



Faking It With My New Boss

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Description: After my divorce, I swore I was done with relationships... except now, I'm accidentally "engaged" to my new boss! This is not what I expected when I offered my skills to tall, dark, and deliciously dominant hotelier Bryan Callahan. He also happens to be the most spoiled and ill-mannered man I've ever met, but...
...law school doesn't come cheap and he is very generous. Intoxicatingly arrogant, Bryan doesn't bow for anybody – except his grandfather, that is. And Grandpa Callahan doesn't seem to be too thrilled about leaving the family empire in the hands of a playboy.

And Bryan chose me to prove him wrong. After all, as the girl who'd sworn off men forever, who better to stand in as Bryan's fake fiancée? It is a perfect plan, but there is one little problem. Feelings. Nothing about this was supposed to be real – but somehow, our connection is. I feel like a different woman – one with yearnings and needs that have gone unfulfilled for my entire life. It scares me to think he shares the way I feel about him. I need to do something before it goes too far.

Faking it with my New Boss is a witty, yet emotional office romance – the second in the My New Boss series. This full-length enemies-to-lovers romance can be read as a complete standalone. HEA guaranteed!

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Chapter One

Courtney

“You’re here!”

I could hear my best friend squealing with delight at my arrival over the sound of the moving truck engine. It cut through the silence of the early morning hour and made several birds fly out of a tree right in front of me.

I bet my new neighbors were just loving this.

Parking the truck in front of the little house, I turned off the engine and took a deep breath. Vanessa was already running down from the small front porch in all her denim overalls glory, her ponytail bouncing behind her.

This was actually real. I was really doing this. After months of talk and bravado, I had actually taken the leap. Rather than just continuing on with the career I thought I wanted and thinking my dreams were out of my reach, I packed up and went for it. For the first time, I’d actually taken control of my life.

And I was right on the brink of hyperventilating.

This whole thing was just a lot. I didn’t want to show how overwhelmed I already felt. After all, I was a grown woman. A grown woman who had already been through finding a career, getting a divorce, and rebuilding her life. Relocating a few hours away to go back to school shouldn’t have been that daunting.

And yet, here I was. Hands clenched around the steering wheel. All my possessions piled up behind me. Both a rock and a swarm of butterflies in my stomach. And my best friend trying to pry the locked door open.

Looking out at Vanessa lessened my nervousness a little bit. It made me smile to see how excited she was to have me there. She was already dressed and ready for the challenge of moving me into my new place. I hadn't even seen the inside of the little house yet. When I made the decision to move here, I searched online for something that would suit my needs and also my now fairly limited budget. It was up to Vanessa to do the actual tour inside.

I knew she wouldn't agree to something that I would end up hating, but there was still a lingering worry about putting down a security deposit and two months' rent before getting a glimpse inside. It was like the biggest, most expensive blind bag collectible in existence.

"Courtney?" Vanessa called through the door. "What are you doing?"

She shouted like I was still all the way across the yard. The combination of the quizzical look on her face, the open front door of the little house, and the man in a blue fuzzy bathrobe and quite possibly nothing else glaring out of his own little house down the block snapped me out of my meandering thoughts. I was spiraling, giving myself excuses to stay stagnant again, just like I had for so long.

I couldn't let myself do that. It might have seemed like a compulsive decision to empty my old apartment, toss interior designing behind me, and enroll in law school, but it actually wasn't. This dream had been inside me a long time and I'd just let myself avoid going after it so I didn't have to worry about failing. If I just kept it as a dream, then I could long for it. I could think about it and how wonderful it would be to have, and never risk the possibility it wouldn't happen.

That wasn't good enough anymore. Watching the transformation my ex-husband Robert went through falling in hapless, unexpected love with his wife Tina was enough to shake me out of that funk. There was life out there. More than what I had and everything I could go after.

I deserved to at least try.

Somehow that pep talk pushed me over the edge and had me reserving a moving van and searching for houses in close proximity to the school I hoped to attend. My application for school and the house were in and several boxes were packed and labeled before it all sank in. But it was too late to turn back, too late to reconsider.

I was here now. It was time to find out what life had waiting for me.

One more deep breath and I opened the door, sliding from the black leather seat and onto the edge of the street in front of Vanessa. She immediately let out another squeal and I was pretty sure it was the first sound several of my neighbors heard that morning, and threw her arms around me.

I hugged her back tightly. She was a lot, but she was my oldest and best friend. I'd missed her like crazy when she came here to embark on her own legal career and it was good to be near her again.

"It's been way too long," I said, still hugging her.

"Well, I'm the one who's been telling you for years to come out here," Vanessa said. "I've had to brave the wilds by myself."

I laughed and looked around the sleepy neighborhood. "These wilds?"

"These aren't the wilds. Wait until I get you out on the town tonight," she said.

“There’s a whole lot of moving ahead of us,” I pointed out, stepping back from the hug and wrapping my arm around her waist to guide her to the back of the truck. “Maybe after that we’ll talk about going out.”

“How much could you have possibly brought with you?” she asked.

I opened the back of the truck to reveal the boxes and furniture stuffed inside.

“About that much,” I said.

Vanessa’s mouth fell open. “How did that fit in your apartment?”

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“I don’t know,” I said with a sigh, staring into the truck. “It was like a clown car. While I was packing things up, more just spontaneously appeared.”

“Well,” my best friend said with a resolved drop of her shoulders as she planted her hands on her hips. “Let’s do this thing.”

Five hours later, we finally dragged the last of the boxes into the house and shut the door behind us. I sagged onto the couch positioned at a bizarre angle in the general vicinity of the living room. Vanessa dropped down beside me and we turned our heads to look at each other. Both burst into laughter.

“You’re never living anywhere else,” she said. “This is it. Your one move.”

I nodded, my head rested against the back of the couch. “That works for me.”

“I am absolutely starving. Let’s order pizza,” she said.

Neither of us moved and a few seconds later, I laughed again.

“We’re making great progress here,” I said.

“Yep.” She groaned and pulled herself up. “Alright. Since this is my neck of the woods, I’ll pick the place. Your usual?”

“Absolutely. Onions and pineapple.”

