



Daddy's Naughty Bridesmaid

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Description: When you're a professional bridesmaid, blending into other people's lives comes with the territory. But pretending to be the bride's best friend while dodging suspicious questions from her groom's bossy older brother? Yeah, that's new—even for me.

I'm Jackie Lawrence, problem-solver extraordinaire and president of the Charlotte chapter of the Naughty Girls Book Club. Weddings are my job, and I'm damn good at them. But this one? It's messier than the secrets spilled at the bachelorette party with an open bar. The bride's ex-best friend tried to steal her fiancé, so now I'm playing the role of loyal BFF while keeping the wedding from imploding.

Enter Matthew Dayton: broody storm-chasing meteorologist, war-hardened Marine vet, and the groom's protective older brother. He's got sharp eyes, a skeptical smirk, and an annoyingly accurate radar for BS—including mine. But when the storm between us breaks? It's electric. He calls me on my bluff, peels back every layer I try to hide, and when he learns what I really want? Let's just say... Daddy is more than willing to deliver.

Now I'm balancing a lie I didn't ask for, heat I can't ignore, and a man who sees everything. And when the truth comes out, the real question is... will Matt still want to keep me? Or was I always just another passing storm?

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CHAPTER 1

The Magnolia Grand Hotel in downtown Charlotte is exactly what you'd expect from old Southern money with its gleaming marble floors, crystal chandeliers dripping from high ceilings, and enough floral arrangements to make a botanical garden jealous. I adjust the wrap of my cobalt blue dress, smoothing the fabric over my hips. The color pops against my skin, and the cut flatters my size eighteen curves rather than trying to hide them. I learned to embrace my body instead of trying to disappear in black shapeless shifts.

My phone buzzes in my clutch. I check it discreetly, finding four new texts from the Naughty Girls.

Emily: Tell us about the wedding! Rich people drama?? Is it like the Kardashians?

Christine: Is the venue as ridiculous as it looks online?

Maya: Forget the venue, scope out the groomsmen! Wedding hookups are practically a professional requirement.

Jessica: Don't forget our emergency code if you need an out: "My dog swallowed my grandmother's dentures."

I smile despite my nerves. The Naughty Girls Book Club has become my lifeline over the past year. What's not to love? We're a group of women united by our love of spicy romance novels and our weekly virtual meetings. As chapter president, I'm technically supposed to keep us on track discussing literary themes, but we usually

end up analyzing the latest Daddy Dom hero's red flags while ordering more Pinot.

Me: Just arrived. Will update later. Professional mode: ACTIVATED.

With my game face on, I approach the reception desk. "I'm here for the Kent-Dayton wedding," I tell her. "Jackie Lawrence. I'm Catherine's maid of honor."

The lie slides off my tongue as smooth as honey on warm toast. I don't like to think about it as lying... more like acting. I'm being paid to play a role. In reality, Catherine Kent and I met exactly eighteen days ago when she hired me to pretend to be her lifelong best friend after her actual best friend, Megan, confessed to having feelings for Catherine's fiancé, Greg. The wedding was six weeks away, invitations sent, plans finalized, and suddenly the bride had no maid of honor and a potential scandal brewing.

Enter me: professional bridesmaid, problem-solver extraordinaire, and now, apparently, Catherine's "bestie since freshman year at UNC."

"Of course, Ms. Lawrence. The rehearsal dinner is in the Azalea Ballroom at six. The bride is in the Magnolia Suite, fifth floor. She's been asking for you."

"Thank you." I flash my most confident smile and head for the elevators, mentally reviewing Catherine's dossier.

Catherine Kent: 28, works in fundraising for the Charlotte Symphony, loves French cuisine, hates cilantro, is allergic to cats, met Greg at a charity auction three years ago, vacations exclusively in the Hamptons or Lake Como. Her father owns half of Charlotte's financial district. Her mother is on the board of nine different charities.

I've memorized her life story, her friend group dynamics, and enough personal anecdotes to fake my way through casual conversations. It's what I get paid to do. To

slide seamlessly into wedding parties, handling disasters and difficult relatives while the bride gets her perfect day. Usually, I'm just "Jackie, the bride's friend from college" or "Jackie, who works with the groom." This is the first time I've been hired to impersonate someone's best friend completely.

Double my usual fee, but triple the stress.

The elevator doors open, and I follow the signs to the Magnolia Suite. Before I can knock, the door flies open, revealing Catherine. She's petite, blonde, and perfect, wearing a silk robe, eyes wide with panic.

"Jackie! Thank God!" She pulls me inside. "Everyone's arriving and I'm freaking out because what if Megan shows up? She knows people in Greg's family and she could totally crash and?—"

"Breathe," I say, setting down my overnight bag and taking her by the shoulders. "Megan is not going to crash your wedding. Security has her photo. And if she somehow sneaks in, I will personally escort her out. In very high heels." I lift one foot, showcasing my four-inch blue suede pumps. "These babies double as weapons."

Catherine's laugh is shaky but genuine. "You're the best. Seriously. I don't know how I got so lucky finding you."

"That's what best friends are for," I give her a reassuring smile. "Now, show me your rehearsal dinner outfit so I can properly gush over it."

For the next hour, I'm in full professional mode: helping Catherine with her makeup, listening to last-minute wedding jitters, and reviewing the weekend schedule. I'm good at this part; the gentle guidance, the calming presence, the ability to make someone feel like the center of the universe. It's why my business has grown from a desperate side hustle to fully booked success in just three years.

"Oh!" Catherine suddenly exclaims, pausing in the middle of explaining table arrangements. "I almost forgot to warn you about Matt."

"Matt?" The name isn't in my notes. A cousin? Drunk uncle? Vengeful ex?

"Greg's older brother. The best man." She wrinkles her nose. "He's... intense. Kind of broody. Greg worships him, but they've been distant lately. Matt's rarely in town. He chases storms for that weather channel."

"WeatherFront?" I ask, remembering a segment I'd seen about hurricane hunters.

"That's it! He's their star meteorologist or something. Former military. Super smart but..." She trails off, looking uncomfortable. "He asks a lot of questions. Very protective of Greg. Just... be prepared. We weren't sure he was going to make it, but he's here. Which of course threw off everything. But, Greg's first cousin didn't want to be a groomsman anyway and was talked into it to replace Matt and luckily they are about the right size..."

Warning bells chime in my head. Protective older brothers with investigative tendencies are the natural predators of fake best friends.

"Does he know about the Megan situation?" I ask carefully.

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"God, no. Greg barely told him anything. They talk maybe twice a month these days." She sighs. "Matt's been weird since he left the Marines. Always on the move, never settling down. This is the first time he's been back in Charlotte in over a year."

Great. A perceptive, suspicious loner with military training and brotherly concerns. Exactly what my deception needs.

"Don't worry," I assure her, projecting confidence I don't entirely feel. "I've handled protective families before. I'll win him over with my charm and encyclopedic knowledge of your friendship history."

Catherine squeezes my hand. "You're amazing. Seriously."

By the time we head down to the rehearsal dinner, I've mentally prepared for every possible question about Catherine's life, preferences, and our supposed friendship. I've practiced my, "Oh, Matt! I've heard so much about you!" with various inflections. I've even rehearsed a few deflection techniques if the conversation gets too specific.

What I haven't prepared for is the reality of Matthew Dayton.

The Azalea Ballroom is already half-full when we arrive, guests in cocktail attire mingling over champagne as waiters circulate with trays of appetizers. Relatives immediately swarmed Catherine, leaving me momentarily alone at the entrance, surveying the room. I match faces with the dossier I'd been studying for the last two weeks.

That's when I see him.

He stands by the windows, slightly apart from the other guests, radiating the kind of quiet intensity that makes the space around him seem charged. Six feet of lean muscle in a charcoal suit that fits him perfectly. Close-cropped dark hair, strong jaw dusted with slight stubble, and eyes that scan the room with military precision. The faint scar above his left eyebrow only adds to the rugged appeal.

My breath catches.

This is not how protective older brothers are supposed to look. They're supposed to be balding accountants with bad ties, or pudgy lawyers with condescending smiles. Not... this. Not a man who looks like he walked straight out of the pages of one of our Naughty Girls novels. He looks dangerous... in all the right ways.

As if sensing my gaze, his eyes find mine across the room. Dark, intense, assessing. For a moment, we just look at each other, and something electric passes between us that makes my skin prickle with awareness.

Danger, my professional instincts scream. Abort mission.

Too late.

Catherine reappears at my side, following my gaze. "Oh, that's Matt," she says, waving him over. "Come meet him!"

Matt Dayton moves through the crowd with the fluid confidence of a predator, eyes never leaving my face. As he approaches, I plaster on my most genuine-looking smile and try to ignore the flutter in my stomach.

"Matt!" Catherine greets him with a hug that he returns somewhat stiffly. "This is

Jackie Lawrence, my maid of honor and best friend since forever. Jackie, this is Greg's brother, Matt."

Close up, he's even more devastating. Those dark eyes miss nothing, taking me in with a thoroughness that feels almost physical. His handshake is firm, warm, his palm slightly callused against mine.

"The famous Jackie," he says, his voice a low rumble that does unfair things to my insides. "Funny, Greg's never mentioned you before."

And there it is. The first test, delivered with a subtle challenge in his tone that makes it clear he's not buying our story for a second.

"Well, I've heard plenty about you," I counter smoothly, holding his gaze. "Catherine and Greg's personal storm chaser. Though you've been a bit... absent, from what I understand."

A flash of something—annoyance? respect?—crosses his features. The corner of his mouth quirks up in what might be the beginning of a smile.

"I go where the weather takes me," he says simply.

"How convenient," I reply before I can stop myself.

Catherine laughs nervously beside me. "Jackie's being modest. She's always traveling for work, too. Event planning," she adds quickly, sticking to our cover story. "Very in-demand."

Matt's eyes narrow slightly. "Is that right? What kind of events?"

"All kinds," I say vaguely. "Corporate, social, whatever pays the bills."

"Jackie's amazing," Catherine jumps in. "She organized that charity gala for the children's hospital last year. Remember I told you about it?"

Matt's expression makes it clear he remembers no such conversation, but he nods politely. "Impressive."

"It's just problem-solving with prettier decorations," I say with a shrug. "Nothing like chasing hurricanes."

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"Tornadoes, mostly," he corrects. "Though I've done my share of hurricane seasons in the South."

"Matt was just in Oklahoma tracking some massive storm system," Catherine offers, clearly trying to smooth the awkward energy between us.

"Fascinating," I say, meaning it despite myself. "What makes someone choose a career literally running toward danger?"

His gaze intensifies, as if he's trying to see beneath my carefully constructed exterior. "Maybe the same thing that makes someone choose a career slipping into other people's lives and pretending to be what they need."

My heart stutters. Does he know? How could he possibly?—

"Event planning," he clarifies, but there's a knowing glint in his eye that makes me think he suspects something. "Becoming whatever the client needs for their perfect day."

Relief mingled with wariness washes through me. "We all wear different hats in our jobs, Mr. Dayton."

"Matt," he corrects.

"Matt," I repeat, the name feeling oddly intimate on my tongue.

Before he can respond, Greg appears, slinging an arm around his brother's shoulders.

He's the younger, softer version of Matt with the same dark hair but with friendly eyes and an easy smile.

"You met Jackie!" he exclaims. "Cat's partner in crime since forever. The stories this woman could tell..."

I laugh, the sound practiced but convincing. "And I've been sworn to secrecy on most of them."

"Smart," Matt says, his eyes still studying me. "Secrets have a way of coming out though."

The warning is subtle but unmistakable. This man is going to be a problem.

"Dinner's starting," Catherine says, tugging on my arm. "We should find our seats."

As we move toward the tables, I feel Matt's eyes on me, tracking my movements. I resist the urge to look back, focusing instead on guiding Catherine to the head table where place cards await.

My seat, naturally, is right across from Matt's. He's the best man. I'm the maid of honor. We're going to be spending a lot of time next to each other.

Just perfect.

Throughout dinner, I navigate the conversation with practiced ease. I deflect questions about our college days with vague references and inside jokes. I compliment Greg's parents, charm his extended family, and do what I'm paid to do—make everything feel warm and genuine.

All while hyper-aware of Matt's silent observation.

He doesn't say much, but when he does, his questions are precision-targeted. Where did I grow up? What's my family like? How exactly did Catherine and I meet? Each one requires careful navigation, blending enough truth from my real life with the fabricated backstory Catherine and I created.

By dessert, the tension between us has built to almost tangible. Every time our eyes meet, something hot and dangerous flashes between us. It's not just suspicion on his part or wariness on mine. There's an attraction that's as unwelcome as it is undeniable.

"Jackie, don't you have that photo on your phone?" Catherine asks suddenly. "The one from that spring break trip to Miami?"

I blink, momentarily confused. We hadn't discussed any Miami photos in our preparation.

"You know," she prompts, eyes widening meaningfully. "When we got those matching tattoos that our parents would have killed us over?"

Ah. She's creating shared history on the fly. Clever girl.

"God, I'd forgotten about that," I say with a laugh. "But no, those photos are long gone. Probably for the best considering how we looked in those bikinis."

"Speak for yourself," Catherine teases. "I rocked that neon green monstrosity."

"And I rocked being twice your size in that purple one," I counter, adding a touch of authentic body humor. "Though I still maintain my curves look better on a beach than just about anywhere else."

Matt's gaze flicks over me at that, a brief but thorough assessment that sends heat

blooming across my skin. For a second, I think I see appreciation in his eyes before they cool back to watchful suspicion.

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"What tattoos did you get?" Greg asks, looking between us with interest.

Catherine and I exchange a panicked glance. We hadn't elaborated that far.

"Stars," I say, just as Catherine blurts, "Butterflies!"

There's an awkward pause.

"Star-shaped butterflies," I recover smoothly. "Very 2012."

Matt's eyebrow lifts slightly. He's not buying it. Not for a second.

"Where exactly are these tattoos?" he asks, voice deceptively casual.

Catherine flushes. I maintain my composure despite the dangerous gleam in his eye.

"Wouldn't you like to know," I say, meeting his gaze directly, a hint of challenge in my voice.

He stares at me with the barest hint of heat, of interest beyond suspicion in his gaze. The corner of his mouth ticks up in a half-smile that transforms his face from merely handsome to devastating.

"I would, actually," he says, his voice dropping to a register that sends a shiver down my spine.

Greg laughs, oblivious to the tension crackling between us. "Dude, stop interrogating

Cat's friends. This isn't one of your reconnaissance missions."

"Force of habit," Matt says, his eyes still locked with mine. "I'm trained to spot pressure systems before they develop. To recognize when something isn't quite... as it appears."

The double meaning isn't lost on me. He's figured out something isn't right about my story. About me.

"Sometimes a cloud is just a cloud," I counter lightly. "No hidden tornadoes forming."

"And sometimes," he says, "what looks like a passing shower turns out to be the edge of a hurricane."

Our verbal sparring is interrupted when the band starts up, and Greg pulls Catherine to the dance floor for their first dance practice. The other guests follow, leaving Matt and me momentarily alone at the table.

"Something is off with you, Jackie Lawrence. I just haven't figured it out yet. It's like you are playing a part or something."

My heart hammers against my ribs, but I keep my expression neutral. "We all play parts, Matt. The dutiful son, the successful professional, the storm-chasing loner. Which one is the real you?"

"Careful," he says, voice dropping lower. "You don't want to poke at things you don't understand."

"Maybe I like poking at dangerous things," I reply, the words out before I can stop them.

His smile is slow, predatory, sending a jolt of heat straight to my core. "Do you now? That's interesting information, sunshine."

Sunshine.

The pet name catches me off guard, especially coming from a man who looks like he lives in perpetual storm clouds. But there's something about the way he says it—warm, with a hint of irony—that makes my skin tingle. Like he sees the brightness I bring to rooms, the warmth I cultivate as part of my job, but knows there's more beneath the surface.

Before I can respond, Catherine reappears, breathless and laughing.

"Jackie! Come dance!" she insists, pulling at my hand. "Sorry to steal her, Matt, but maid of honor duties call."

I allow myself to be led away, feeling Matt's eyes on me as I go. On the dance floor, surrounded by laughing guests and pounding music, Catherine squeezes my arm.

"How's it going?" she asks, having to lean close to be heard. "Matt's not giving you too hard a time, is he?"

"Nothing I can't handle," I assure her, though I'm far less confident than I sound. "He's suspicious, but that's natural. Protective older brother and all."

"He's always been intense," she says with a grimace. "But ever since the Marines..." She trails off, shaking her head. "Just don't let him intimidate you."

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Matthew Dayton doesn't intimidate me—he rattles me in ways no man has in years. Not just because he's dangerously perceptive and might expose my deception, but because he looks at me like he can see beneath my carefully constructed persona to the woman underneath. The one who reads Daddy Dom romances in secret and wonders what it would be like to surrender control, just once, to someone strong enough to handle it.

As if my thoughts have summoned him, Matt appears at my side.

"Mind if I cut in?" he asks Catherine.

She gives me a questioning look. I nod slightly, and she steps back with a smile that's equal parts encouraging and concerned.

"Be nice," she orders Matt before disappearing into the crowd.

Then his hand is on the small of my back, the heat of it burning through the fabric of my dress. His other hand takes mine, and suddenly we're dancing, my curves pressed against the solid wall of his chest as he guides me with confident precision.

"You are a good dancer," he observes, surprising me with what sounds like a genuine compliment.

"So are you," I reply. "Not what I expected from a storm chaser."

"My parents made us take cotillion," he says simply. "We all hated it, but the lessons have stuck with me."

He pulls me closer to him and I'm suddenly acutely aware of his hand on my back, how it spans almost half my waist, his thumb resting just at the curve where my hip flares out.

"So, Jackie," he says, his breath warm against my ear. "Who are you, really?"

"Exactly who I said."

He laughs softly. "You're good. I'll give you that. But your eyes give you away."

"What do my eyes say exactly?"

His gaze softens slightly. "That you're more than Catherine's friend. More than an event planner. More than this role you're playing. You are hiding something, Jackie."

For a terrifying moment, I think he's going to expose me, call me out in front of everyone. Instead, he spins me elegantly, then pulls me back against him, closer than before.

"You're not who you say you are, are you?" he murmurs, his lips brushing my ear.

The question sends ice through my veins, even as his proximity floods me with heat. This is exactly the disaster I feared. Matt is a perceptive man who sees too much, asks too many questions, and won't be satisfied with charm and vague answers. But there's something else in his tone beneath the suspicion. Interest. Intrigue. Maybe even admiration for the game I'm playing.

"Everyone at weddings plays a part," I deflect, forcing a light tone. "The blushing bride, the proud parents, the charming best man. It's all theater, isn't it?"

"Nice pivot," he acknowledges with a subtle nod. "But I'm not talking about others."

I'm talking about you. And why my brother's fiancée suddenly has a 'best friend' no one's ever heard of before."

The music shifts to something slower, giving him the perfect excuse to tighten his hold. With our bodies pressed this close, I'm acutely aware of the contrast between us; my soft curves against his hard planes, my rounded hips cradled against his narrow ones.

Most men I've danced with seem uncomfortable with my size, holding me at awkward distances or overcompensating with too-tight grips. Matt holds me like my curves are exactly what he expected, what he wants, his hands confident in their placement on my fuller figure.

"What exactly are you accusing me of?" I ask.

His dark eyes hold mine, searching. "I haven't decided yet. But I will figure it out."

The certainty in his voice sends a shiver down my spine. Part fear, part something far more dangerous. Because the truth is, part of me wants him to figure it out. To see me, truly see me, beyond the professional mask I wear so well.

"You're wasting your energy," I tell him. "I'm just here to support Catherine."

"Hmm." The sound is skeptical. "We'll see."

The music ends, but he doesn't release me immediately, holding me in place with that steady gaze and the warm pressure of his hand on my back.

"This weekend just got a lot more interesting," he says finally, stepping back with a slight incline of his head. "Enjoy the rest of your evening, sunshine. I'll be watching."

It's both a promise and a warning.

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I'll be watching.

I'm in serious trouble. And the storm has only just begun.

CHAPTER 2

The rehearsal dinner stretches into the kind of elegant, endless affair where champagne flows freely and conversations bubble up around stories I'm supposed to know but don't. So far, I've navigated four "remember when" moments with the skill of a professional liar. I wonder briefly if I should be playing poker in Vegas instead of performing this skit as a bridesmaid.

"So Jackie," Greg's mother leans across the table, "Catherine tells me you two were roommates at Vanderbilt?" Catherine's mother is aware of my job, but the groom's family is not. Catherine is my client, I do as she wishes. She expressed how Greg's mother is a real gossip and can't keep a secret, it's best to not let her in on the charade, for now, anyway.

I take a sip of champagne, buying myself precious seconds. My notes said UNC Chapel Hill, not Vanderbilt. Either Catherine changed the story or I'm about to crash spectacularly.

"For a semester," I say smoothly. "Before I transferred to Chapel Hill. Catherine and I met in the dorms freshman year."

Mrs. Dayton nods, satisfied, but across from me, Matt's eyes narrow. He hasn't stopped watching me all evening.

"What did you study at UNC?" he asks, his tone conversational but his gaze anything but.

"Event management and hospitality," I lie easily. "With a minor in psychology. You learn a lot about human behavior when planning events."

"I'm sure you do." He takes a slow sip of his bourbon. "Like how to spot a liar, for instance."

The table falls silent. I force a laugh, like this is some delightful inside joke.

"Matt's teasing," Catherine says quickly. "He's always so suspicious of new people."

"Not suspicious," Matt corrects, his eyes never leaving mine. "Just observant."

I meet his gaze head-on, refusing to be intimidated. "And what are you observing, Matt?"

"That you're very good at what you do," he says finally. "Whatever that is."

The double meaning isn't lost on me or on him, judging by the heat in his eyes. The conversation shifts to the wedding itself, and I exhale quietly. Round one to the suspicious brother, but the night is young. I make it through dinner without any more near-disasters, fielding questions about my "history" with Catherine with the kind of vague, affectionate answers that could apply to anyone.

As dessert is served, I excuse myself to the restroom, desperate for a brief escape from Matt's unrelenting attention.

In the mirror, I assess the damage. My curls are holding up, my makeup still intact. I look like exactly what I'm pretending to be, the successful, confident best friend of

the bride. But underneath, my nerves are frayed. Usually, I blend seamlessly into wedding parties. No one questions my presence or my stories.

Matt Dayton isn't just anyone, though. He sees too much.

When I emerge from the restroom, he's waiting in the hallway, leaning against the wall.

"Ambushing women outside restrooms?" I ask, arching an eyebrow. "How gentlemanly."

"Just happened to be passing by," he says, straightening. In the narrow hallway, he feels larger, his presence more commanding. "Thought we could have a chat. Without an audience."

I fold my arms across my chest. "About what, exactly?"

"About how you and Catherine have supposedly been best friends forever, yet there isn't a single photo of you on her Instagram. Not one mention of a 'Jackie' anywhere in her social media history."

Shit.

I hadn't thought to check social media. Rookie mistake.

"I'm not big on social media," I say, which is actually true. "And neither was Catherine until recently."

"She has posts going back to 2014."

"Are you cyber-stalking the bridal party?" I deflect. "That seems excessive, even for a

protective brother."

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He steps closer, and suddenly the hallway feels even smaller. "I'm looking out for my brother. Someone appears out of nowhere, claiming to be Catherine's best friend, when Greg's never heard of you before last month? It's suspicious."

He's right, of course. It is suspicious. And if I were actually Catherine's friend, I'd appreciate his concern.

"Look," I sigh. "Catherine and I reconnected recently after losing touch for a while. We were close in college, drifted apart, and now we're back in each other's lives. It happens."

"Right around the time her real maid of honor tried to sleep with Greg," Matt observes. "Convenient timing."

My smile slips. "What exactly are you accusing me of?"

"I haven't decided yet." His eyes roam my face, searching for... something. A clue? Confirmation? "But I'll figure it out."

"Well, while you're playing detective," I say, stepping into his space with more confidence than I feel, "maybe consider that Catherine's happy. That your brother's getting a beautiful happy bride. That whatever you think I'm doing, it's not hurting anyone."

We're standing close now, too close. I can smell his cologne. It's something woodsy and subtle, mixed with the whiskey on his breath. His eyes drop to my mouth for a fraction of a second, and my heart hammers against my ribs. I want him to kiss me.

The thought infuriates me. I shouldn't want him to kiss me. Is it the alcohol? I blame the alcohol.

"Not hurting anyone yet," he murmurs. "But lies have a way of catching up, don't they, Jackie?"

The way he says my name—like he's testing the sound of it, like he's not entirely convinced it belongs to me—sends a shiver down my spine. I always use my real first name.

"We should get back," I say, my voice embarrassingly breathy. "They'll be wondering where we are."

"Let them wonder." His hand comes up, not quite touching my face but hovering near my cheek. "I'm not done figuring you out, yet."

There's a promise in those words that makes heat pool low in my belly. If this were one of my romance novels, this would be the moment he pushes me against the wall, his mouth claiming mine in a kiss that proves chemistry trumps suspicion. His hands would come up, one on each side of my head, his lips would lower over mine. The kiss wouldn't be gentle. It would be dominating, a taste of things to come in the bedroom.

But this isn't fiction. This is a job, and Matthew Dayton is a complication I cannot afford.

"Well," I say, ducking under his arm, "you have three more days to solve the mystery. Good luck."

I walk away, feeling his eyes on me with every step. My heart is racing, and not just from narrowly avoiding his interrogation. There's something about the way he looks

at me...like he can see past my professional façade, past the carefully constructed persona I present to the world.

Like he sees me.

Which is ridiculous, since he doesn't even believe I'm who I say I am.

Back at the table, Catherine gives me a questioning look. "Everything okay?"

"Perfect," I assure her. "Just freshening up."

When Matt returns a few minutes later, there's a new tension between us. A hum of awareness that has nothing to do with his suspicions and everything to do with whatever just sparked in that hallway. He catches my eye across the table and raises his glass in a silent toast, the gesture both a challenge and an acknowledgment.

Game on.

The rest of the evening passes in a blur of toasts and laughter. I navigate the treacherous waters of fake friendship with practiced ease, mentally filing away details about Catherine's life to repeat later. All the while, I'm hyperconscious of Matt's presence. The way he throws his head back when he laughs at his brother's jokes, the careful way he watches over his mother, making sure her wine glass stays full. For all his intensity, he's unexpectedly tender with family. It's... dangerously attractive.

By the time the dinner winds down, I've had enough champagne to feel warm and loose-limbed, but not enough to forget myself. As guests begin to depart, I find myself standing near the door, saying goodbyes alongside Catherine and Greg.

"Early morning tomorrow," Catherine reminds me, kissing my cheek. "Yoga at nine, then brunch, then the welcome party starts at three."

I nod, committing the schedule to memory. "I'll be there. Get some rest." I step into the hallway and head down to the elevator.

"Going up?"

Matt's shed his suit jacket, his tie loosened, looking less like an intimidating ex-Marine and more like a man who knows exactly how good he looks in rolled-up shirtsleeves.

"I'll walk you to your room."

The sensible part of me knows spending any more time with him is playing with fire. The part of me that reads steamy romance novels and leads a chapter of a book club called "Naughty Girls" wonders what would happen if I got burned.

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"Fine," I say. "But no more interrogations tonight. I'm off duty."

His eyebrow lifts. "Off duty?"

Shit. Poor choice of words.

"Figure of speech," I recover quickly. "It's been a long night of socializing."

"No interrogations," he agrees. But not even twenty seconds after the elevator closes, he starts talking. "I care deeply about my brother and about Catherine. Which is why your sudden appearance in their lives interests me."

"There's nothing interesting about old friends reconnecting," I say, sticking to my story.

He glances at me, his gaze heavy with meaning. "We both know that's not what's happening here."

The rest of the short elevator ride passes with charged silence. He puts his hand on the small of my back and guides me out and down the plush carpeted hallway. I nod at my room number and we stop right outside the door.

"Whatever you're doing," he says, his voice low, "whatever game you're playing, I'll figure it out."

"There's no game, Matt." I reach for the door handle, eager to escape the intensity of his presence.

His hand lands on my arm, gentle but firm. "One more thing."

I turn back, my breath catching as I realize how close our faces are. "What?"

"If you hurt them," he says softly, "if this whole charade is some kind of scam, there is nowhere you can run that I won't find you. Understood?"

The threat should anger me. Should offend me. Instead, I feel a thrilling shiver race down my spine.

"Crystal clear," I whisper.

His eyes drop to my mouth again, lingering longer this time. For one breathless moment, I think he might actually kiss me.

Instead, he releases my arm and steps back. "Goodnight, Jackie Lawrence. If that's even your real name."

I slip into the hotel room, shut the door and lean back against it, letting out a long, deep breath.

What the hell am I doing?

Matt Dayton is suspicious, perceptive, and determined to expose me. He's the last person I should be attracted to.

And yet here I am, heart racing, skin buzzing, remembering the heat in his eyes when he looked at my lips.

Get it together, Jackie. It's just a job. Three more days, then you never have to see him again.

The thought should be comforting.

It isn't.

CHAPTER 3

Surviving the morning yoga session is easy enough. I'm naturally flexible and Catherine's college friends are too hungover to notice that I don't know the "traditional post-vinyasa chant" they apparently did in their college days. Brunch passes in a blur of mimosas and wedding talk, with no sign of Matthew Dayton to complicate matters.

By the time I return to my hotel room to change for the welcome party, I've almost convinced myself that last night's electric tension was just champagne and wedding jitters. A professional hazard, nothing more.

Then my phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number.

Unknown Caller: Wear something blue tonight. It suits you.

I stare at the screen, my heart doing a little tap dance against my ribs. There's only one person it could be.

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Me: Who is this? As if I didn't know.

The response comes immediately: I'm still watching. Let's see how long you keep up the façade.

Heat blooms low in my belly. I should be annoyed, but I rifle through my suitcase, pulling out the navy blue cocktail dress I packed as a backup. It hugs my curves in all the right places, the neckline dipping just low enough to be interesting without crossing into unprofessional territory.

As I slip it on, I tell myself I'm not doing it because he asked. I'm doing it because navy is a flattering color and the welcome party is at an upscale venue that requires cocktail attire.

I am a terrible liar, even to myself.

The welcome party is in full swing when I arrive at the botanical garden pavilion. Fairy lights twinkle in the trees, a live band plays something jazzy and upbeat, and waiters circulate with champagne and hors d'oeuvres. I spot Catherine immediately, radiant in a blush pink dress, holding court with a group of relatives.

I make my way to her side, slipping effortlessly into the role of supportive best friend. We take selfies, chat with guests, check on details with the coordinator. I'm so absorbed in my duties that I almost forget about Matt.

Almost.

"You look beautiful," comes his voice from behind me, low and warm against my ear.

I turn to find him standing closer than strictly necessary, looking unfairly handsome in dark slacks and a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Forearms were never sexy to me before... but his? His eyes move over me appreciatively, lingering on the blue fabric.

"You look nice," I say.

"You obeyed my instructions," he observes, nodding at my dress.

"Pure coincidence," I lie. "Blue is my color."

"It is," he agrees. His fingers brush my bare shoulder, so lightly I could almost imagine it. "Brings out the gold in your eyes."

Before I can respond, Catherine appears, looping her arm through mine. "Jackie! There you are. We need you for the game!"

"Game?" I echo, a note of dread creeping into my voice.

"'How Well Do You Know the Bride!'" She's practically vibrating with excitement. "All my closest friends are playing. It'll be fun!"

My stomach drops. A public quiz about Catherine's life and preferences? This is my actual nightmare.