Vanessa shook her head as she picked up her cell phone from where she left it on the

counter.

“Still gross.”

When the pizza arrived, we each sprawled on our respective ends of the couch and opened our individual boxes. The first bite was decadent and delicious. I knew I was hungry, but didn't realize just how ravenous until I swallowed that first delicious chunk of bread and oily cheese cut by the sweetness of the pineapple.

“I forgot to text Robert,” I said, wiping my mouth with a napkin.

Vanessa gave me a questioning look. “Why do you need to text your ex-husband?”

“To let him know I got settled in. We’re on good terms now. I told you that,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, not sounding totally convinced. “That whole situation is still really weird to me.”

“It’s not weird. Robert and I make far better friends than we ever did as a married couple, and Tina is wonderful. You’d really like her. Besides, it’s not like I’m planning on calling them every day. The two of them are handling some last-minute stuff that didn’t get wrapped up before I left, and they just wanted me to check in to let them know I’m safe. It’s called caring about your fellow man.”

“Alright, I’ll give them that,” Vanessa said, reaching for another slice of pizza. “But then we’re calling a moratorium on all things your old life. You’re here now. We’re finally back together and it’s time to have some fun. Are you excited about starting school soon?”

“Trying to be,” I admitted. “Maybe I’ll be more excited when I have a way to pay for it.”

“I thought you said you have that interview in a few days,” Vanessa said.

“I do. But I’m really nervous about it,” I said.

She gave me an incredulous look. “There’s no reason for you to be nervous. It might not have been what you wanted to do for the rest of your life, but you are an amazing interior designer. These restaurants would be lucky to have you.”

“Hotels,” I said. “And it’s just one. The hospitality company is opening a new hotel and wants a fresh look. It would be something to get some money in my bank and hopefully I could parlay it into a permanent position. I just need something that’s going to pay for school and rent.”

“You’ll get it. Don’t worry,” Vanessa said. “And then before you know it, you’ll pass the bar and enter the realm of the lawyers.”

“That sounds fancy,” I said. “Is there an initiation I should be aware of?”

“You’ll just have to wait and find out,” she said, winking at me. “And speaking of out, let’s finish eating and get ready.”

“Get ready for what?” I asked.

“Dancing,” she said as if we had already come to this understanding and I was ruining it by not knowing what she was talking about. “I want to bring you to my favorite club.”

I shook my head. “Not tonight. I am so exhausted from all this.”

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Vanessa looked so disappointed I almost changed my mind, but I just wasn't feeling going out that night. I was just settling into my new place and I needed some time to wrap my head around it. All the sudden changes in my life were exciting and I couldn't wait to see where they would lead me. But they were also overwhelming. I needed to do this one step at a time.

Chapter Two

Bryan

The elevator rose to the second from the top floor and I took a deep breath.

This was it. This was the beginning of my new job, my new career and my new direction in life.

Yay.

I tried, really tried, to be excited, but I just couldn't force the feeling. It was what I was raised to do, and clearly I knew enough about the business since I literally grew up in it, but hospitality and fine dining restaurants were not exactly my speed. That didn't mean I had much of a choice. Not after Dad died.

I had always had a role in the company. From the time I was a kid, I had some kind of job, something to make a little cash of my own that didn't have to come from the trust fund. Something a little less traceable by my parents. It had been fun, being a big shot while still being a pool boy or front desk manager or whatever job they needed to be filled at the premier hotel just outside of DC that I could do with a little training and a

lot of pressure.

The jobs came naturally to me, so that was good. I was always a hard worker, and took the opportunity to find ways to make the jobs I was doing more efficient while I was doing them. It didn't win me a lot of friends sometimes when I pointed out how many extra people we had doing jobs or how people found ways to waste time that I could eliminate. But I was good at them, and kind of floated my way through the company until I was an adult and they put me in the offices.

There were letters in front of my name, but I didn't pay much attention to them for a long time. I didn't care. As long as I came to work, was visible, and hung out in Dad's office while he bitched about whatever thing it was that bugged him, it was assumed I was just soaking everything up so I could be next in line. Grandpa had retired and Dad had taken over and one day that would happen with me too.

Then Dad died.

It was unexpected and unfortunate. Grandpa immediately resumed being in charge, but as an octogenarian, promised the board and the investors that he would pass along the company to me. I just had to prove myself first. Part of that was today, just weeks since my father's burial, as I came back into the offices for the first time and met with my Grandpa's top guys on the board. Grandpa was still the majority owner, by a large margin, and his say went, but he was pretty adamant about me having a good relationship with the rest of the board.

The door opened and I exhaled. Here we go.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Every person that came up to me either said it verbatim or had a little twist, but the sentiment was the same. Everybody was sorry for my loss. I felt bad. I should be sorry for my loss too. He was my father. He was, by all accounts, a decent man. He just wasn’t a big part of my everyday life growing up. It wasn’t until I was an adult and spent time listening to him ramble about the business, that I spent any time with him. By then, our relationship was far more like colleagues than father and son. We didn’t spend holidays together except Christmas. We didn’t have things to talk about other than the business. We just weren’t close.

Finally making it past all the lined-up ass-kissers who wanted to make sure they got their pouting faces in front of me to apologize for my loss, I got to the heavy wooden doors of the chairman’s office. It was technically the secondary office of my grandfather at the moment. My father’s office, on the top floor, was also his office in his temporary role as CEO again. That office would theoretically be mine after this meeting.

Supposing it went well.

“Bryan, good to see you,” said the old man standing up from behind the ornate wooden desk by the window. He was tall, taller than I was, but lanky and ancient. Spots on his forehead where hair should have been told me he wasn’t particularly in good health, but he seemed spry anyway. He also had a smile like a shark that had missed several meals.

I took his hand and shook it and he patted me on the back.

“I am so sorry for your loss, son,” he said.

Only two people in the world called me “son”. Grandpa and William Hicks. The

largest minority shareholder in the company and Grandpa's closest advisor.

"Thanks, Mr. Hicks," I said.

"Oh, Bryan, you are a man now. And CEO. You can call me as your grandfather called me. I prefer it," he said.

"Okay, Billy," I said. The words felt dirty in my mouth. Calling a man who looked like he was older than God himself "Billy" just seemed wrong on a molecular level.

"Very good," Billy said and headed back to the table. "I would like to talk to you about expectations today, Bryan."

"Sure," I said, sitting down on one of the expensive leather chairs across from the desk. Billy's eyes caught mine as I looked at the desk and then him, then to the picture of my Grandfather on the wall. It was subtle, but it was good to remind him that I knew full well he didn't actually belong in that seat. He was just occupying it.

Billy folded his hands together, fingers interlaced, and leaned forward on the table. The diamonds in his cufflinks reflected light from the sun at me and I temporarily wished I had worn the sunglasses inside. There was a premium put on natural light in the offices, and this room was a shrine to it. Dad's office was even more so.

Not Dad's office. My office.

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“There are certain expectations for you in this company, Bryan. Obviously, your grandfather and father have built it up to a level that is the envy of the hospitality industry. As the CEO and majority stakeholder, you will be the shepherd for that reputation. As such, there are some things you should know about how things actually work on the level of administration,” he said. “Including one very special tradition that you will need to get a move on rather fast.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“The upcoming charity fundraiser,” he said. “Known as the Callahan Charity Gala. Your grandfather started it many years ago, and it is the primary networking event of the season for the DC elite.”

“So, what, do I need to go shake hands with people?” I asked, unclear at what he was getting at.

“Well, yes,” he said. “But it’s more than that. You need to host the event. There is a lot to get done, and the planning and execution is solely your job.”

“What? Why?” I asked. “What does throwing a party has to do with running the company? Shouldn’t we just hire people to do that?”

Billy sighed. “Again, there are things you don’t quite understand. It’s not your fault, you weren’t groomed for this yet. Your father’s death was a bit earlier than we anticipated.”

“I know,” I said. “I certainly wasn’t planning on doing any of this right now.

Especially throwing some dumb party.”

“It’s not a dumb party,” Billy said, his voice suddenly developing an edge. “It’s a huge source of referral and prestige for the company. And it is tradition that a Callahan man hosts it, dating back to your grandfather fifty years ago. Doing well with this will demonstrate you are a competent head of the company. If you fail…”

“If I fail, what?”

Billy shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “It would seem to make the rumors of your ability to lead this organization seem founded in reality,” he said. “Your grandfather has been very clear about how he plans on using his power as majority shareholder and how he plans on transferring that power. It is contingent on many things. You need to prove yourself, Bryan. Lest he cut you off and cut you out.”

I tried to contain the anger bubbling up in my chest. As much as I really didn’t particularly want this position, I didn’t want to be cut off either. Not having my family’s power or money to fall back on was not something I was prepared for in any way, shape or form.

I swallowed hard and nodded. “Fine,” I said. “I’ll throw the party. No problem.”

“Excellent,” Billy said, standing. “And should you need anything, I will be at my offices in Orlando. You can always send me a message and I will get back to you in a short time.”

He stood and crossed the room to me. I stood and shook his hand again. His free hand moved to my shoulder, and he shook me as if he was imparting deep wisdom and encouragement.

“I believe in you, Bryan. I see great things in your future,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said, releasing his hand and walking away. I wanted to prove myself to these people if nothing other than to wipe the smug look off Billy’s face. He lied when he said he believed in me. He wanted me to fail as much as anyone.

“Oh,” he said from behind me, just as I reached the door. I turned to look at him as he sat back down at the desk, my father’s painting looming over him. “I just wanted to say again, I am so sorry for your loss.”

I forced a thin smile.

“Me too,” I said, and walked out the door.

Chapter Three

Courtney

Listening to rain and thunder had always been one of my favorite ways to go to sleep. It always helped me relax and calmed my mind, even when I had a thousand thoughts running through it. That was why it seemed like a good sign when a few days after I moved into my little house the sky opened up just as I was climbing into bed.

The next day it was my interview and I knew I needed a good night's sleep in order to be at my best and impress the hiring manager of the company. I tucked myself into bed, closed my eyes, and concentrated on the soothing sounds of the storm outside. It definitely did the trick. In fact, it lulled me into such deep sleep I didn't notice when the electricity went out in the middle of the night.

Fun fact: alarm clocks often require electricity to work. And a cell phone alarm set as a backup doesn't do any good at all if it was on its charger just about dead when the power went out.

That was how my morning started out, with me opening my eyes feeling refreshed and well-rested, like everything was good in the world. For approximately 10 seconds. That was how long it took me to realize I overslept.

It wasn't by long, but just knowing I no longer had that half an hour threw me off and got my morning going on the wrong foot. Glad the electricity had come back at some point during the night, I threw myself into the shower and underwent the world's fastest bathing. That done, I grabbed the interview clothes I set out for myself the night before.

Vanessa always made fun of me for liking to lay out my clothes before going to bed. She said it reminded her of the first day of elementary school and color-coordinated outfits her mother chose for her. Not that those outfits ever actually made it out the front door. Vanessa was infamous for what I would compassionately refer to as a bold and innovative fashion sense as a young girl.

Thankfully she had overcome her deep devotion to neon DayGlo and garment layering that tested the boundaries of just how much cloth you could wrap around a human being and have them still capable of breathing.

Despite her discouragement, I liked planning my clothes, setting them out along with my shoes and accessories so I could be ready in the morning. It was something I learned in a life skills class in high school. It was meant to increase productivity and reduce stress by eliminating morning-time decisions. I just figured it bought me a few extra minutes in bed.

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That was an exceptionally good thing that morning as I tried to multitask by brushing my teeth and getting dressed at the same time. I could feel the seconds sticking past me and kept trying to go faster so I wouldn't be late for my interview.

Which resulted in me promptly sticking my thumbnail right through my pantyhose as I tried to pull them on. Toothpaste dripped out of my mouth as I watched the run traveled down my pantyhose all the way to my foot. Letting out an exasperated growl, I peeled off the ruined hosiery, tossed them in the direction of the trashcan, and pulled a new pair out of the dresser.