Matt's eyes gleam with something between amusement and triumph. "Yes, Jackie, how could you miss the game? I'm sure you'll ace it, being such old friends and all."

I shoot him a look that could curdle milk.

"I'll be watching," he murmurs as Catherine drags me away.

Of course he will. Watching and waiting for me to slip up, to reveal that I don't actually know Catherine's favorite song or her childhood pet's name or where she spent her sixteenth birthday. I studied the dossier. I should be fine.

I am not fine.

The game is exactly as excruciating as I feared. The wedding coordinator reads questions from cards while Catherine's actual friends answer confidently. I rely on a combination of lucky guesses, vague answers, and the cheat sheet I'd memorized. I recall Catherine's favorite color (lavender), food (sushi), and vacation spot (Santorini). Basic information that could have been gleaned from any social media deep dive.

I'm holding my own until the coordinator asks, "What was Catherine's most embarrassing moment in college that only her closest friends know about?"

Shit.

This isn't on any cheat sheet.

I glance at Catherine, who's watching expectantly, then at the other bridesmaids, who all seem to know exactly what the answer is. My mind races through possibilities. Was it a drunken party mishap? A wardrobe malfunction? A regrettable hookup?

"Pass," I say finally, forcing a laugh. "Some stories are too good to share in mixed company."

There's an awkward pause. Catherine's smile falters slightly.

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"Oh come on," the coordinator pushes. "Everyone else answered!"

I scan the crowd desperately and spot Matt at the back, watching with those perceptive eyes. He raises his glass slightly, a silent acknowledgment that he knows I'm floundering.

Then, inexplicably, he mouths something at me.

It takes me a second to lip-read, but when I catch it, I could kiss him. Actually kiss him.

"The karaoke incident," I say smoothly. "When Catherine thought she was auditioning for The Voice but was actually just screaming Lady Gaga into a hairbrush on the quad."

The crowd erupts in laughter. Catherine squeals, "Jackie! You promised never to tell!"

I shrug, all faux innocence. "Sorry, bestie. The people demanded answers."

Crisis averted. But why would Matt help me? What game is he playing?

The coordinator moves on to the next question, which I manage to answer correctly thanks to my research. When the game finally ends (I place third, respectable enough), I make my way through the crowd toward Matt, determined to figure out his angle.

But Catherine intercepts me, dragging me onto the dance floor where the band has shifted to something slower and more romantic. "Dance with me! Greg's doing shots with his groomsmen and I need my bestie!"

So I dance with the bride, then with her cousin, then with one of Greg's friends who has wandering hands I expertly deflect. All the while, I'm aware of Matt circling the periphery, never quite approaching but always watching.

It's past eleven when the band announces the last song. I'm contemplating slipping away. I've fulfilled my duties, made a respectable showing, survived the game without completely blowing my cover, when a warm hand lands on the small of my back.

"Dance with me."

It's not a question. Matt's palm is firm against my back, guiding me onto the dance floor before I can object.

The band plays something slow and bluesy, the kind of song designed for bodies to press close together in the warm Carolina night. Matt's hand slides to my waist, the other taking mine, holding it against his chest where I can feel his heartbeat.

"Why did you help me?" I ask, because I can't stand not knowing. "With the game."

His lips quirk into that almost-smile. "Maybe I didn't want to see you crash and burn publicly."

"How gentlemanly," I say dryly. "Or maybe you just want to be the one to expose me privately."

He pulls me closer, his breath warm against my ear. "There are many ways I'd like to

expose you, Jackie."

The heat in his voice sends a shiver through me. My body responds embarrassingly quickly, melting against him almost involuntarily.

"Why are you here?" he asks, his voice low enough that only I can hear. "What's your angle?"

"I told you?—"

"The truth," he interrupts. "Just between us."

I hesitate. Telling him would violate my contract with Catherine, my professional ethics, everything I've built my business on. But there's something about the way he's looking at me, like he genuinely wants to understand rather than judge.

"I can't," I say finally. "Client confidentiality."

His eyebrows lift. "So you are working for her."

Damn it.

I've already said too much.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." His hand tightens on my waist, drawing me impossibly closer. Our bodies are flush now, his thigh between mine as we sway to the music. "You're not who you say you are, are you?"

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The question hangs between us, weighted with possibility. If I admit the truth, I risk everything. If I lie again, I risk... what? His good opinion of me? His opinion shouldn't matter. But it does. God help me, it does.

Before I can respond, the music ends. Around us, couples break apart, applauding the band. The moment shatters, the spell broken.

Matt steps back, his eyes never leaving mine. "Think about your answer carefully, Jackie. Because I'm going to ask you again, and next time, I expect the truth."

CHAPTER 4

I wake to the sound of rain hammering against my hotel window. The weather app on my phone shows an angry red blob moving across the radar, covering most of Charlotte. Flash flood warnings, thunderstorm alerts, high wind advisories.

Perfect.

Nothing like a natural disaster to complicate an already complicated wedding weekend.

My phone buzzes with a text.

Catherine: Still on for today! Moving picnic inside to ballroom. Same time. Weather won't stop this party!

I admire her optimism, if not her judgment. Having planned more weddings than I

can count, I know the chaos a sudden venue change can create. Especially with a guest list of two hundred.

I dress quickly in a casual sundress and cardigan, appropriate for an indoor picnic, and make my way to the hotel lobby. The rain is coming down in sheets, turning the world outside into a gray blur. I'm debating whether to brave the downpour or call a rideshare when a black SUV pulls up to the entrance.

Matt steps out, unfazed by the rain soaking through his shirt, and jogs to the revolving door. He spots me immediately, water dripping from his hair onto his shoulders, making him look like some kind of storm god come to life.

"You're here," he says, sounding surprised.

"I'm staying here," I point out.

"I know that. I meant, here. At the door. I was coming up to get you." He runs a hand through his wet hair, slicking it back from his forehead. "Catherine was worried about guests getting there safely."

The rain is torrential, and he's already soaked, and refusing would just seem petty.

"Thanks," I say, pulling my cardigan tighter around me. "That's... thoughtful."

His mouth quirks. "Don't sound so surprised. I'm capable of basic courtesy, even to people I suspect of lying to me."

"I'm not—" I begin automatically, then stop. No point rehashing this argument. "Never mind. Let's go."

Outside, the rain slams into us the moment we step from beneath the hotel's awning.

Matt's hand finds the small of my back, guiding me quickly to the passenger side of his SUV. The gesture is protective, automatic, and weirdly affecting. I can't help but notice all the small dominant gestures he makes. He reminds me of one of the heroes from our book club novels. The daddies who take care of their women with a firm, but caring, hand.

Inside the car, the rhythmic pounding of rain creates a cocoon of white noise, isolating us from the rest of the world. Matt starts the engine, cranking up the heater against the damp chill.

"Some storm," I say, for lack of anything better.

"Just a garden variety thunderstorm." He glances at me, amusement playing at the corners of his mouth. "Though the barometric pressure drop was significant. There's a chance of rotation if the system intensifies. I'm more worried about flash flooding in the historic district."

I blink at him. "Is that your sexy weather talk?"

He laughs, the sound rich and unexpected. "Just shop talk. Hazard of the profession."

"So this is mild for you? What do you consider an actual storm?"

Something shifts in his expression, a distant look replacing the amusement. "An EF4 tornado tearing through a residential area. A Category 5 hurricane making landfall in a populated city. The kind of weather that changes lives."

There's weight behind his words, a gravity that speaks to experience rather than theoretical knowledge.

"You've seen a lot of destruction," I say softly.

His hands tighten on the steering wheel. "More than most."

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"In the military?"

"And after." He navigates through rain-slicked streets with practiced ease. "Weather doesn't discriminate. It doesn't care who you are or what you've done. It just... is."

"Is that why you chase it? Because it's predictable in its unpredictability?"

He glances at me, surprise evident in his expression. "Most people think I'm an adrenaline junkie."

"Are you?"

"Partly," he admits. "It's hard leaving war zones and returning to the mundane of day to day American life. But it's more than chasing the next adrenaline high. In a storm, everything is stripped away except what matters. Survival. Protection. It gives me a purpose. If I can get ahead of a storm, warn people... save a life... I consider it a successful day at the office."

I study his profile, seeing beyond the handsome features to the complexity beneath. "You're looking for meaning in chaos."

"Aren't we all?" His voice is quiet, almost lost beneath the sound of rain.

For a moment, we're just two people having an honest conversation, no games, no suspicion, no roles to play. It's... nice. Dangerous, but nice.

Then lightning flashes, followed immediately by a crack of thunder that shakes the

car. The street ahead is suddenly obscured by a wall of water.

"Shit," Matt mutters, slowing the vehicle. "Visibility's gone."

I peer through the windshield, seeing nothing but gray and the blurry red of tail lights ahead. "Should we pull over?"

"We're almost there." His focus has shifted entirely to driving, his posture alert. "Just a few more blocks."

The radio crackles with a severe weather alert, warning of flash flooding and advising people to seek shelter.

Great.

Just what every bride wants to hear on her wedding weekend. I wonder how stressed Charlotte is, and what kind of bride she will turn into with this chaos. Will I have a bridezilla on my hands?

We crawl along at a snail's pace, the wipers working overtime. Matt's concentration is absolute, his eyes never leaving the road despite the near-impossible conditions. There's something compelling about his focus, his competence, the way he handles the vehicle like it's an extension of himself.

Finally, the grand facade of the venue appears through the rain. Matt pulls as close to the entrance as possible, then turns to me.

"Wait here," he says. "I'll come around with an umbrella."

"I'm perfectly capable of walking ten feet in the rain," I protest.

His expression is unyielding. "It's coming down hard enough to knock you over. I said wait." His tone is commanding and as much as I hate to admit it, it turns me on.

Before I can argue further, he's out of the car, jogging around to my side with an umbrella that immediately inverts in the wind. By the time he opens my door, he's soaked through for the second time today. I step out and he quickly pulls me against his side, one arm around my shoulders as he attempts to shield me from the worst of the downpour. I can't help but feel his strength and the outline of his muscles. This man has stepped right out of one of my romance novels. Intelligent. Sexy as fuck. Dominant. Too bad he thinks I'm a liar. Well... he's not exactly wrong.

We make a dash for the entrance, rain lashing at us from all directions. By the time we reach shelter, we're both drenched despite his efforts. My sundress clings to my skin, my carefully styled curls are now plastered to me, and my cardigan feels about ten pounds heavier.

Matt doesn't look much better. His shirt is transparent with moisture, revealing the contours of his chest and the edge of what appears to be a tattoo beneath his collarbone. Water drips from his eyelashes, making them seem impossibly long.

"So much for staying dry," I say, trying to wring water from my hair.

"Could've been worse." He reaches out, brushing a wet strand from my face with unexpected gentleness. "You look like a drowned kitten."

"Charming," I say dryly, but my pulse kicks up at his touch.

Inside, the venue is chaotic. Staff members rush about moving tables, caterers argue over serving stations, and the wedding coordinator looks one crisis away from a nervousbreakdown. Catherine stands in the center of it all, still smiling but with a frantic edge to her expression.

"There you are!" she exclaims when she spots us. "Oh my god, you're soaked!"

"Just a little damp," I assure her, pushing aside my discomfort to focus on her needs.

"How can I help?"

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For the next hour, I'm too busy to think about Matt or my attraction to him or the conversation in the car. I direct staff, rearrange seating, consult with the caterer, and generally do what I do best, solve problems. I'm in my element, the professional taking charge, making decisions and creating order from chaos.

It's only when things finally seem under control that I slip away to find a bathroom, desperate to do something about my bedraggled appearance before more guests arrive. As I round a corner, I nearly collide with a staff member carrying a case of wine.

"Sorry," I say automatically, stepping back. "Is there a restroom nearby?"

"The main one is pretty full. I saw a line. If you want, you can use the staff bathroom. It's down those stairs, to the end of the hall, then left," he says. "But careful down there. We had some water come in through a broken window. Floor's slippery."

I thank him and head down, my wet shoes squeaking against marble tiles. The farther I go, the darker and quieter it becomes. The staff bathroom, when I find it, is blessedly empty. I do what I can. I bend under the hand dryer for a moment until my hair is dryer. Using paper towels and the emergency makeup kit I always keep in my purse, I manage to transform myself from "drowned rat" to "caught in light rain" in about ten minutes. I've just put my makeup back in my purse when the lights suddenly shut off, and I emerge into a dark and silent hallway. The emergency lights have kicked on, casting an eerie glow through the hallway.

I start back the way I came, moving carefully on the slick floor. As I pass a set of double doors, I hear voices from within. One of them is distinctly Matt's.

"—at least a foot of water in the cellar already," someone is saying. "Wine collection's in danger."

"What about the structure?" That's Matt, all business.

"Foundation's solid, but we need to move the guests to the upper floors, just in case."

I push the door open without thinking. Matt stands with the venue manager and two staff members, looking at what appears to be blueprints of the building spread across a large table.

"Jackie," he says when he spots me, surprise evident in his voice. "You shouldn't be down here."

"I was using the bathroom," I explain. "What's going on?"

He hesitates, then seems to decide I deserve the truth. "Flash flooding in this district has caused some major issues. We're in the floodplain and water's rising faster than expected. We need to move everyone upstairs as a precaution."

"Is Catherine aware?"

"Not yet. We're trying to avoid panic."

I nod, already shifting into problem-solving mode. "I can help with that. Tell me what you need."

He studies me for a moment, then nods. "We need to clear all the lower rooms, then start moving guests upstairs in a way that doesn't cause alarm."

"I'll take the east wing," I volunteer. "I noticed some storage rooms down that way

when I was exploring earlier."

Matt shakes his head. "Not alone. Some of those doors lock automatically."

"I'll be fine?—"

"I said no." Man. If I had to imagine what a Daddy Dominant voice sounded like, it would be the one he is using right now. I half expected him to add, 'little girl' to the end of the statement. He pauses for a second, as if expecting me to argue with him. When I don't he continues.

"I'll go with her," he tells the others, his tone brooking no argument. "Coordinate with the staff to move people upstairs. Frame it as a better view of the storm or something."

The venue manager nods, gathering up the blueprints. "We'll start moving everyone."

As they leave, Matt turns to me. "Come on. East wing first, then we'll check the wine cellar."

"You don't have to babysit me," I say, following him into the corridor. "I'm perfectly capable?—"

"Of getting locked in a storage room during a flash flood? No thanks. I've seen what happens when people underestimate water. It's not pretty. Especially in areas that don't normally see this much water. Be a good girl and obey me."

My mouth drops open. What did he just say? I want to argue, but the grim set of his mouth stops me. This isn't about me or his suspicions or whatever tension exists between us. This is about safety, and he clearly takes that seriously.

We move quickly through the darkened downstairs, checking rooms methodically. Most are empty, those that aren't we quickly clear. The emergency lights cast long shadows, creating an atmosphere that would be almost romantic under different circumstances.

"All clear," I say after checking the last room in our assigned section. "Now what?"

Before Matt can answer, a tremendous crack of thunder shakes the building, followed immediately by the unmistakable sound of breaking glass. Water rushes in through a window at the end of the hall, a sudden torrent that seems to expand faster than should be possible.

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"Shit!" Matt grabs my hand, pulling me back the way we came. "Move!"

We run, the water pursuing us with alarming speed. It's already ankle-deep, cold and murky, making each step treacherous on the smooth floor.

As we round a corner, Matt suddenly stops, causing me to slam into his back. "Damn it."

Water flows from the opposite direction as well and we're caught between two advancing currents.

"In here," Matt says, yanking open a heavy wooden door to our right.

I follow him without question, adrenaline overriding everything else. The door closes behind us with a heavy thud, and I find myself in a wine cellar. Its stone walls are lined with racks of bottles, a tasting table in the center, and, most importantly, a raised floor that puts us several inches above the water level in the corridor.

Matt pulls out his phone, grimacing at the lack of signal. "We're cut off."