Finally dressed, I headed for the kitchen. One of my favorite modern inventions is the coffee maker that can be programmed to start brewing at a specific time. It meant I already had a steaming cup ready for me when I rushed across the linoleum floor and grabbed the mug filled with delicious coffee. I took a satisfying sip, tipped the rest into a traveling tumbler, and ran for the front door.

I was on the way to my car when I realized I didn't know where my keys were. I didn't remember setting them down anywhere inside, but I also didn't remember picking them up that morning. Setting my coffee on the roof of my car, I dug through my purse in hopes I'd put them there. Finding them wedged into the corner at the very bottom felt like a much-needed victory in the rocky morning. I wrapped my fingers around the keys and pulled them out.

Unlocking the door, I wrenched it open. My respite from disaster was officially over. The edge of the door caught the bottom of my cup and knocked it down. I tried to catch it, which only resulted in me swatting the mug onto the hood of the car. The top popped off and a rivulet of coffee dripped along my car and down on to the gravel

driveway.

Grumbling a fairly creative spiel of profanity under my breath, I picked up the cup and tossed it into the passenger seat. Of course that left a new splatter of coffee across the upholstery, but I forced myself to ignore it. There was already nothing I could do about the stream of coffee going down my hood. I might as well add some coffee fragrance to the inside of the car as well.

Everything that happened that morning was minor, but all the little things were building up and I felt frazzled by the time I parked in the parking deck near the office building where I was interviewing. I noticed a coffee shop down the block as I walked toward the building and thought maybe things were turning around. At least I could still have a cup of coffee and didn't need to brew it myself.

Nothing disastrous happened on my way to the coffee shop and when I stepped inside, I forced myself to take a moment and remember what was at stake. I had to calm down. There was no way I could go into my interview like this and expect to get the position. And this had to work. I'd used up nearly all my savings for the move and to pre-pay tuition for the first semester of school. It was critical I landed a good job if I was going to have any chance of staying in place and pursuing my dream.

That was going to take a good amount of coffee.

I was digging through my purse again when a man stepped in front of me in line. I couldn't even believe his brazenness. I wasn't standing off to the side or in some awkward position that made it logical to question whether I was among the masses waiting for coffee, or if I was just hovering for no particular purpose.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm in line."

The man glanced over his shoulder at me, his eyes briefly flickering up and down me.

“Looks like it,” he said flatly.

He turned back around and I shook my head.

“You got in front of me. You need to get out and go to the back of the line.”

“You weren't standing close enough to the person in front of you. Besides, I need to get to work. My time is important,” the man said.

“And, what? I'm just drifting around through existence without any direction?”

“I really wouldn't know,” he said, not bothering to turn back around to look at me.

I didn't think it possible, but he had officially managed to put me in an even worse mood. He stepped up to the counter and made his coffee order. When he stepped aside, I closed the gap between myself and the cashier with what might have been a touch too much insistence. I ordered my coffee and glanced over at the pastry menu.

“An apple fritter sounds delicious,” I said. “Go ahead and add in one of those.”

“I'm sorry,” the cashier said. “We are actually out of apple fritters. Is there something else I could get you?”

I shook my head. This was definitely not my day and I wasn't going to tempt fate by asking for anything else. Whatever good possibilities I might have left, I needed to shore up and keep for the interview. The woman behind the counter let me know they had run out of to-go cups and asked me to step to the side to wait. I nodded and stepped over to allow easier access for everybody else in line.

Another employee of the coffee shop took a stack of to-go cups and unwrapped the plastic from around them. He sat several out on the counter and everyone who had

ordered coffee and didn't get a cup snatched one. I went over to the bank of coffee machines on the wall and pressed the button for the darkest brew of coffee they carried. It needed to replace not only the coffee I'd managed to spill down the front of my car, but any other cups I might have tipped back if I got out of bed early enough.

I wasn't the type to have a set way I drank my coffee. At home I either drank it black or poured a little bit of milk in it, depending on my mood. But when I was at a coffee shop, all bets were off. Sometimes I went crazy with the creamers or added far too much sugar just because I could. That was the mission of the morning. I figured if I put enough sugar in my coffee, it would give me a boost and I would be able to get through the interview more smoothly.

But one thing about adding sugar to coffee is it needs to be stirred. Which is going to be fairly difficult considering there were no coffee stirrers at the condiment table. The man who cut in front of me in line grabbed the last one before I had a chance.

Before I could say anything to him, one of the servers called an order for an apple fritter out over the voices of everyone waiting. I looked over at the counter and watched, blood boiling, as the man swaggered up to the counter and took the bag.

Everything from the hint of a smirk on his face to his grungy sweatpants and sleeveless shirt pissed me off. I checked the time and saw I'd gotten back on track. I had the time to get back in line and order a pastry. A few minutes later, I made my way down the sidewalk toward the office building. I ate the chocolate chip muffin that was the only even slightly appealing option left and washed it down with coffee.

Some of the nerves started to return as I got close to the building. But they dissipated, replaced by aggravation, when I looked up and saw the revolving glass door. The man from the coffee shop stepped right in front of me to walk through the door. He looked at me before stepping in, not bothering to let me go ahead or to hold the door for me.

Who the hell did this man think he was? Not only was he being so exceptionally rude and discourteous to me, but just his appearance rubbed me the wrong way. His clothes suggested to me he was a maintenance worker. Not that that put him beneath me or made him any less than me. But it did make it seem out of place and suggested to his character that he was just roaming around the office building looking like that. The office was a professional environment and he should have had more respect for it than to be seen like that.

When I got inside, I approached the large curved desk set in the middle of the lobby. Our receptionist looked up at me and smiled.

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“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning. My name is Courtney Reynolds. I have an interview.”

“Go ahead up to the fourth floor,” the receptionist said. “They will help you there.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I went over to the elevator at the side of the lobby and pushed the button to bring me up. The doors opened and I stepped inside. A second later, I noticed the man walking toward the elevator. The pace of his steps picked up, telling me he fully intended on coming into the elevator with me.

Without even thinking the action all the way through, I pressed the button to close the doors and smirked at him as it closed right in his face. It was petty, but at least it gave me a little moment of satisfaction.