"They'll come looking for us," I say, trying to sound more confident than I feel. "They know where we are."

"Eventually." He runs a hand through his damp hair. "We should be safe here. The water will recede."

I glance around. It's dry, at least for now, and the thick wooden door seems to be

keeping the water at bay. But there's only one way in or out, and if the water rises much higher...|

I push that thought away. "So, I guess we wait."

"We wait," he agrees.

We stand in silence for a moment, the only sound the muffled rush of water outside and the distant rumble of thunder.

"Well," I say finally, perching on the edge of the tasting table, "at least we're not stuck with boring company."

The corner of his mouth lifts. "Is that a compliment, Jackie?"

"An observation." I smooth my still-damp dress over my knees. "Though I suppose there are worse people to be trapped with during a flash flood."

"High praise." He leans against the stone wall opposite me, arms crossed over his chest. "So. While we're here with nothing but time... want to tell me who you really are?"

I should have seen that coming. Of course, he'd use this opportunity to continue his investigation.

"I told you?—"

"The truth," he interrupts. "I don't like being lied to. No one's listening. No one to perform for. Tell me the truth."

Maybe it's the surreal situation, or the adrenaline still coursing through my system, or

simply the way he's looking at me, but suddenly, keeping up the pretense seems exhausting.

"Fine," I sigh. "I'm a professional bridesmaid."

His eyebrows lift. "A what?"

"A professional bridesmaid," I repeat. "Women hire me to stand up in their weddings, handle logistics, manage family drama, and make sure everything goes smoothly. I'm like... support staff in a pretty dress."

He stares at me for a long moment, then lets out a short laugh. "That's a real job?"

"A very real job," I confirm. "And a lucrative one. Weddings are high-stress events. People will pay good money for someone who can reduce that stress."

"So Catherine hired you to be in her wedding party," he says slowly, working it out. "But why the charade? Why pretend to be her lifelong friend?"

I hesitate, weighing professional discretion against the reality of our situation. We're literally trapped together and there's no avoiding this conversation. I know he won't let this go.

"Catherine's former maid of honor, her actual best friend, tried to seduce Greg," I explain. "Made a drunken pass at him. Catherine confronted her, and a massive fight ensued. Turns out the former best friend has had the hots for Greg since the night Catherine met him. With the wedding so close, Catherine needed a replacement who could step in seamlessly. Hence, the backstory about reconnecting with an old college friend."

Understanding dawns in his eyes. "So the guests wouldn't know there was drama."

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"Exactly. Appearances matter in Catherine's social circle. Having to explain a last-minute maid of honor change would invite questions she doesn't want to answer."

"And everyone would gossip about the 'real' reason her friend isn't in the wedding anymore," he concludes.

I nod. "Catherine's paying me double my usual rate to step in at the last minute and maintain the fiction through the wedding. After that, we'll 'naturally drift apart' again, and no one's the wiser."

Matt pushes away from the wall, taking a step toward me. "So everything you've said since you arrived has been a lie."

"Not everything," I say, oddly defensive. "I do like Catherine. She's genuinely sweet. And I am good at my job. The only lie is the nature of our relationship."

He takes another step closer. "And what about us? Has that been part of the performance too?"

My pulse quickens. "What 'us'? You've been interrogating me since I arrived."

"Is that all I've been doing?" His voice drops lower, his eyes never leaving mine. "Just interrogating?"

The air between us seems to thicken, charged with something that has nothing to do with the storm outside and everything to do with the one brewing between us.

"You tell me," I challenge, lifting my chin. "What exactly have you been doing, Matthew?"

He moves closer still, until he's standing directly in front of me, close enough that I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact.

"Testing a theory," he says quietly.

"What theory?"

His hand comes up, fingers brushing against my cheek in a touch so light it's barely there. "That there's something real happening here, despite all the lies."

My breath catches. I should back away. Should maintain professional boundaries. Should remember that he's the brother of my client's fiancé, and any involvement would be wildly inappropriate.

Instead, I hear myself ask, "And? What's your conclusion?"

His eyes darken, dropping to my mouth. "Inconclusive. I need more data."

"Very scientific," I murmur, my heart hammering against my ribs.

His thumb traces my lower lip, sending shivers cascading down my spine. "I'm a methodical man."

"I've noticed."

He's so close now that I can feel his breath against my skin, can see the individual droplets of water still clinging to his eyelashes from our mad dash through the flood.

"I'm going to kiss you now," he says, his voice a low rumble that I feel more than hear. "Unless you tell me not to."

I should tell him not to. I really, really should.

"I'm not stopping you," I whisper instead.

His mouth claims mine with a hunger that steals my breath. There's nothing tentative about the kiss. It's all heat and demand and suppressed tension finally breaking free. His hands frame my face, holding me steady as he explores my mouth with devastating thoroughness.

I respond with equal fervor, my fingers clutching at his shirt, pulling him closer until he's standing between my knees where I sit on the edge of the table.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, his forehead rests against mine. "That wasn't part of the job, was it?" he asks, voice rough.

"Definitely not in my contract."

His smile is slow and dangerous. "Good."

Then he's kissing me again, deeper this time, his hands sliding from my face to my shoulders to my waist. I arch into him, all professional pretense abandoned in the face of this overwhelming attraction.

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His mouth moves from mine to my jaw, then lower, trailing hot kisses down my neck. I tilt my head to give him better access, a small sound of pleasure escaping me when he reaches the sensitive spot just below my ear.

"Been wanting to do this since I first saw you," he murmurs against my skin. "Even when I was sure you were lying to me."

"I was lying to you," I remind him, gasping as his teeth graze my collarbone.

"Yes, you were. The next time you lie to me, you'll find out exactly how I feel about my woman lying to my face. But, you weren't lying about everything. Not about this." His hand slides up my ribs, thumb brushing the underside of my breast through the damp fabric of my dress. "This is real."

He's right. Whatever's happening between us, it has nothing to do with my job or his suspicions. It's pure chemistry, undeniable and powerful.

His other hand finds the hem of my dress, fingers skimming along my bare thigh. "Tell me to stop," he says, voice strained.

"Don't stop," I breathe, beyond caring about propriety or professionalism or anything but the feel of his hands on my body.

He groans, capturing my mouth again as his hand moves higher, tracing patterns on my inner thigh that make me tremble. I'm lost in sensation, in the taste and feel of him, in the?—

A sharp knock on the cellar door jerks us apart.

"Hello?" calls a voice from the other side. "Anyone in there?"

Reality crashes back with jarring speed. Matt steps away from me, running a hand through his hair as I hastily straighten my dress.

"Yes," he calls back, his voice impressively steady. "Two of us. We're fine."

"Water's receding," the voice informs us. "We'll have you out in a few minutes."

"Thanks," Matt replies, then turns back to me.

We stare at each other for a long moment, the magnitude of what just happened and what almost happened settling between us.

"Jackie—" he begins.

"Don't," I interrupt, sliding off the table and smoothing my hair. "That was... We were caught up in the moment. Adrenaline. Close quarters. It happens."

His eyes narrow. "Is that what you think that was? A stress response?"

No. It was chemistry and attraction and something deeper that I'm not ready to examine. But acknowledging that would make this real, would complicate an already complicated situation.

"It doesn't matter what it was," I say instead. "I'm here to do a job. That's all."

He steps closer, purpose in every line of his body. "Liar. I just warned you about lying to me, little girl."

The words have my insides clenching. What does he mean? What is he going to do? Before I can respond, the door opens, revealing the venue manager and two staff members.

"Everyone okay?" the manager asks, glancing between us with obvious curiosity.

"Fine," I say quickly. "Just waiting out the flood."

Matt says nothing, his eyes still fixed on me with an intensity that makes my skin heat despite the chill of my damp clothes.

"Guests are all upstairs," the manager informs us. "We're telling them it's a special storm-watching event. Most of them think it's exciting."

"Great," I say, forcing enthusiasm I don't feel. "I should get back to Catherine."

As I move toward the door, Matt's hand wraps around my wrist, stopping me. "This isn't over," he says, quietly enough that only I can hear.

I meet his gaze, seeing the promise there. "I know."

Then I pull away and hurry back to the party, my lips still tingling from his kiss and my body humming with unfulfilled desire.

CHAPTER 5

I avoid Matt for the rest of the evening, throwing myself into bridesmaid duties with almost manic energy. I help Catherine calm nervous relatives, organize impromptu entertainment when the power fluctuates, and generally make myself indispensable to everyone except the one person I can't stop thinking about.

By the time I return to my hotel room that night, I'm exhausted and no closer to resolving the Matt situation than I was in that wine cellar. I strip off my clothes and stand under the shower for a long time, letting hot water wash away the physical remnants of the day while my mind replays every moment with Matt. The tension in the elevator. The mad dash through the flood. The heat of his mouth on mine. The feel of his hands moving up my leg...

"Stop it," I tell myself firmly, shutting off the water with more force than necessary. "It was a moment of weakness. It won't happen again."

I'm a professional. I have a reputation to maintain, a business to run. I don't get involved with clients or their families. Ever. My job does not include one night stands with the groomsmen. No matter how sexy they might be. I've been into dozens of weddings and never so much as kissed anyone. So why can't I stop thinking about Matt?

I'm toweling my hair dry when my phone chimes with a text message. My heart jumps, expecting Matt and I'm slightly disappointed when it's not.

Catherine: Everything ok? You disappeared during the storm for a bit.

Me: Everything's fine. Just helping coordinate with staff. How are you holding up?

Catherine: Surprisingly well! Matt said you were a huge help during the evacuation. Thank you so much!

So he mentioned me. Interesting. What else did he say?

Me: Just doing my job.

Catherine: Well, get some rest! Big day tomorrow. Can't wait for the final fittings and rehearsal!

I stare at Catherine's text, guilt gnawing at me. While she's thanking me for being helpful, I was kissing her future brother-in-law in a wine cellar. Some professional I am.

I set my phone on the nightstand, determined to get some sleep and put this whole Matt situation behind me. Tomorrow I'll be focused, professional, and completely immune to his intense stares and knowing smirks.

That resolution lasts approximately eight hours. Right until I step through the doors for the final fitting and see him sitting in one of the plush chairs in the waiting area, scrolling through his phone.

He looks up when I enter, and everything I'd convinced myself I'd imagined... The chemistry, the tension, the heat, all comes rushing back with breathtaking force.

"Morning," he says casually, like he didn't have his tongue in my mouth yesterday.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, keeping my voice low so the bridal attendant checking me in can't hear. "This is for the bridal party."

"Greg asked me to drop off something to Cat." He stands, tucking his phone in his pocket. "But since you're here, I think we need to talk."

"I have nothing to say to you." I turn to the attendant with a bright smile. "I'm with the Kent-Dayton wedding. Jackie Lawrence."

"Of course, Ms. Lawrence. Right this way. The bride is already in the fitting room."

I follow her, painfully aware of Matt's eyes on me as I walk away. He's frowning and oddly flexing his hand. Weird. Is that a tic of his? I shrug it off as I enter the bridal salon. Champagne is flowing freely despite the early hour. Catherine and the other bridesmaids are already in various stages of undress, attendants fussing over hems and seams.

For the next hour, I lose myself in the rhythm of fittings and alterations. My bridesmaid dress, a flattering A-line in pale lavender, needs only minor adjustments at the waist. I stand patiently as the seamstress pins and marks, making small talk with the other women and steadfastly avoiding thoughts of Matt.

When I finally emerge from the fitting room, I'm convinced he'll be gone. Men rarely linger after delivering messages. But there he is, still in the waiting area, now nursing a cup of coffee and looking like he has nowhere else to be.

"You're still here." I stop several feet away from him.

"I am." He stands, his eyes tracking over me in a way that makes my skin heat. "I'll drive you to the rehearsal."

"I can get there myself."

"I'm sure you can." His tone is maddeningly patient. "But we still need to talk, and I'd

rather do it privately than at the rehearsal dinner."

He has a point. The last thing I need is for us to have some kind of confrontation in front of the entire wedding party.

"Fine," I concede. "But just a ride. A conversation. Nothing else."

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His mouth quirks. "Define 'nothing else.'"

I shoot him a warning look. "You know exactly what I mean."

"Do I?" He steps closer, lowering his voice. "Because yesterday in that wine cellar, you seemed pretty clear about what you wanted. And it wasn't just conversation."

A flush creeps up my neck. "That was... a mistake."

"Didn't feel like a mistake." His eyes hold mine, challenging. "Felt pretty damn right, actually. And, just so you know, Jackie, I am the one who gives the orders, not you."

"Fine." I concede and adjust my purse strap, refusing to meet his gaze. "Where are you parked?"

Once inside the vehicle, he doesn't start the engine immediately. Instead, he turns in his seat to face me. "Look at me, Jackie."

Something in his tone, the quiet but commanding way he spoke, makes me comply instantly, despite my better judgment.

"Good girl," he praises as he reaches out and strokes my cheek gently. "Yesterday wasn't a mistake. It was probably bad timing, and definitely complicated, given the circumstances. But it wasn't a mistake."

I swallow hard. "I don't get involved with clients' families. It's unprofessional."

"Catherine's your client, not Greg. Not me." His logic is irritating. "And the wedding's over in two days. Then what?"

"Then I go back to my life, and you go back to chasing hurricanes, and we never see each other again." The words taste bitter on my tongue.

"Is that what you want?"

No.

But it's what needs to happen. This—whatever this is between us—is temporary. A product of wedding emotions and forced proximity, and the heightened reality that comes with both.

"It doesn't matter what I want," I say instead. "It's what makes sense."

His eyes narrow slightly. "You're hiding behind your job. Using professionalism as a shield."

The accuracy of his observation stings. "I'm not hiding. I'm being responsible."

"Bullshit." There's no heat in the word, just certainty. "You're scared."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." He leans closer, his gaze intent. "You've created this perfect little life where you drift in and out of other people's special moments without ever having to commit to anything yourself. No risk, no vulnerability, just a series of performances where you get to be whoever people need you to be."

Anger flares, hot and sudden. Maybe because he's read me well, too damn well, in

such a short amount of time. "You don't know the first thing about my life."

"I know you're good at your job. I know you care about doing it well. And I know you're using it as an excuse to keep people at arm's length." His voice softens slightly.

"What I don't know is why."

I look away, uncomfortable with how easily he sees through my carefully constructed defenses. "We should go. The rehearsal?—"

"Isn't for another hour," he interrupts. "Stop deflecting."

"I'm not?—"

"Look at me." Again, that tone brooking no argument.

I meet his eyes reluctantly.

"Yesterday, in that cellar, was anything but professional," he says. "You wanted me. I wanted you. Still do. The only question is whether you're brave enough to admit it."

My heart hammers against my ribs, my mouth suddenly dry. "What exactly are you asking for here, Matt?"

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"Honesty," he says simply. "Start with that."

Honesty. Such a small word for such a monumental request.

I take a deep breath. "Fine. Yes, I'm attracted to you. Yes, yesterday was... intense. But that doesn't change the fact that getting involved would be complicated and messy and potentially disastrous for my professional reputation."

He nods, accepting this. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"Are we? Because it feels like we're going in circles."

"Not circles." His mouth curves into a smile that makes my stomach flip and my clit vibrate with need. "Just taking the scenic route."

Before I can respond, he starts the engine and pulls out of the parking lot. We drive in silence for several minutes.

"So what happens now?" I finally ask, unable to bear the tension.

"Now," he says, turning onto a quiet residential street that's definitely not the route to the church, "we figure out what we both want."

I glance around, confused. "Where are we going? The rehearsal is at St. Thomas."

"We'll get there." He pulls into the driveway of a modern-looking townhouse.

"This is your place?" I ask as he parks.

"Yes. I rent it. It's home when I'm not on the road." He unbuckles his seatbelt. "Come in for a minute."

Every warning bell in my head is clanging now. Going into his home is crossing a line I'm not sure I'm ready to cross.

"The rehearsal—" I begin.