When I got up to the fourth floor, I approached another desk.

“Good morning,” I repeated. “My name is Courtney Reynolds. I’m here for an interview with Greg McNally.”

The woman glanced at the calendar in front of her and nodded. She gestured to the other side of the open floor and I saw a small waiting area set up with several chairs and a coffee table.

“You can wait right over there. It will just be a few minutes,” she said.

I nodded and thanked her before heading over to sit down. A quick glance at my phone when I sat told me my appointment time was in just ten minutes. I'd used more time at the coffee shop than I intended and wasn't as early as I liked to be to things like this. It was a relief to be asked to wait. At least that meant I hadn't kept them waiting.

Chapter Four

Bryan

I got to the fourth floor a little later than I intended to because of the vile woman who shut the elevator door on me. I was hot, sweaty and ready to take a quick rinse in the shower I had installed in my old office years ago. Since I was still working on getting my things together and there was still the scepter of the event hanging over my head, I had decided to leave the top floor office for now and stay in the one I had since I took the corporate job right out of college.

The fourth floor was the center of the action when it came to the administration stuff. We had rooms all over the floor and offices for most of the managers and executives. Mine was the front left corner office and included its own suite in case I felt like crashing at the office, which I had done on a few occasions. I didn't spend a lot of time in the building the last few years, opting to be on the road and checking other locations, but when I was there, it wasn't unusual for me to stay in the suite rather than go home. At least at the office, there was always someone tooling around the building.

The secretary my father had employed for years decided to retire when he passed, but I had asked her to hire a new assistant for me before she left. It worked for me, since my plan was pretty simple. We were both new to the job. She wouldn't know that her duties didn't, in fact, include doing all the legwork to prepare for the party, leaving me to waltz in and host and be done with it.

I really despised the idea of the party at all. It was so unnecessary. What good was it going to do? Were they hazing me? Was it some setup to make sure I failed at the job? I didn't know. All I knew for sure was that it was dumb and I didn't want to do it. That meant forcing the job on someone else, and since the new assistant wouldn't know it wasn't her job, she was the ideal candidate.

If I could just get through it, everything else would fall into place. They would give up on trying to run me out of the company or hazing me to make me feel like part of the team. Then I could quietly and ruthlessly fire each one of the ones I felt was responsible for it over the next few months. By this time next year, they would all be gone, and I would be the primary shareholder in the company.

My appointment was set up with the new assistant for just fifteen minutes from when I got off the elevator. It didn't leave me a lot of time to get clean and change. The gym in the basement of the building was a key piece of enticement for me since it meant I could just work out while I worked half the time, but since I had to be presentable for my first meeting, I needed to get back in and get dressed in a hurry.

I brushed by the receptionist just outside my door and made my way into my office. It was gorgeous in there, and not for the first time, I wondered if I should ever take the top floor office when this one was so perfect for me. Sure, the top floor office had a few more amenities and its own gym, which was nice, but this one felt like mine. I would forever be in Dad's office up there.

Flipping the television on in the suite, I ducked into the bathroom, turning on the water and setting out some towels. Placing a new suit on the bed, I hopped in the shower and rinsed off as quickly as I could. Time was ticking away and I needed to do my meeting before people started to think that I was as out of practice and unprofessional as apparently the rumors about me were floating.

Once I was out, I got dressed quickly and checked myself in the mirror. I didn't clean

up too bad. Sweeping my hair into a part and running a little mouse through it, I looked professional enough that I felt comfortable conducting business. The tie was a little loose and the cufflinks probably didn't match, but I was in a suit and had a little less than thirty seconds to spare.

Making my way out of the suite, I shut and locked the door, walked to the main door to the receptionist area and made my way out. The assistant should have been waiting on me, but there was no one out there, so I ducked my head into the waiting room. Usually, the waiting room was empty. There was almost never more than one person there to see me, though I figured that might change now that I was in charge. Still, it was a sparse room and I didn't like keeping people in it.

Other than her. When I saw who was waiting in the room, I was kind of glad she had been shoved in there. She deserved worse.

Rolling my eyes, I made my way to the break room area just beyond the waiting room. I had a coffee maker in my office, but it was one of those pod things and I never liked how it tasted. I'd much rather have the coffee out of the pot in the breakroom. Filling up a cup, I walked back by the waiting room, feeling her eyes on me as I did, and into the office. As I passed her, I glared at the receptionist.

"Send her in," I said.

"Oh, but sir, she's not," she began, fumbling over her words.

"I said send her in," I said, cutting her off.

I went into the office and sat the coffee down on the desk. Looking out over the city from the large windows, I took a deep breath and grinned. I had several options. I could go for revenge and outright deny her like she denied me the ride up the elevator. I could string her along and make her think the job was hers, only to crush

her spirit. Or I could hire her and torture her for a while.

I had to admit that last idea had some merit. After all, the entire point of hiring this assistant now was so she could do the jobs I absolutely did not want to do. This way, I could not only avoid the work I was hoping to avoid, but I could punish this woman for being such a raging bitch by making her do it anyway. It was a win-win situation.

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I sat down heavily in my chair, turning to face the desk and taking a big sip of the hot coffee. It burned in my throat but tasted wonderfully dark and rich. I sat it down and waited for the door to open.

When it finally did, the woman from the lobby poked her head inside. She had a mixture of shock, horror, guilt and anger on her face. It was kind of impressive for her to have such an expressive face I could read all of that, but it still was really funny.

But she was gorgeous. I had to admit that. Even if I absolutely hated her personality, she wouldn't be bad to look at every day. I waved for her to come in, pretending to do some paperwork on my desk. In truth, I had nothing important there, but I shuffled around some of the paper I had, including a printed-out list of fantasy football teams some old college buddies and I did every season, and began furiously scribbling on them like I was signing something important.

Apprehensively she made her way toward me and I looked up briefly to indicate a chair she could sit on with my pen and then went back to pretending to read super serious, important contracts and then signing them at the bottom before putting them in my "out" box.