"Will still be there in twenty minutes," he finishes. "Come inside, Jackie. Just to talk."

I shouldn't. I really, really shouldn't.

But I find myself unbuckling my seatbelt and following him up the short walkway to his front door.

The interior of Matt's rental is surprisingly comfortable. It looks lived-in, despite his nomadic lifestyle.

"Drink?" he offers, heading toward the kitchen.

"Water," I say, still hovering near the door. "Just water."

He fills two glasses from the refrigerator dispenser, hands me one, then leans against the counter, watching me.

"You can sit down," he says, nodding toward the living room. "I don't bite." A pause, then with a slight curve of his lips, "Unless you want me to."

Heat rushes to my face. "Very funny."

I perch on the edge of his sofa, sipping my water and trying to look more composed than I feel. He remains in the kitchen, giving me space, which I appreciate.

"So," I say, when the silence stretches too long, "you wanted to talk. Let's talk."

He sets his glass down and moves into the living room, taking the armchair across from me rather than sitting beside me on the sofa.

"I know about your book club," he says without preamble.

I blink, thrown by this unexpected turn. "I'm sorry, my what?"

"Your book club. The Naughty Girls Book Club. I overheard you on a call last night."

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Mortification washes over me in a hot wave. Last night, after my shower, I had a brief check-in with Christine about our next meeting. Had he been outside my room? Listening?

"You were eavesdropping on me?" I demand, anger replacing embarrassment.

"Not intentionally. I came to your room to talk, raised my hand to knock, but when I heard you on the phone, I paused." He looks annoyingly unperturbed. "Couldn't help but overhear some... interesting details about your reading preferences."

Oh god.

What exactly had he heard? Christine and I had been discussing our current book, a particularly spicy Daddy Dom romance with discipline spanking and definite power exchange dynamics.

"That was a private conversation," I say stiffly, offended by his decision to eavesdrop on me. How loud was I talking? How much had he heard?

"It was." He leans forward, elbows on his knees. "And illuminating."

"If you're going to mock me—" I push off the couch.

"Sit back down, Jackie," he commands. "I'm not mocking you. I wouldn't have listened except I froze in place by what I heard. I'm sorry that I violated your privacy. When I heard what was being said, I wanted to understand what you want, Jackie."

I set my water glass down with more force than necessary. "What I want is to not have my privacy invaded."

"Fair enough." He nods, conceding the point. "But I think what I overheard might explain some of the tension between us."

"Meaning?"

"Like recognizes like. Meaning you respond to a certain type of... dynamic." His eyes hold mine, unflinching. "One that I happen to favor myself."

My breath catches as his implication becomes clear. He heard me talking about Daddy Dom romance and recognized the dynamic. Which means...

"You're into that?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Into what, exactly?" he counters. "Say it, Jackie."

The challenge in his voice makes something flip in my stomach. "Power exchange," I manage. "Dominance and submission."

"Yes." His gaze is steady, assessing. "I'm a Daddy Dom."

I swallow hard, heat blooming between my thighs despite my best efforts to remain detached. "You're saying..."

"In the right circumstances. With the right partner." His voice drops lower. "Someone who needs both firm guidance and tender care. Someone who's strong on the outside but craves surrender on the inside. Someone who might call me 'Daddy' when they're being particularly good. Or particularly naughty."

Oh.Oh.

"Someone like me," I say, the realization washing over me like a warm wave.

His smile is slow, knowing. "That's what I'm trying to determine."

His presumption should offend me. I should be storming out, insulted that he thinks he has me figured out based on a snippet of overheard conversation.

Instead, I'm transfixed, heart racing, a yearning I've only explored through fiction suddenly presenting itself as a very real possibility.

"And if I am?" My voice comes out steadier than I feel. "What then?"

"Then we have a conversation about boundaries and expectations." He watches me intently. "And then, if we both want to, we explore what that might look like between us."

The practical, professional part of me is screaming that this is insane. I barely know this man. I'm here to do a job. The wedding is in two days.

But another part, the part that devours Daddy Dom romances and fantasizes about strong hands and spankings, is already imagining what it would be like to surrender to Matt Dayton.

"I'm still here to do a job," I say, needing to establish at least some boundaries. "Whatever... this is... it can't interfere with that."

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"I would never ask you to compromise your professionalism," he says, understanding immediately. "What we do in private stays private."

In private.

The implication that there will be private moments between us sends another wave of heat through me.

"And after the wedding?" I ask, voicing the practical concern. "You'll go back to chasing storms..."

"We'll figure that out when we get there." He stands, moving to sit beside me on the sofa. Not touching, but close enough that I can feel the heat of him. "Right now, I'm more interested in what happens today. Tonight."

My mouth goes dry. "What does happen?"

His eyes darken as they roam my face. "That depends on what you want. What you're ready for. You are ultimately in control. I only do what you consent to. Nothing more."

What do I want? The question seems simple but isn't. I want to be professional. I also want Matt's hands on me, his mouth on mine, his voice in my ear telling me I'm a good girl.

"I don't know," I admit finally. "This is all..." I'm an educated woman and yet words keep failing me.

"Let me help clarify, then." His voice takes on that commanding edge that makes my spine tingle. "I want you, Jackie. Have since the moment I saw you. And not just physically, though that's certainly part of it. I want to know you, the real you, not the professional bridesmaid persona. I want to see what you look like when you let go of control. When you trust someone else to take care of you."

His words paint a picture so compelling, so aligned with my secret desires, that I can hardly breathe.

"And if I want that, too?" I whisper.

"Then we start slow." His hand moves to cover mine, the touch electric even through this simple contact. "We set boundaries. We communicate. And we see where it leads."

It sounds reasonable. Measured. Responsible, even.

So why does it feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, about to jump into the unknown depths below?

"The rehearsal," I say, clinging to the mundane reality of my obligations. "We should go."

"We should," he agrees, but makes no move to stand. "But first, I need to know: are you in, Jackie? Do you want to explore this?"

Do I? God help me, I do. Despite the complications, despite the professional risk, despite the almost certain heartache when he inevitably leaves to chase his next storm. I want this. Want him.

"Yes," I say, the word both terrifying and liberating. "I'm in."

The smile that spreads across his face is pure masculine satisfaction. "Good girl."

The simple praise sends a shiver down my spine, a pavlovian response to words I've only read in fiction until now.

"But," I add quickly, needing to establish some control, "I set the pace. If I say stop, we stop. No questions asked."

"Absolutely." His expression turns serious. "Your boundaries are non-negotiable. Your comfort and consent are always my priority."

It's exactly what I needed to hear. Maybe I'm stupid for allowing a stranger to Daddy me. Maybe... but it feels right. My gut says he is safe. "Okay then."

He squeezes my hand once, then stands. "We should get to the rehearsal."

I nod, rising on legs that feel slightly unsteady. "Yes. Work first."

As we head toward the door, Matt's hand settles on the small of my back. It's a touch that feels both protective and possessive. At the threshold, he stops me, turning me to face him.

"One more thing," he says, voice low. "Between now and tonight, I want you to think about what you want. What you need. Be honest with yourself."

I nod, swallowing hard. "And tonight?"

His thumb traces my lower lip, teasing me. "Tonight, you tell me. And I won't tolerate dishonesty."

“And after?”

“After our talk? We’ll put these words into action, Sunshine.” He lowers his mouth to mine in a kiss that can only be defined as possessive.

What have I gotten myself into?

Whatever it is, I'm not backing out now.

CHAPTER 6

The rehearsal and dinner pass in a blur of practiced smiles and professional efficiency. I act the dutiful maid of honor, all while hyper aware of Matt's presence.

He doesn't crowd me or make obvious gestures. In fact, to anyone watching, we're simply polite acquaintances fulfilling our respective wedding roles. But every time our eyes meet across the church aisle, every accidental brush of hands when reaching for the same program, every subtle nod he gives me when I manage a particularly tricky situation all feel charged with unspoken promises.

Tonight, his eyes seem to say. Tonight we begin.

By the time the rehearsal dinner winds down, my nerves are stretched to a breaking point. I make my excuses to Catherine, promising to be available first thing tomorrow for the hair and makeup marathon, and slip outside to call a rideshare. I need to go back to the hotel and regroup before heading over to Matt's.

Before I can open the app, Matt appears beside me, car keys dangling from his fingers.

"Need a ride?" he asks, his voice casual even as his eyes communicate something far more intense.

I should say no. Should maintain some distance, gather my thoughts, prepare myself for whatever is about to happen between us.

"Yes," I say instead, because apparently my self-preservation instinct has taken the night off.

The drive to the hotel is silent, tense with anticipation. Matt keeps both hands on the wheel, eyes on the road, maintaining a respectful distance that somehow feels more intimate than if he'd been touching me.

When we pull up to the hotel entrance, he turns to me. "May I come up?"

Three simple words that carry the weight of everything we've been circling since we met. My answer will set the course for the rest of this wedding weekend and possibly beyond. He's asking, not demanding. Not telling. Asking. Another green flag. Another assurance that my gut is correct in trusting him.

"Yes," I say again, crossing a threshold I can't uncross.

In the elevator, we stand a careful foot apart, neither speaking. An older couple joins us on the third floor, chatting about their dinner plans, oblivious to the crackling tension between Matt and me.

By the time we reach my room, my hands are actually shaking as I tap the key card against the lock. The door swings open, revealing the generic luxury of a high-end

hotel suite, a king bed, desk, sitting area, tasteful abstract art on the walls.

Matt follows me in, closing the door with a soft click that sounds unnervingly final. For a moment, we just stand there, the reality of being truly alone together settling around us like a physical presence.

"Would you like a drink?" I ask, falling back on social niceties to break the tension. "There's a minibar."

"No." He steps closer, eyes never leaving mine. "What I'd like is for you to tell me what you want."

Right. He'd asked me to consider what I wanted, what I needed. I'd thought about little else all day, even while going through the rehearsal and dinner.

"I want..." I begin, then pause, struggling to articulate desires I've barely admitted to myself. "I want to explore this. Whatever this is between us."

He nods, encouraging. "What else?"

I take a deep breath. "I want to feel... taken care of. Guided. But not controlled in a way that diminishes me." My cheeks heat as I force myself to continue. "I've read about these dynamics in books, fantasized about them, but I've never... It's all theoretical for me."

Understanding dawns in his eyes. "You've never actually experienced it."

I shake my head. "No. Just fiction."

"I see." He moves to the sitting area, taking a seat in one of the armchairs. Not what I expected. "Come here," he says, patting his lap. I hesitate before I join him, sitting on

his lap. He turns to face me, expression serious.

"Let me tell you what I want," he says. "I want to give you what you need. The guidance, the care, the structure. But for that to work, we need trust. Absolute trust."

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"I barely know you," I point out.

"Which is why we start slow." His hand finds mine, fingers interlacing. "Tonight, we talk. We learn about each other. We establish boundaries."

Relief and disappointment war within me. Relief that he's not rushing this, not assuming I'm ready to jump straight into the deep end of dominance and submission. Disappointment because my body is humming with anticipation, with the need to be touched, claimed, possessed.

"Just talk?" I can't keep the hint of disappointment from my voice.

His smile is knowing. "For now. There are many ways to explore this dynamic that don't involve getting naked right away."

"Oh." My imagination provides several vivid possibilities that make my pulse quicken.

"First things first," he says, his thumb drawing circles on my palm. "Safe words. Even if we're just talking tonight, I want you to have them."

I nod, having read enough romance novels to understand the concept. "Green for keep going, yellow for slow down, red for stop?"

"Perfect." His approval sends a little thrill through me. "And you use them if anything, and I mean anything, makes you uncomfortable. Clear?"

"Clear."

"Good girl." The simple praise makes my stomach flip in the most delicious way.

"Now, tell me about Jackie Lawrence. The real one, not the professional bridesmaid."

The request catches me off guard. I'd expected... well, I don't know what I expected. Something more physical, certainly.

"What do you want to know?" I ask.

"Everything." His eyes hold mine. "Start with why you became a professional bridesmaid."

I hesitate, then realize there's no reason not to share this. "I was always good at events. Organized, detail-oriented. And I genuinely love weddings. There's something about the joy, the tradition, the whole spectacle of it, that I just love."

"But?" he prompts, sensing there's more.

"But the event planning industry is cutthroat. Competitive. And I didn't want to be responsible for planning entire weddings, all the tiny details. It started by accident. A friend asked me to step in when her bridesmaid dropped out last minute. I was good at it. Word spread. Eventually, I realized people would pay good money for someone who could handle the chaos without adding to it."

He listens with genuine interest, asking thoughtful questions about my business model, my typical clients, and my most memorable weddings. It's... nice. To be heard like this. To have someone want to know the details of my life.

"And the book club?" he asks eventually, a slight curve to his lips. "How did that start?"

Heat floods my cheeks. "That also started with a friend. Valerie. She loaned me a book. A romance that was... spicier than what I usually read. I loved it. We started trading recommendations, then she introduced me to her favorite author who ran a book club for Daddy books."

"And you're the president."

"Unofficial title," I admit. "I just host most of the meetings and keep us on schedule."

"Organized even in your personal life," he observes. "Do you ever just... let go?"

The question cuts deeper than he probably intended. "Not often," I admit. "My mom was... chaotic. Emotional. Unpredictable. I learned early that someone had to keep things running, make sure bills were paid, food was on the table."

His expression softens. "You became the responsible one."

"Someone had to be." I shrug, uncomfortable with the childhood memories. "What about you? How does a Marine end up chasing hurricanes for a living?"

He accepts the change of subject, telling me about his military service, his deployment, his struggle to adjust to civilian life afterward. "The military gives you purpose, structure, clear mission objectives. Civilian life is... messy. Undefined. I'm a man who likes to be in charge."

"So you found a new mission," I say. "Predicting storms, saving lives."

He nods. "There's clarity in crisis. All the noise falls away, and you're left with what matters."

"Is that why you like the Daddy Dom dynamic?" I ask, genuinely curious. "Because it

provides structure? Clear roles?"

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His eyes darken slightly. "Partly. But it's more than that. It's about protection. Guidance. Creating a safe space for someone to be vulnerable. To surrender control without fear. Earning a woman's submission and not demanding it."

The way he describes it makes something inside me ache with longing. To surrender without fear. To be strong and independent in the world, but have a space where I can just... be. Let someone else take the weight for a while.

"And what do you get out of it?" I ask.

"What don't I get out of it? Knowing someone is trusting me that much," he says without hesitation. "Having someone strong enough to handle the world on their own but choose to give me their submission. It's... there's nothing like it."

The raw honesty in his voice sends a shiver through me.

"Enough talking for now," he says, sensing my reaction. "I want to try something. Will you trust me?"

I nod, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Say it," he instructs gently.

"I trust you," I whisper.

"Good girl." He shifts to sit at the end of the sofa. "Come here. Lay down with your head in my lap."

It's such a simple request, but it feels monumental. Intimate in a way that has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with vulnerability. I hesitate only briefly before stretching out on the sofa, resting my head on his thigh, looking up at him.

"Close your eyes," he says softly.

I comply, heart racing.

His fingers slide into my hair, gentle but sure, massaging my scalp in slow, rhythmic movements. The tension I didn't even realize I was carrying begins to melt away beneath his touch.

"That's it," he murmurs as I exhale deeply. "Let go. I've got you."

It shouldn't feel this good, this right, to surrender to such a simple touch. But as his fingers work through my curls, occasionally grazing my neck or the sensitive spot behind my ear, I find myself sinking into a state of relaxation that borders on euphoric. If I relax anymore, I am going to fall asleep.

"You carry so much," he says, his voice a low rumble above me. "Always taking care of everyone else. Always in control."

I make a soft sound of agreement, too relaxed to form words.

"But not now," he continues. "Now you're letting me take care of you. Being a good girl for me."

The praise washes over me like warm honey, sweet and enveloping. Is this what it feels like? This dynamic I've read about, fantasized about? This sense of safety, of rightness, of belonging?

"How does this feel?" he asks.

"Good," I murmur. "So good."

"What color are you, Sunshine?"

"Green," I say without hesitation. "Very green."

I feel rather than see his smile. "I'm going to tell you what's going to happen next," he says, his voice taking on a firmer edge that makes my pulse quicken. "I'm going to keep touching you like this for a few more minutes. Then I'm going to help you get ready for bed. You're going to take a shower, put on something comfortable, and get under the covers. I'll join you, and we'll hold each other. Just hold each other. Until you fall asleep in my arms. How does that sound?"

Like heaven. Like exactly what I need after days of stress and pretense and professional smiles.

"Perfect," I whisper.

True to his word, he continues the gentle scalp massage until I'm practically purring with contentment. Then he helps me sit up, brushes a kiss against my forehead, and guides me toward the bathroom.

"Take your time," he says. "I'll be here when you're done."

The hot shower is exactly what I need, washing away the tension of the day and leaving me loose-limbed and drowsy. I towel dry my hair, apply my usual nighttime moisturizer, and slip into the silk pajama set I'd packed, thankful they are modest enough to be comfortable, but still pretty enough to feel feminine.

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When I emerge from the bathroom, Matt is sitting on the edge of the bed, his shoes off, scrolling through his phone. He looks up when I appear, his eyes warming as they take in my appearance.

"Beautiful," he says simply.

I approach the bed, suddenly shy despite the intimacy we've already shared. "Your turn," I say, nodding toward the bathroom.

He stands, dropping a kiss on my cheek as he passes. "Get comfortable. I won't be long. I ran down to my car and grabbed the go bag I always have in the trunk."

I slip under the covers, listening to the sound of water running in the bathroom. This is surreal. Matt Dayton, showering in my hotel room, about to spend the night in my bed. Not for sex, but for something that feels even more intimate. Connection. Care. The dynamic we're both craving.

When he returns, dressed in his boxers and t-shirt, hair damp and face freshly washed, something settles in my chest. A recognition. A certainty. This is right.

He slides into bed beside me, opening his arms in invitation. "Come here, Sunshine."

The pet name sends a little jolt through me. It's different from "good girl" but just as potent. I move into his embrace, resting my head on his chest, his heartbeat strong and steady beneath my ear.

"Comfortable?" he asks, one hand coming up to stroke my hair.

"Very." I sigh contentedly, my body melting against his.

"Tell me something you've never told anyone," he says softly.

I consider the request, feeling safe enough in this moment to share a truth I usually keep hidden. "I'm afraid of ending up alone. Of being so good at fitting into other people's lives that I never build one of my own."

His arms tighten around me. "Thank you for telling me that."

"Your turn," I prompt, tracing patterns on his chest through his t-shirt.

He's quiet for a moment. "I have nightmares," he finally admits. "About Afghanistan. About storms that went bad. About not being able to save people."

I lift my head to look at him, seeing the vulnerability beneath his strength. "Is that why you push yourself so hard? Chase the most dangerous storms?"

"Probably." His smile is self-deprecating. "My therapist certainly thinks so."

"You see a therapist?"

"Yes. The VA hooked me up with one I connected with. PTSD doesn't go away on its own."

I lay my head back on his chest, absorbing this. The man who projects such confidence, such control, is fighting his own battles. It makes me trust him more, somehow. That he understands struggle. That he's doing the work to heal.

"Thank you for telling me," I echo his words back to him.

We talk for hours, sharing stories and secrets in the intimate darkness. He tells me about growing up with Greg, about joining the Marines to find purpose, about the storm that nearly killed him last year in Oklahoma. I tell him about my childhood with a single mother who chased men and dreams in equal measure, about building my business from nothing, about the satisfaction I find in making other people's special days perfect.

Gradually, our words slow, our voices grow softer, and I find myself drifting toward sleep, wrapped securely in Matt's strong arms.

"Rest now, Sunshine," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "I've got you."

As I slip into dreams, one last coherent thought floats through my mind: I could get used to this.

And that's the most terrifying thing of all.

CHAPTER 7

The moment Matt offers his arm, I feel the electric shock of contact even through the fabric of his perfectly tailored tuxedo. He's supposed to be escorting me down the aisle as part of my professional bridesmaid duties, but there's nothing professional about the way my body responds to his proximity. His cologne, something expensive and masculine with notes of sandalwood, envelops me as we take our first step together. I'm acutely aware of the solid strength of his bicep beneath my hand, the controlled power in his measured stride that forces me to match his pace. When he leans down to murmur, "breathe, little girl" in my ear, his warm breath against my neck sends a shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with the air conditioning.

Now, as we stand watching Catherine and Greg exchange vows, with every eye in the

chapel on the bride, I can feel Matt's heated gaze on my profile, studying me with an intensity that makes my pulse race. The wedding ceremony goes perfectly. Despite yesterday's storm chaos, everything has come together seamlessly.

Throughout the ceremony, I maintain my professional composure, standing at the appropriate distance from the bride, holding her bouquet during the ring exchange, discreetly adjusting her train when needed. The perfect maid of honor, focused entirely on the bride's needs.

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Except for the moments when my eyes meet Matt's across the altar.

Brief, electric connections that last only seconds but carry the weight of shared secrets and anticipation. Each time it happens, each time his gaze finds mine, heat blooms in my chest and spreads outward, a physical reaction to the emotional connection that's becoming increasingly difficult to hide.

During the recessional, as we pair up to follow the newly married couple down the aisle, Matt offers his arm with perfect ceremony-appropriate formality. But his fingers press briefly against mine as I take it, a subtle gesture invisible to everyone else that sends awareness racing along my nerve endings.

"Beautiful ceremony," he murmurs, voice pitched for my ears alone. "Though not as beautiful as you look in that dress, Sunshine."

"Thank you," I whisper back. "Daddy." I wonder if the word will throw him off balance. I say it in part to tease him, in part to try it out. It feels good. Natural.

His step falters slightly, the only indication that my deliberate use of the title has affected him as intended. His answering smile holds a private meaning that warms me from within. "I like how that sounds coming from your sweet lips, Sunshine. I can't wait for you to hear what I'm thinking about doing to you later."

The promise in his voice sends heat pooling low in my belly, a reaction completely at odds with the formal wedding setting and the dozens of eyes on the wedding party as we process out of the garden.

Professional Jackie would deflect such comments with practiced ease, maintaining appropriate boundaries even during harmless flirtation. But last night changed something between Matt and me, crossed a line that makes standard deflections seem dishonest, unnecessary.

"Looking forward to it, Daddy," I murmur instead, so quietly the words are barely audible.

When he glances down at me, the heat in his eyes makes promises that have nothing to do with wedding traditions and everything to do with what will happen when our official duties are complete.

The hours that follow are a blur. Formal photographs in the garden, managing reception logistics, ensuring Catherine's needs are met. Brides forget to eat, I make sure she gets plenty. Matt maintains an appropriate distance throughout, fulfilling his best man duties with the same focused attention he brings to everything. But even across a crowded room, I feel his gaze tracking my movements, his body angled toward mine even in separate conversations, his attention never fully absent despite our physical separation.

It's during the father-daughter dance, as I stand at the edge of the dance floor with the other bridesmaids, that my phone buzzes in the hidden pocket of my dress.

Maya: REMINDER: Book club in 30 mins! We'll wait for you if you're running late.
Topic: "Dangerous Desires" Chapter 8-12. CANNOT WAIT to hear your updates too!

I stifle a groan, having completely forgotten our monthly video chat in the wedding chaos. Tonight of all nights, when I'd been anticipating finally being alone with Matt, exploring the connection that's been building between us since our morning confessions.

Me: Can we reschedule? In the middle of wedding reception duties.

The response is immediate and unanimous:

Emily: ABSOLUTELY NOT! We've been patient for TWO DAYS waiting for updates on Hot Storm Chaser. We need details!

Christine: You can step away for a couple minutes. Just tell the bride you need to make a call about tomorrow's brunch arrangements or something.

Jessica: If you don't show, we'll assume you're either dead or getting spectacularly laid, and we'll require FULL DETAILS either way.

I sigh, knowing there's no escaping the Naughty Girls when they're in full interrogation mode. These women have been my support system, my confidantes, my safe space to explore fantasies I never expected to experience in reality. They deserve at least a brief appearance, even if I can't share everything that's happened with Matt.

Me: Fine. But I'll need to keep it short.

Their excited responses make me smile despite the complication to my evening plans. Friendship obligations are as real as professional ones, after all.

As the reception shifts into full party mode, the dance floor packed, drinks flowing freely, the newlyweds surrounded by celebrating friends and family, I approach Catherine with my prepared excuse.

"I need to step away for a few minutes and make a call," I tell her. "Do you need anything before I go?"

Catherine, radiant with happiness and possibly a glass of champagne too many,

waves dismissively. "Go, go! Everything's perfect. You've done an amazing job, Jackie."

The genuine appreciation in her voice sends a twinge of guilt through me. It's a reminder that our relationship began as a business arrangement despite the authentic connection that's developed. I slip away during a particularly energetic group dance, making my way through the hotel to my room. I have just enough time to freshen my makeup, adjust my hair, and set up my laptop for the video call before the familiar chiming of the Naughty Girls' dedicated chat platform fills the room.

Three faces appear on my screen, all wearing expressions of eager anticipation that would be comical if they weren't so intimidating.

"FINALLY!" Maya exclaims. "We thought you'd ghosted us for Mr. Hurricane Hunter!"

"It's 'storm chaser,' not 'hurricane hunter,'" I correct automatically, settling more comfortably against the headboard. "And I'm at work, remember? Professional boundaries and all that."

"Professional boundaries," Christine repeats with exaggerated air quotes, her dark eyes twinkling with mischief. "Is that what we're calling it when you're making eyes at the best man during the ceremony?"

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I blink, momentarily startled. "How did you?—"

"Catherine's been posting ceremony highlights on Instagram," Jessica explains. "Including a very interesting shot of the wedding party at the altar. You think we wouldn't notice the way Tall, Dark, and Stormy looked at you?"

Heat rises to my cheeks as I make a mental note to check Catherine's social media posts. "He was not looking at me in any particular way," I protest, the lie transparent even to my own ears.

"Honey," Maya says with exaggerated patience, "that man was eye-fucking you so hard I'm surprised you didn't get pregnant from across the altar."

The crude but not entirely inaccurate assessment draws a reluctant laugh from me. "You're exaggerating."

"We are not," Jessica insists. "Now spill. What's happening with Hot Storm Chaser? And don't you dare say 'nothing' because your face is already telling us otherwise."

I hesitate, caught between the urge to share with the friends who understand this part of me and the desire to protect something that still feels fragile, precious, too new for outside examination. But these women have been with me through years of dating disasters, professional triumphs, and personal doubts. If anyone deserves the truth, it's them.

"Something... is definitely happening," I admit finally, unable to keep the smile from spreading across my face.

"I KNEW IT!" Jessica crows triumphantly. "The second you described him at the rehearsal dinner, I told you he was giving off major Daddy Dom energy!"

"Details," Christine demands, leaning closer to her camera. "We need specifics. How did it start? What happened? Is he a Daddy?"

The direct questions send heat flooding my face as memories of last night flash vividly through my mind. Matt's hands pinning my wrists, his voice dropping to that commanding register as he outlined his rules, the feel of his palm against my skin as he delivered the discipline I'd been unconsciously craving.

"Earth to Jackie," Jessica prods, obviously enjoying my flustered state. "You've gone completely red, which tells us everything."

I take a deep breath, gathering my thoughts. "It started during the storm yesterday," I begin, deciding to share the emotional connection rather than explicit details. "We got trapped at the venue when roads flooded. Spent hours talking, really talking, beyond the wedding small talk. He's... perceptive. Sees through my professional persona in a way that should be terrifying but somehow isn't."

"And?" Maya prompts, clearly expecting more salacious details.

"And yes, he's a Daddy," I admit, the confession sending a pleasant shiver through me even now. "Not in an overbearing or controlling way, but confident, assured. He knows what he wants and isn't afraid to say it directly."

"Did you sleep with him?" Christine asks, never one to dance around the point.

The blunt question would normally make me deflect with humor or vague non-answers. But something about Matt, about what's developing between us, makes honesty feel more natural than evasion even with my typically nosy friends.

"Yes," I confess simply. "Last night. We fell asleep together, we did not have sex. And it was... transformative."

The single adjective, chosen carefully from many possibilities, speaks volumes to women who read and discuss the same romance novels I do, who understand the fantasy of finding someone who sees and accepts all aspects of yourself, including the parts usually kept hidden.

"Oh my god," Jessica breathes, eyes wide. "You found your real-life Johnathon Trivalta."

I laugh at the reference to the hero of our most recently discussed book, a dominant CEO with a penchant for discipline and deep emotional wounds that only the heroine could heal. "Not exactly. Matt's more... grounded. Less dramatic. The dominance isn't a power play or control issue. It's about creating clarity, structure. A safe space where boundaries and expectations are explicit rather than assumed."

"Even better," Maya declares. "The fictional ones always have too many red flags anyway. So is this just a wedding fling, or...?"

The question cuts to the heart of what's been occupying my thoughts since our morning conversation.

"I don't know yet," I answer honestly. "We've talked about after the wedding. About him being based in Charlotte when not on assignment, about making time when our schedules align. It seems... possible. But complicated."

"Complicated how?" Christine asks, her expression turning more serious. "Because of the distance when he's working, or because of deeper concerns?"

The perceptive question, cutting past logistics to potential emotional barriers, is why I

value these friendships despite their occasionally overwhelming enthusiasm.

"Both," I admit. "The practical challenges of his travel schedule, certainly. But also... I've never done this before. Allowed someone to see past the professional exterior to the messy, contradictory person underneath. It's terrifying."

"But worth it?" Maya asks gently.

I consider the question seriously, weighing the emotional risks against the profound connection I've experienced with Matt in just a few days.

"Yes," I say finally, surprising myself with the certainty in my voice. "Worth it in a way I didn't expect."

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"Well, damn," Christine says with a slow smile. "Our Jackie's falling in love with her very own Daddy Dom. It's like every book we've read is coming to life."

"It's not—" I begin to protest automatically, then stop myself. Is it love? Too soon to tell, certainly. But it's undeniably more significant than any connection I've formed in years, with a potential that both exhilarates and terrifies me.

"It's something," I say instead, unwilling to label feelings still taking shape. "Something worth exploring, at least."

"We're happy for you," Maya says, her expression softening. "Truly. You deserve someone who sees the real you and appreciates her, the way we do."

The simple validation creates a lump in my throat. "Thank you," I manage, genuinely touched by their support.

"Now," Christine says, "let's talk logistics. When do you see him next? Tonight after the reception?"

"That's the plan," I confirm, glancing at the time display on my laptop. "Which means I should get back soon. The cake cutting is scheduled here shortly, and I need to be there to help Catherine."

"Go, go!" Jessica waves dismissively. "Wedding duties first, then storm chaser seduction. But we expect FULL details at our next meeting, including a thorough assessment of his... weather forecasting abilities."

The innuendo draws reluctant laughter from me as I prepare to end the call. "You're incorrigible, all of you."

"And you love us for it," Maya grins. "Now go finish being the perfect professional bridesmaid so you can get back to being perfectly unprofessional with Mr. Daddy Dom Storm Chaser."

"His name is Matt," I say with exaggerated patience.

"Whatever you call him," Christine says with a wink, "just make sure 'Daddy' is part of it."

Heat floods my cheeks again at the all-too-accurate assessment. "Goodbye, ladies," I say firmly, reaching for the end call button. "Book discussion will have to wait until next time."

I end the call, sitting for a moment in the sudden quiet of my hotel room. The conversation has left me feeling strangely exposed yet supported. As I gather myself to return to the reception, my phone buzzes with a text from

Matt: Reception duties becoming increasingly tedious without you nearby. Where did you disappear to, Sunshine?