I wanted to keep her waiting, just to increase the discomfort. She was clearly not happy to see me, and while I was enjoying the moment of lording my position over her and her obvious need for a job, I wasn't terribly pleased to see her either. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if it would be a good idea to have around. If she disliked me as much as she seemed to already without having even met me, the more she might intentionally screw things up to make me look bad.

Finally, I sat the pen down and looked at her from across the table, keeping my expression neutral. I'd just have to see where all this went.

Chapter Five

Courtney

This was not happening.

What in the cosmic fresh hell was this?

I'd been sitting there in the waiting room going over what I was going to say to convince the interviewer I was the right person for the interior design position — and I ended up in an office with him. First the coffee shop, then the lobby, and now the office. It was a trifecta of pissing me off.

It definitely didn't help that he no longer looked like he should be hauling construction supplies or replacing lightbulbs somewhere. At some point between the elevator incident and now he'd put on a suit and cleaned himself up. He looked polished, put together, and aggravatingly good. As if I wasn't annoyed enough by him, this man had to be gorgeous.

He was sitting behind the desk, leaned back in a big winged chair, looking smug. As soon as he folded his hands over his chest and looked me up and down, I had the compulsion to turn and walk away. There was really no point in this interview and I had no interest in sitting there and letting him taunt me just for his amusement.

"Hello," he said before I could turn around and leave the office. "I feel like we've met before."

This was probably the moment when I should have apologized and come up with

some sort of excuse for the incident with the elevator. Maybe I could convince him that I didn't know how to use elevator buttons. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. He was sitting there with that arrogant smirk on his gorgeous face, and I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of groveling to some assistant tasked with doing the hiring for the company.

"Not formally," I said as if we had only just briefly passed each other in the lobby.

"Then I should introduce myself. Bryan Callahan. And you are?"

Fucked. That was what I was. If this was Bryan Callahan, that meant I closed the elevator doors on the owner of the company. That probably wasn't the answer he was looking for. Or maybe he was, but I was still going to go with my name.

"Courtney Reynolds."

Why was the owner of the company interviewing for an interior designer? Surely he had better things to do.

"Well, Courtney, I'm sure you are already familiar with the expectations of the position. It's fairly straightforward. I can't stress enough that you shouldn't expect to always comply with normal business hours. You will likely work late most days and will be expected to be available weekends and additional hours as needed to manage various tasks. Calls will be redirected to your cell phone so you will always be able to answer no matter where you are."

"Redirected to my cell phone?" I asked.

I was starting to get confused. If he needed to talk to me about the project, why wouldn't he just have his assistant call my phone directly?

“Of course, we’ll provide a business phone for that purpose. All calls should be answered promptly and you will need to be able to use your best judgment to determine what calls should be sent to me and which you can handle. The phone will obviously be equipped with a calendar feature so scheduling meetings and recording notes about calls shouldn’t be a problem even if you are away from the office,” he said.

This wasn’t piecing together. I had done a lot of interior design jobs in my life, and never had my client expected me to manage his incoming phone calls. That thought going through my head was what made me realize he didn’t sound like he was talking about an interior design project at all. It sounded much more like he was talking about a secretary.

“This position...” I started, but Mr. Callahan didn’t seem to have any intention of stopping. Maybe there would be a question and answer period later and I’d be able to figure out what the hell was going on.

“I’m sure the former secretary explained the position to you and got you up-to-date on the policies and expectations of the company. Of course, there will be some changes considering the transition. For the most part, however, expectations are straightforward and fairly self-explanatory. In order for you to fulfill your responsibilities effectively, you will need to be familiar with my daily schedule and all meetings, events, and other obligations upcoming several weeks in advance,” he said.

“Your daily schedule? Your former secretary?”

“Well, not my former secretary. My father’s. But, yes, my daily schedule is often in flux depending on meetings and other obligations. However, there are some set activities you should be aware of.” He gave me the smug look again. “Perhaps you should think of it as being ahead of the game considering you clearly already know I

start my day at the gym and then stop for coffee.”

Heat crawled up the back of my neck and I hoped it wasn't visible on my cheeks. I was embarrassed, but also confused. None of this was making sense. As he continued to talk, outlining things like making appointments and talking to vendors, it occurred to me. He wasn't interviewing me for an interior design position. He thought I was there to be his secretary.

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Screw that.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not here to apply as a secretary,” I said, starting to move toward the door again.

“Assistant, then,” he said dismissively. “That’s probably a better term for it, anyway, considering the scope of the expectations. Which brings me to the discussion of compensation. I know you were given a general idea of your pay when you were hired, but those are details I’m only comfortable settling myself rather than allowing someone else to do it.”

Hired? When was I hired to be a secretary? An assistant?

I was so wrapped up in trying to figure out what happened and how I got to be standing here in this office, I almost missed it when he quoted the salary. It sank into my head a couple of seconds later and I went still. That was considerably higher than what was being offered for the interior design project.

I blinked at him a few times. Now would be a fantastic moment to come up with some sort of witty comment or say something, anything, that might make me sound like I knew what I was doing in a professional setting.

“Excuse me?”

Instead, I came up with that.

“That is what I am willing to pay considering the additional work that will need to be

done for the event coming up. You'll need to manage the regular daily tasks of the position in addition to overseeing the event."

"I'm sorry..."

He rolled his eyes, the smirk gone from his face. Now he just looked like the amusement was gone and he was getting frustrated that this conversation was still going.

"Fine. If you prove yourself as capable as Bernice reported you as being, and the event turns out well, you'll receive an extra twenty-five percent bonus."

Chapter Six

Bryan

I wasn't expecting this woman — Courtney? — to push back on the pay I was offering. I already knew it was far more than an assistant would usually make, which was precisely why I didn't want Bernice to discuss the offer with her during the interview and hiring process. Pay that seemed far too high for a position often had the opposite effect of what people expected.

Many people would think a candidate would jump on higher pay than anticipated. But often inflated pay meant a less than appealing work situation, so well-qualified candidates would be wary. Courtney wasn't wary. She was downright defiant. It was clear she considered herself very valuable and wanted to be compensated accordingly.

I threw in the added bonus to show I was serious about this position. It probably put the compensation over the top, but I didn't care. The company had the money to throw around and I'd pay out of my own pocket if I needed to. If she could fulfill

what I needed in this position, she would be well worth it. And it would be a lot for her to prove. I was expecting a lot from her.

She was replacing Bernice, my father's secretary who had been by his side for decades, but I wasn't looking for just another secretary. I didn't need someone to just answer phones. Thanks to technology, I was more than capable of keeping my own schedule if I was so inclined. And, also thanks to technology, the idea of having her come in to sit in front of me and take dictation while I rattled off memos and correspondence was woefully outdated.

I needed something different. What I needed was someone who would be able to make this absurd event hovering over my head impressive. I certainly wasn't going to try to pull something like that off on my own. Not only had I never even attempted to plan an event and wouldn't know where to begin, but I had no desire to. There were far better things for me to be doing with my time than coming up with things like themes and menus.

But the right assistant would have to be very good at these things.

That was why when Bernice and I discussed hiring her replacement, I specifically asked her to look for someone with an artistic slant and good taste. I obviously couldn't tell her that I was intending her successor to spend a good portion of her job being an event planner. But I figured those specifications would put me on the right track.

As soon as I saw the woman standing in front of me, I knew Bernice got it right. Her sleek, tailored clothes and expertly applied makeup were clear indications she had what I needed. But I couldn't go on just eyeliner and a suit alone. Fortunately, she had come prepared.

The portfolio tucked under her arm would give me the insight I needed to ensure she

really did have the skills to create an event of this scope. I didn't know why she would bring it with her, unless Bernice had mentioned my need for a creative, artistic person and she wanted to prove herself. Whatever the reason, I was glad she had it. If she wasn't going to have what this would take, a glimpse at what she considered her best work would be all I needed to see.

It would be better for me to know now and be able to find someone else than to waste my time on letting her make an attempt and fail.

I gestured at the portfolio.

"Can I have a look?" I asked.

Courtney looked confused for a second, then glanced down at the black leather portfolio under her arm. She looked like she didn't even remember she was holding it.

"My portfolio?" she asked.

"Yes. I'd like to see it."

Rather than holding the entire portfolio out to me, Courtney fished out a few drawings and placed them on my desk. I slid them closer to me and turned them so I could look at them.

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“These are just a few of the projects I've done in the last couple of years.” She pointed at one of the pictures in particular. “This was one of the more challenging projects I handled. But I also really enjoyed it. The client was specifically going for a medieval theme, but I didn't want it to seem kitschy or like a bad stage production. So I looked for elements that could bring in that ambiance people associate with the medieval period. There's another one in there with a carnival theme.”

I sifted through the pictures until I found that one. The theme was obvious, but she had managed to create a space that somehow incorporated the fun of a carnival while still maintaining a sense of elegance and elevated taste. I pointed to a feature that specifically caught my eye.

“Is this a seating area?” I asked.

Courtney nodded. “I felt there needed to be a lounge area that enabled people to separate themselves from the main focus and energy of the space and relax. But I didn't want it to just look like the collection of couches or stand out awkwardly against the theme. So I worked with a local prop designer and custom furniture maker to create ottomans and chairs that resemble kernels of popcorn.”

“And the red and white carpet is supposed to be the popcorn box,” I said.

She nodded again. “Yes.”

I looked through the pictures for a few more seconds then returned the nod. “I'm impressed.”

It was putting my reaction to her skill mildly. She was clearly an extremely creative and talented person. I didn't know why she would end up wanting to be a corporate assistant with all that talent, but that wasn't for me to judge. I was just glad I had the opportunity to make use of this skill set.

It didn't hurt that I also couldn't help but notice Courtney was beautiful. Difficult and rude, perhaps. But beautiful. I could definitely get used to looking at her.

“Alright. Then I accept,” she said.

It had taken us long enough to get to the point of her acknowledging the position she had already been hired for I decided not to push back against it. Instead, I stood and extended my hand to shake hers. She didn't seem thrilled at the idea of shaking my hand, but she did.

“We need to get started immediately. I have some pictures of events from the past several years. I want you to look over them and start coming up with ideas,” I told her.

“I can do that,” she said.

I gave a single nod and went back to work. Several seconds later, I realized she hadn't moved. She was still just sitting there across the desk from me, waiting.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“You didn't tell me where I'm supposed to be working.”

I realized she was right and was surprised she'd managed to distract me like that.

“Go talk to the receptionist. She'll show you where you're working.”

I went back to work, but heard her walk across the office and close the door behind her as she left.

Chapter Seven

Courtney

I was nothing short of dumbstruck. I wasn't sure exactly what had just happened as I stood up from Mr. Callahan's desk and walked out of the office.

Did I seriously just agree to be that man's assistant?

Not only to be his assistant, but to plan some big company event for him?

I was still fuzzy on the details of what I had actually agreed to. Every time I got to that place in my head, all that came to mind was the money. He quoted me an absolutely ridiculous salary for the position, then topped it off with a bonus that was almost as much as the flat rate for the one-off interior design project I thought I was interviewing for.

And then there was that uncomfortable detail I didn't particularly want to dwell on. He was going on and on about the former secretary hiring me. Which actually meant she had hired somebody else. I had not only agreed to be the assistant to the most arrogant, obnoxious, and aggravatingly gorgeous man I'd ever encountered, but I had stolen the position from somebody else.

And when I stepped out of the office back into the open reception area, I came face to face with exactly who I'd stolen it from. A woman was standing at the receptionist's desk, her eyebrows furrowed and a displeased expression on her face. Both women looked at me as I stepped out of the office. There was only one thing to do.

I lifted my chin and strode right over to them.

“Mr. Callahan told me you would show me to my office,” I said.

I didn't let anything show on my face, not a single hint or indication that there was something off. There was no way I was going to let myself get found out or give up the fantastic salary and promise of an ongoing position rather than just a temporary gig. I was going to do exactly what was recommended to anyone going into something they weren't totally confident about. I was going to fake it till I made it.

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The receptionist looked at me with a confused expression. She glanced at her computer screen, then the papers on her desk, then back up at me. She obviously knew something wasn't right, but couldn't put her finger on it. So, I went with it.