The simple message, the acknowledgment that he's noticed my absence, that he's thinking of me even amid his brother's wedding festivities, sends a flutter through my stomach that has nothing to do with physical desire and everything to do with emotional connection.

Me: Had to step away for a quick video call. Heading back now. Miss me?

His response comes immediately.

Matt: More than is reasonable for knowing you less than a week. Nothing about this is reasonable. Cake cutting soon, then first opportunity to dance with you properly. I better get the next dance.

The request warms me from within.

Me: All yours, Daddy

I hesitate before sending the deliberately provocative response. Professional Jackie would never risk such a message, would maintain appropriate boundaries even in private communication. But I'm no longer just Professional Jackie, at least not with Matt. I'm also the woman who surrendered control in his arms, who articulated desires I'd barely acknowledged to myself, who longs to discover unexpected freedom in submission to the right person.

I hit send, then add a second message to clarify my return timing:

Back in five minutes. Try not to miss me too desperately until then.

His reply makes me laugh out loud.

Matt: Too late. Already contemplating storm-related emergencies that might require us both to leave early. Sadly, clear skies forecast for the entire evening.

When I reenter the ballroom, I find Matt standing near the bar with Greg and several groomsmen, a bourbon in hand and that subtle commanding presence that draws attention without demanding it. As if sensing my arrival, he looks up, our gazes connecting across the crowded room with an intensity that makes my pulse quicken.

The slight curve of his lips at seeing me, sends warmth spreading through me. He lifts his glass slightly in my direction, a private toast that no one else would notice or

understand.

I incline my head in acknowledgment, then turn to seek out Catherine, slipping back into professional mode with practiced ease. Something new hums with steady awareness, the knowledge that later tonight, when wedding duties are complete, I'll be returning to Matt's arms, his bed, his particular brand of dominant care that provides exactly what I didn't know I needed.

"There you are!" Catherine exclaims when I reach her side. "We're doing cake in ten minutes."

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"Everything's ready to go." On my way in, I double checked with the photographer and the wedding planner.

"You're amazing," she says, squeezing my arm affectionately. "I don't know what I would have done without you this weekend."

"Just doing my job," I say with a practiced smile. "Now, let's get you ready for cake cutting. It's your moment to shine."

As I guide Catherine toward the elaborate cake display, I catch Matt watching me from across the room. There's an intensity in his gaze that suggests he sees beyond the professional performance to the woman beneath. The woman who's beginning to integrate all aspects of herself rather than keeping them carefully compartmentalized.

The woman who's discovering that sometimes, the most unexpected connections are the most transformative.

The woman who, despite years of professional boundaries and careful distance, is falling for a storm chaser with perceptive eyes and dominant tendencies that match her secret desires with uncanny precision.

The professional bridesmaid who's discovering that some rules are worth breaking for the right person.

And Matthew Dayton with his quiet strength, perceptive understanding, and acceptance of all aspects of me might just be exactly the right person to show me what happens when a woman breaks her Daddy's rules.

CHAPTER 8

By the time the DJ announces the next slow song, the cake has been cut, the toasts have been made, and I've fulfilled every last one of my bridesmaid duties. The ballroom lights dim slightly, the soft amber glow settling over the dance floor like candlelight.

And then I feel him. Before I see him, before I hear him. Matt moves like he always does with a deliberate, confident, quiet command woven into every step. My body reacts before my mind catches up, my heart rate spiking in anticipation. I've never felt this way about a man before. Never. I've been attracted to men, but this? This is more than attraction. It's like my soul recognized him as being mine. I shake off that ridiculous thought as he draws closer.

"Dance with me?" he murmurs, appearing at my side, hand extended.

I place my hand in his without hesitation. "Took you long enough."

"I was being polite. Letting the family have their moments," he says, drawing me toward the dance floor. "But I've waited through cake, a champagne spill, and your mysteriously long conversations with flower girls. I've earned this."

He pulls me close, one strong hand settling at the small of my back, the other capturing my hand in his. We start to sway, slow and easy. The world narrows until it's just the two of us, the hum of the music a distant backdrop to the warmth of his body pressed against mine.

"I've never danced at a wedding like this," I admit quietly, my cheek brushing the lapel of his suit jacket. "I've danced, of course, as part of my duties... But, never with someone I'm interested in."

"I'm interested in you, too," he murmurs into my hair. "You're mine, Sunshine."

His words wash over me, settling in deep. Warm. Steady. Real.

"Do you know what I want right now?" He asks me. I shake my head. "I want to finish my best man duties while thinking extremely indecorous thoughts about what happens when this reception ends and I get you alone again."

The blunt admission sends heat pooling low in my belly. "That's... remarkably specific," I manage, fighting to maintain composure despite the images his statement evokes.

"I find clarity beneficial in all areas of life," he says, the serious tone belied by the heat in his eyes. "Especially regarding expectations and intentions."

"And your intentions for tonight are...?" I prompt, surprising myself with my boldness.

His smile is slow, predatory in a way that makes my pulse quicken despite the public setting. "To thoroughly explore every sound I can draw from you when you surrender control. To watch you come apart beneath my hands, my mouth, my cock. To hear you call me 'Daddy' as you beg me for your release."

The explicit declaration, delivered in that calm, controlled voice while we move decorously among other dancing couples, steals my breath and sends color flooding my cheeks. No man has ever spoken to me with such a direct, unashamed statement of desire, with no prevarication, no uncertainty, just clear intent and absolute confidence.

"That's..." I struggle for words, professional composure thoroughly rattled.

"Too much?" he asks, genuine concern beneath the heat. "We established honesty between us, Sunshine. I won't censor my desires unless you ask me to."

"Not too much," I assure him quickly. "Just... unexpected in the middle of a wedding reception. Difficult to respond to appropriately while maintaining professional decorum."

His low chuckle vibrates against me where our bodies press together. "Who says you need to respond appropriately? I rather enjoy watching your professional veneer crack when I push just the right buttons."

"You're deliberately trying to make me blush in public," I accuse, though there's no real heat in it. "Testing my composure."

"Guilty as charged," he admits without a trace of remorse. "Though I prefer to think of it as anticipatory foreplay. Building tension that makes the eventual release all the more satisfying."

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His thumb strokes lazy circles against the back of my hand as we move, and even in heels, I feel short next to him. I also feel protected by his strength surrounding me. And for the first time in my life, claimed. I'm both hyper-aware of the people around us and completely centered on Matt. He holds me in a way that makes everything else fall away.

"Matt," I start, then hesitate.

"Mmhmm?"

"I, uh... I've been thinking about our conversation in bed last night." My face heats as soon as the words leave my mouth. "When we were talking about how you'd have rules and um... discipline if those rules were broken."

His grip tightens just slightly, enough to ground me. "You can trust me, Sunshine. Tell me what is on your mind."

I draw in a slow breath. "I'm excited. I want this... dynamic with you. But I'm also self-conscious about some things."

"Like what?" he asks gently, dipping his head closer.

I hesitate again, then blurt it out before I lose my nerve. "Spanking. Specifically, being spanked. It's not that I don't want it, I do. Those chapters in the books I read are always my favorite and I've been curious about how it would feel in real life. But..." I groan softly. "God, I hate even saying this. My butt is...big. Like, really big. I know I'm curvy and like plus-sized and I don't make excuses or care what people

think about my size. I love myself and I'm confident in who I am. But, my butt...I've always been self-conscious about it. The thought of you staring at it or... focusing on it like that...it's gross. Disgusting. Covered in stretch marks and cellulite."

Matt stills. Just for a moment. Long enough that I start to wish I'd kept my mouth shut. Then he leans back, just enough to look me in the eyes.

"Jackie." His voice is calm. Firm. "I love your ass."

My face flames. "You're just saying that?—"

He cuts me off with one raised eyebrow. "No, Sunshine, I'll never lie to you. I adore your ass. You could land planes on it. It's perfect. And if you ever talk about yourself like that again?—"

"But it's true!"

His hand slides down to cup the curve of my hip. "Doesn't matter whether it's true or not, it's not okay to speak that way about something I happen to find irresistible. Something that now belongs to me. I appreciate you letting me know how you feel, Sunshine. I will work hard on making you see your body the way I do. Edible. Perfect. Mine."

My breath hitches. Should I let it go or push it? I'm curious about how serious he is. During our hours-long conversation we'd spoken about some basic rules. No lying. No negative self-talk. "But, me saying my butt is covered in cellulite and stretch marks, that it's disgusting, is the truth and you want the truth from me."

"Sweetheart, you might have cellulite and stretch marks. Bodies grow, change and develop over the years. That doesn't make it disgusting. It makes it real. Authentic. Believe me, whether I'm buried in you from behind or spanking you over my lap, I

won't be thinking that you are disgusting."

"Yeah, yeah. We'll see." I mutter. Just loud enough for him to hear me.

"In fact..." His palm shifts lower, cupping me fully through my dress. "You just earned your first spanking, sweetheart."

My mouth drops open. "But—Matt!"

He leans in close, lips brushing the shell of my ear. "Bare butt. Over my knee. Maybe even with the belt if you keep protesting."

I let out a shaky breath, body tingling. "It's not negative self-talk if it's accurate," I murmur stubbornly, testing him just a little.

He chuckles darkly, the sound vibrating through his chest. "That's twice. You're not making it easy on yourself tonight."

"Maybe I don't want easy."

The music swells. I realize we've stopped swaying. He's holding me still, and I'm very aware of the way his hand hasn't moved from my ass. He squeezes once, slow and deliberate, the pressure sending sparks all the way up my spine.

His gaze is warm, amused, and utterly commanding. "Dance is over, Sunshine. And I cannot wait to get you back to my place."

Heat rushes through me, pooling low and fast. My fingers clutch his lapel as the music fades out and another more upbeat tune kicks in. Around us, couples break apart, returning to their tables, but we don't move.

“You’re serious,” I whisper.

“Dead serious.” His thumb strokes just below my waistband. “You’re mine now. And Daddy takes care of what’s his.”

I bite my lip, unable to stop the smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. I should probably be more nervous than I am. But all I feel is anticipation and this deep, blooming trust.

“Better not go easy on me then,” I say softly.

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He grins. "Oh, sweetheart. I wouldn't dream of it."

He takes my hand again, leading me off the dance floor like a man who has every intention of keeping every promise he just made.

And me? I follow, willingly. Because this time, I'm not walking into the unknown alone.

I'm walking into it with a Daddy who sees all of me and apparently is attracted to every inch.

As we walk off the dance floor, a commotion near the entrance to the ballroom catches my attention. Raised voices, a flash of movement, hotel security moving purposefully toward the disturbance. Professional instincts override personal distraction immediately. "Something's wrong," I tell Matt. "I need to check what's happening."

"I'll come with you."

Together we move toward the source of the disruption, my mind already calculating potential problems and solutions. I've dealt with intoxicated guests, vendor disputes, and medical issues requiring discrete intervention.

What I don't expect, what never enters my realm of possibilities, is the sight that greets us at the entrance to the ballroom: a slender blonde woman in a slightly rumpled cocktail dress arguing with hotel security, her voice rising with indignation.

"I'm not crashing! I'm Megan Roberts. I'm Catherine's best friend! This is absurd! I have every right to be here!"

My blood runs cold, professional panic setting in with crystalline clarity. Megan. Catherine's actual best friend and former maid of honor, whose confession of feelings for Greg created the vacancy I was hired to fill. The woman whose existence throws my entire presence here into question.

Beside me, I feel Matt go very still, his posture shifting subtly from relaxed to alert. Before I can decide how to handle this development, Catherine appears, her face draining of color as she spots her former friend.

"Megan? What are you doing here?"

Greg materializes at his new wife's side, his expression hardening as he recognizes the source of the disturbance. "You shouldn't be here," he says firmly. "You need to leave."

"I came to apologize!" Megan exclaims, her voice carrying despite security's attempts to usher her away discreetly. "To explain! You wouldn't answer my calls or texts, so what choice did I have?"

"Not showing up drunk at my wedding reception would have been a good start," Catherine replies, her voice tight with controlled anger. "This is completely inappropriate, Megan."

"Inappropriate?" Megan's laugh holds a bitter edge. "You know what's inappropriate? Replacing your best friend of fifteen years with—" her gaze lands on me, narrowing with recognition and resentment, "—with some hired stranger pretending to be your BFF! Yes, I know exactly who she is, Catherine. A professional bridesmaid you found online when you decided to erase me from your life!"

The accusation lands like a physical blow, silence expanding in its wake as nearby guests process this unexpected drama. I maintain my professional expression through sheer force of will, though internally I'm calculating damage control scenarios with the detached efficiency that crisis situations tend to trigger in me.

Before I can decide how to respond, Matt steps forward, his voice carrying the calm authority that seems to come naturally to him in crisis situations.

"This is hardly the time or place for this conversation," he says, addressing the security staff rather than the principal players in the unfolding drama. "Perhaps we could move this discussion somewhere more private?"

Security nods in agreement and guides Megan towards a small room off the main ballroom. Catherine follows, visibly distressed, with Greg close behind, his expression a complex mixture of confusion and concern.

As I move to join them, Matt's hand catches my arm, his touch gentle but grounding.

"Do you want me there?" he asks quietly, his focus entirely on my needs.

The simple offer of support, the acknowledgment that this situation is professionally and personally challenging for me, creates a lump in my throat. "Yes," I admit, finding strength in honesty. "Please."

He nods once, his hand moving from my arm to the small of my back as we follow the others into the private room, his steady presence beside me more comforting than it has any right to be given how recently he's entered my life.

Inside the room, tension radiates from all parties. Megan perched on the edge of a chair looking simultaneously defiant and miserable, Catherine standing with arms crossed and posture rigid, Greg hovering beside his new wife with protective concern,

hotel security positioned discreetly near the door.

"I think," Matt says into the awkward silence, "some explanations would be beneficial for everyone involved."

His calm statement serves as permission for the floodgates to open, Megan launching into a tearful, slightly disjointed explanation of her side of the story. She explains how her confession to Greg had been misinterpreted, how she'd been drunk and emotional after a bad breakup, how she never intended to create problems but simply needed to be honest with her friends.

"I didn't try to 'steal' Greg," she insists, looking pleadingly at Catherine. "I just... I was in a bad place, and I've always admired your relationship, and it came out all wrong. But cutting me out completely? Hiring someone to pretend to be your best friend?" Her voice breaks on the last words, genuine hurt evident beneath the indignation.

Catherine's rigid posture softens slightly, though wariness remains in her expression. "You told my fiancé—now husband—that you'd 'always had feelings for him' and 'wondered what might have happened if you'd met him first,'" she says, the words clearly painful to repeat. "Right before our wedding. What was I supposed to think?"

"That I was a mess! That I needed my best friend!" Megan wipes at her eyes, mascara smudging beneath her fingers. "Not that you'd replace me with—" she gestures toward me with a dismissive wave, "—with some fat stand-in."

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“I understand you are drunk and upset, but you will not talk to my girl like that,” Matt says, stepping forward.

“Your what?” Catherine asks before turning to me. “Did you seduce the best man?”

The accusation stings.

“No.” Matt says. “She did not. If anything, I seduced her. She was the epitome of professionalism and turned me down.”

“You know how stubborn Matt can be,” Greg says.

Throughout this exchange, I maintain careful neutrality, years of navigating wedding drama allowing me to project calm despite my central role in the conflict.

After a moment, Catherine turns to me, genuine regret in her expression. "I'm sorry you've been put in this position, Jackie. This isn't what I hired you for."

"Wedding dynamics are complex, and my role is to support you through whatever situations arise, including unexpected confrontations."

"I think," Matt says, addressing the room with quiet authority, "that what we have here is a situation where hurt feelings and miscommunications have created complications for everyone involved. Including," he adds with a significant glance at the security staff, "hotel personnel who are simply trying to maintain appropriate decorum at a wedding reception."

The gentle reminder that this drama is unfolding in the middle of what should be a joyous celebration seems to penetrate the emotional fog surrounding both Catherine and Megan.

"You're right," Catherine acknowledges, visibly collecting herself. "This isn't the time or place for this conversation." She turns to Megan with mixed emotions evident in her expression. "We need to talk but not tonight. Not in the middle of my wedding reception."

Megan's posture deflates slightly, belligerence giving way to resignation. "I just wanted to apologize," she says, voice smaller now. "To explain. To fix things."

"I know," Catherine says, softening further. "And we will talk. Soon. But right now..."

"Right now you should be celebrating with your husband," Megan finishes for her, a hint of her former role as supportive friend emerging through the drama. "I'll go. I'm sorry for crashing in like this. And I'm sorry for calling you fat. I'm feeling all the things seeing you stand where I was supposed to."

I accept her apology with a nod and security escorts Megan out through a side entrance. Catherine takes a moment to compose herself with Greg's supportive arm around her waist, before they return to enjoy the little time left of the reception.

As I prepare to return to the reception, Matt pulls me gently aside. "You okay?" he asks simply, his focus entirely on my wellbeing. The genuine concern in his voice and the prioritization of my emotional state creates a lump in my throat that makes speaking difficult. I nod, not trusting my voice immediately.

"Yes," I say. "I'm fine. I'm just about ready to go but..."

"But, first you have a job to finish," he completes for me, understanding evident in his expression. "I know, Sunshine. Go be brilliant at what you do. I'll be waiting when you're done."

"Thank you," I say simply, meaning it more than the words can convey.

When the reception finally concludes and the bride and groom depart amid sparklers and cheers, guests dispersing to their rooms or after-parties, vendors begin the careful breakdown of décor and equipment. I find myself momentarily alone in the partially dismantled ballroom, I realize my professional responsibilities are complete but my personal reckoning was still to come. Can I do this? Can I step out and take a chance on a Daddy of my own? Move from my books to real life? I think about RJ and Jess and how they definitely found their own fairytale Daddies... and I want that, too.

"You did it," comes Matt's voice from behind me, quiet in the relative emptiness of the space. "Perfect wedding, crisis managed, bride and groom departed happy. Professional bridesmaid mission accomplished."

I turn to find him leaning against a pillar, jacket discarded, tie loosened, looking both exhausted and alert in that particular way special events tend to leave people. "It's what I do," I say simply, too emotionally drained for pretense or deflection.

"You do it exceptionally well," he acknowledges. He studies me for a moment, those perceptive eyes taking in my appearance, my posture, my likely exhaustion after hours of emotional and professional high-wire acts. "My place or yours?" he asks finally.

"Yours," I decide after brief consideration. "There's no one on the other side of the wall like in the hotel."

He nods understanding, extending his hand in silent invitation. After a momentary

hesitation, not reluctance but acknowledgment of the threshold I'm crossing, I place my hand in his, allowing him to lead me from the ballroom toward whatever conversation and consequences await us.

CHAPTER 9

Matt's house is quiet when we arrive, dark except for the soft glow of a lamp near the entryway and the flicker of lightning bugs just beyond the porch. I toe off my heels near the door and sigh in relief as my feet touch the cool hardwood. Behind me, Matt locks the door with a firmclick, then steps in close.

"You still with me, Sunshine?" he murmurs, resting his hands on my shoulders.

"Yeah," I say softly. "More than I probably should be."

His fingers slide down my arms before he turns me gently to face him. "No such thing as 'should' right now. Just you and me, being honest with each other."

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He cups my face, brushing his thumbs along my cheeks. “Tonight was perfect. You were perfect.”

“I was on the clock,” I say with a small smile. “Professional bridesmaid perfection is kind of my thing.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Pretty sure what you were doing on that dance floor wasn’t in the job description.”

I smirk. “Neither was sexting the groom’s brother.”

“Or agreeing to get spanked for self-deprecating comments?”

“Definitely not covered in the service package.”

His hands settle at my waist. “But it’s all real now, Jackie. Wedding’s over. We’ve been living in this little bubble for the past few days... I think it’s time to talk about what happens next.”

A flicker of apprehension passes through me. I nod slowly. “Yeah. I was thinking about that too.”

We settle on the couch, facing each other, our knees brushing. I pull my legs up underneath me, trying to organize the swirl of thoughts in my head. “So. Full disclosure.”

He lifts his chin, giving me his full attention.

“I don’t actually live in Charlotte,” I begin. “Most of my work takes place there, but I’ve got a little cottage about forty minutes outside the city. It’s quiet. Small-town quiet. Which I like. I think I need that contrast to what I do.”

Matt leans back slightly, expression unreadable, and I rush to fill the silence. “I know it might complicate things. And I don’t expect anything. I just didn’t want to lie or make it sound like I was next door or?—”

“Jackie.” He cuts in gently, resting his hand on my knee. “Relax. You told me the truth. That’s all I ever ask.”

His thumb strokes my skin as he nods thoughtfully. “That actually lines up perfectly. I’ve been thinking about changing gears for a while now.”

I blink. “You? Really?”

He lets out a low breath and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Yeah. I love chasing storms. It’ll always be part of me. But I’ve been pushing hard for years. Constant travel, late nights, barely staying in one place long enough to know what drawer my socks are in.”

I smile. “You don’t strike me as a man who doesn’t know exactly what drawer his socks are in.”

He grins. “Guilty. But lately, I’ve been thinking... I don’t want this to be my whole life. I’ve got enough contacts and experience to start consulting. I can work with emergency planning teams, meteorological firms, maybe even teaching some courses here and there. Still get my hands dirty with the really big storms, but not be on the road twenty-four-seven.”

A pause.

“That life... has room for someone else. If they want to be part of it.” My heart does a quiet flip. His eyes meet mine, serious now. “But I want to be clear about something. What we started this weekend? It’s not casual to me. I don’t do temporary well. If this is going to work, I need it to be real. I need you to be real with me.”

I swallow. “Okay.”

“I want to take care of you. That’s not just a kink thing—it’s how I love. Protectively. Consistently. Deeply. But if I’m going to be your Daddy, I need to know what you’re ready for. How much control you want to give up. Where your boundaries are.”

I sit with the question for a few long breaths.

“I don’t think I know the full answer yet,” I admit. “But I want to figure it out—with you. I want to work my way into it. A little at a time.”

He nods. “That’s more than fair.”

“I’ve spent so long in control,” I say. “Managing things, fixing problems, anticipating issues before they show up. I want to let go... but I also want to feel safe while I do. I’m not ready to hand over everything. Not yet. But I am ready to start.”

Matt leans forward again, taking both my hands in his.

“Then here’s what we’re going to do,” he says, voice steady. “Three rules. Three expectations. And as we move forward, we’ll adjust together.”

I nod slowly, breath catching a little at the gravity in his tone.

“One,” he says, holding up a finger. “You keep yourself safe. That means rest, food, basic self-care. If I ask you if you’ve eaten or slept, I expect an honest answer.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Two.” He holds up a second finger. “You don’t talk badly about yourself—not your body, your worth, or your abilities. That mouth is mine now, and I won’t have it used against you.”

My throat tightens. I nod again.

“And three.” His expression softens. “You’re honest with me. Always. There won’t be lies between us. You’ll be honest about how you feel. What you need. What’s too much. This only works if you trust me enough to say the hard stuff.”

“I can do that,” I say quietly.

He leans in, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “I know you can.”

We sit in silence for a moment, the rules hanging in the air between us. Finally, I rest my head on his shoulder. “So... about that spanking I earned earlier.”

He chuckles, wrapping an arm around me. “Oh, sweetheart. We’ll get there.”

“And you’re sure you want all of this? My baggage, my sass, my giant ass?”

He gives my hip a light squeeze. “Especially the sass. And the ass.”

I laugh into his chest, the sound muffled by the steady thrum of his heartbeat. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I’ve found solid ground.

Matt hadn't moved his hand from my thigh. I could feel the weight of it, warm, grounding, entirely in control. And when he spoke again, his voice had shifted just slightly, softened around the edges but still laced with authority.

"You know," he said, thumb making slow circles against my skin, "we've had our heart-to-heart. Talked about where this is going. Shared a whole lot of honest words."

I looked up at him, already sensing where this was headed. "We did."

He nodded once. "But you still haven't been held properly accountable for the things you said at the wedding."

Heat flared in my cheeks instantly. "Matt?—"

His brow lifted, just a little. "Excuse me?"

I caught myself and corrected quickly. "Daddy."

"Better," he said, with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Now, what did you say at the wedding, sunshine?"

I exhaled, the memory coming back fast. "That I was self-conscious. About my... about my butt. And that it wasn't self-deprecating if it was true."

His hand slid just a little higher on my thigh, a subtle warning. "And what do we call that?"

"Breaking a rule," I said, quieter now.

"That's right." He leaned in, brushing a kiss against my temple. "You don't speak badly about what's mine. And that gorgeous body of yours? Every inch belongs to

me now.”

I swallowed, body thrumming with anticipation. “I know.”

“So,” he continued, sitting up straighter. “You’ve earned a real spanking. Not just playful. This is a correction. Discipline. To help you remember that your words have weight. Even the ones you aim at yourself.”

My heart pounded, but I nodded. “I understand. I want that.”

Matt stood and held out a hand to me, his presence suddenly larger than life. “Then come here, baby girl.” He took my hand and led me to his bedroom before saying, “time to get bare for Daddy.”

The phrase made me shiver, but I obeyed. I’d fantasized about this for years. I didn’t think it would ever be me. My turn. Real life. My fingers tremble slightly as I peeled off my pants again, then slid my panties down over my hips. When I turned back toward him, cheeks hot, I found him seated on the couch, his expression unreadable.

“Over my knee. You know why.”

God, yes, I do.

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I move to him, heart pounding, and drape myself over his lap, my body fitting to his like we were made for this. He adjusts my position, tugging me just slightly forward so my butt is perfectly presented. There's something deeply vulnerable about being here like this, exposed and waiting. But it's not scary.

It's freeing.

Matt's hand rests on my lower back.

"You said something cruel about your body," he says softly. "And that's not something I'll ever let slide, not because I want to control you—but because you belong to me now. And I will not tolerate anyone disrespecting what's mine."

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"I know, baby. But you still need the correction. I promised you a spanking on your bare ass and a spanking you will be receiving." He rubs my bottom slowly.

He continued to run his hand over my bare skin, his touch slow and possessive. "This is a discipline spanking, Jackie. You earned it. You accepted it. Now you're going to take it."

I nodded into the couch. "Yes, Daddy."

The first swat landed firm and deliberate, not cruel, but undeniably corrective. I gasped, the sharp sound echoing in the quiet room.

“You don’t call your beautiful body names,” he said, another crisp smack punctuating the words. “Not ever.”

I breathed through it, letting the rhythm take hold.

Smack.

“Your ass is perfect.”

Smack.

“And you don’t have permission to insult what’s mine.” He sets a rhythm, alternating cheeks, his hand connecting solidly again and again. My skin warms, each strike deepening that low thrum of arousal and contrition in my belly.

“This ass,”smack, “is stunning.”

Smack.

“This ass is mine.”

Smack.

The pain bloomed from the inside out. It was bright and hot and somehow centering. With every swat, I felt more present in my body, more grounded. The embarrassment faded, replaced by something deeper: surrender. Trust.

Matt’s hand strokes slowly down my back as I rest against his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart against my cheek. My skin is warm, my mind a little hazy, but I feel safer here than I have in a long, long time.

Then, without warning, he delivers three final swats, sharper than the ones before, enough to make me yelp and press my hips down into his thigh, trying to outrun the sting.

“That,” smack, “is for the dance floor comment.”

Smack. “For the lie you told yourself.”

Smack. “And for making Daddy prove to you just how perfect this beautiful, full ass of yours is.”

I moan softly into the comforter, equal parts overwhelmed and alight. My eyes sting, not with pain, but with release. Because it’s not just the spanking. It’s the meaning behind it. The care. The refusal to let me settle for anything less than love, even from myself.

Matt strokes a hand down the curve of my back again, soothing now, no more swats coming. Just that steady pressure, his touch grounding me back in my body, back in the moment.

“You did so well,” he murmurs, leaning forward to kiss the center of my spine. “Took your punishment like a good girl.” He helps me sit and I cuddle onto his lap. He kisses my forehead. “We’ll take it one step at a time. Just like we talked about. You’re mine now, and I take care of what’s mine.”

And sitting there, sore and warm and utterly adored, I know the truth of it all the way to my soul.

“Yes, Daddy,” I whisper. “I know.”

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He leans in, his lips grazing my ear. “I want to make love to you, Sunshine. The kind that rewrites your body’s memory. The kind you feel for days.”

A shiver rolls through me, not from fear but from the sheer truth of his words. I’ve never had a man say something like that and mean it.

“I want that too,” I whisper, meeting his gaze.

The corner of his mouth lifts; not cocky, not playful. Just sure. Of himself. Of me. Of this thing blooming between us that doesn’t make sense on paper but feels inevitable anyway.

Matt kisses me, slow and deep. It’s not rushed. There’s no pretense in it, just his mouth moving against mine with growing hunger, a promise in every stroke of his tongue. His hand cups my face, steadying me as though he senses how easily I could get lost.

He pulls back just enough to look at me. “Last chance, baby. Once I start, I’m not stopping until you’re completely wrung out and asleep in my arms.”

His tone makes my thighs clench.

“I don’t want you to stop,” I murmur.

Something shifts in him then. Permission given. Walls down. He kisses me again, and this time, it’s all-consuming. I feel him everywhere; his weight, his breath, the way his hand slips under my camisole and lifts it over my head, baring me to the heat of

his gaze.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs, brushing his mouth over my collarbone. “So beautiful, it hurts.”

His hands aren’t hurried as he peels away what’s left of my clothes. His touch is deliberate. Each inch of skin he exposes is kissed, admired, claimed.

When I’m completely bare before him, he just looks at me. Not a quick glance. Not a once-over. He sees me. His eyes linger on my stomach, my thighs, the curve of my hips, the softness I’ve tried to hide.

“You’re mine now,” he says, pressing his forehead to mine. “And I’m going to show you exactly what that means.”

He undresses too, and when his body settles over mine, skin to skin, the pressure is everything I didn’t know I needed. We fit. Somehow. In all the ways that matter.

He slides a thigh between mine and nudges my legs further open, his hand finding mine and threading our fingers together.

“You ready, Sunshine?” he whispers, his voice rough and low.

I nod. “Yes, Daddy.”

He enters me slowly, inch by inch, never breaking eye contact. There’s nothing rushed or urgent; just the ache of stretching around him, of letting him in, in every sense.

Once he’s fully seated, he holds there, giving me time to adjust. One hand stays tangled in mine, the other strokes my cheek as his forehead presses to mine. Then he starts to move, and it’s not just about pleasure, it’s about every unspoken promise

he's already begun to keep. His hips rock into mine with a rhythm that feels like a vow.

Our bodies speak in sync: gasps and moans and whispered names. I wrap my legs around him, pulling him deeper, needing to feel him fill every corner of me. The pressure builds slowly, that coil tightening with each pass of his hips, each stroke of his hand across my breast, each kiss that lingers far longer than lust would require.

When I come apart beneath him, it's not loud. It's not wild. It's devastatingly intimate. I orgasm with a soft cry into his mouth, a trembling release as my body yields to his completely.

He follows moments later, breathing my name like a prayer, holding me so tightly I almost weep.

After, we don't speak. We just breathe, tangled together, his heartbeat a slow and steady thrum against my back. One arm stays tight around my waist, protective. Possessive. The other brushes through my hair as if I'm precious. Fragile, but not breakable.

Eventually, he pulls the blanket over us and murmurs, "Tomorrow we talk more about what kind of future we will build."

I smile against his chest, warm and safe. "It started tonight."

He kisses the top of my head. "Then I promise, Sunshine, I'll make sure it only gets better from here. Tomorrow, when we aren't this exhausted, I'll show you how much pleasure a Daddy can give his girl."

I have every intention to hold him to that promise.