“He isn't able to show me to his office himself, but he wants me to get in there as quickly as possible. He said there will be important information waiting for me there so I can get started on a project for him. He is eagerly anticipating my input as soon as possible. So, I would really appreciate it if you could point me in the right direction. Maybe you could show me around and help me to get comfortable. Help out the new girl a little.”

I wasn't outright lying. I didn't tell her I was the assistant that was hired. I didn't tell her I was there to be his assistant. I just also didn't go into any detail explaining why I was there at that particular moment. There was a little bit of moral ambiguity going on there, but I wasn't going to put too much thought into it right then. I was far too invested in not getting humiliated and fired within four minutes of getting my new job.

It took a few seconds, but finally the receptionist relented. She looked at the other woman and gave her an apologetic shrug.

“I'm sorry. There must have been a mistake.”

This did not go over well.

“She looked like she was about to start spitting fire,” I said that evening while Vanessa and I made dinner.

Vanessa laughed and I gave her a withering look.

“I'm sorry,” she said with her hands held up like she was trying to look innocent. “It's funny. I can't help it.”

“It's not funny. She was seriously furious. And she should have been. Somebody waltzed into the office that morning and stole her job out from under her. Me. I did that. And now somehow I went from being an interior designer dreaming of being a lawyer to an executive assistant.”

“There's nothing wrong with being an executive assistant,” my best friend said.

“No, there's not. But you have to admit it's not exactly on my career path. I took a bit of a detour here.” I groaned, my head dropping back as I relived the sheer embarrassment of all the morning's events. “I can't believe I did this. I am so beyond humiliated. As soon as he started talking about the last secretary and this event thing I'm supposed to be doing, I should have stopped him. I should have stopped him right there and said I was there to apply to be an interior designer. That I was not who he thought I was and I would see myself back to the waiting room.

And instead, I showed the man my portfolio. But that's another thing. Why the hell would he think I had a portfolio with me? How many people show up to be a secretary or an assistant with a portfolio? What would you even put in a portfolio for one of those positions?”

“Nicely typed letters? Day planner pages with all the to-do list tasks checked off? It depends on the industry, I guess,” Vanessa said.

“I just can't believe I was so influenced by the money. I had spent the morning already hating this guy without even knowing who he was. I closed an elevator door in his face. But then I willingly signed myself up to be his assistant because he

flashed a nice salary and bonus in front of me.”

“Well, that was the whole reason you were going for the interior design position, anyway. You need money to pay for law school. It makes sense that you would want to grab an offer that good as soon as it came up.”

“By wantonly stealing it from somebody? Somebody who was standing right outside the office while I did it. It wasn't even like she had totally ghosted. I just happened to be there first, so he took me,” I said.

“I don't think this was a first-come, first-served situation,” Vanessa said. “He must have seen something in you that told him you were right for the position.”

“He said he was impressed by my portfolio, so maybe there's something about me that said I had the artistic slant he was looking for.” I was trying to justify it, but it wasn't working. I groaned again. “But who looks specifically for an artist when hiring an assistant? Unless they are an artist? Which clearly he is not.”

“Someone who wants an assistant to plan an event for him,” Vanessa said. “You said the pictures of the last few events were pretty elaborate. If he's supposed to come up with something close to that, maybe he needs help.”

“Oh, I can assure you he needs help. There isn't a creative or exuberant bone in that man's body. I can tell you that just from the few minutes we interacted today. And the other events were elaborate, but fairly generic. But here's the thing. What happens after this event? Assuming I can bring myself to actually go through with this, what about when the event is over? Am I supposed to just settle into being the secretary of this incredible jerk?”

“Maybe,” Vanessa said with a half-shrug. “It doesn't necessarily have to be so bad. And at least you know you're not going to have to make him coffee since he gets it

for himself in the morning.”

And there I had it. Total justification for what was apparently my new career path.

Chapter Eight

Bryan

Just like the day before, I was in my gym clothes and sipping coffee on my way through the lobby when I got to the office the next morning. I nodded a good morning to the receptionist and headed toward the elevator. I'd only made it halfway across when I noticed Courtney scurrying through the lobby. A large box in her arms nearly covered her head and I almost laughed at the flowers sticking out of the top.

Clearly, she was ready to start settling into her office.

I got to the elevator first and stepped in. Part of me wanted to hit the button to close the doors, but I stopped myself. She was only a few steps away and I stood in the center, sipping my coffee as she rushed toward me. I wasn't sure if she even noticed it was me inside. When she looked up and our eyes met, I knew she hadn't.

The look on her face was pure exasperation. She hesitated, obviously expecting me to close the doors. When I lifted the cup to my lips again instead of reaching for the button, Courtney kept standing there looking at me. It was like we were stuck in a game of chicken, only I wasn't actually playing.

The time passed and the automatic trigger for the doors started them sliding. I lifted my eyebrows at Courtney and she lunged forward, hurrying to get in before she got stuck in them. They seemed to snip at her butt and she jumped a little, whipping around to glare at them. I grinned around the lip of my cup and hit the button for our floor.

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As the elevator lifted, I looked over at her.

“You see, if you don't push that button, the doors stay open,” I said.

Courtney gritted her teeth, but her eyes focused directly in front of her. My comment obviously aggravated her, which kind of amused me. Actually, it definitely amused me. She had been so sure of herself and almost defiant during our first encounter. It was good to be able to ruffle her up a little bit.

We rode the rest of the way up to the office floor in silence, and when the doors slid back open, she walked out without even acknowledging me. I was perfectly fine getting a chance to watch her walk away. I couldn't help but admire the way her pencil skirt molded to every curve of her body and how her tasteful, yet somehow sexy heels exaggerated the sway of her gait.

It made me think about my lack of a love life.

My lack of a serious one, anyway. I wasn't the type to settle into serious relationships. I didn't have the time to deal with meeting women and getting to know them enough to want anything serious with them. Besides, I liked keeping things interesting by changing them up. I met women, had fun with them for a while, then moved on. It was the way I had always been. It didn't bother me. But there were definitely people in my life who had an issue with how I conducted myself and my lack of a permanent partner.

I walked into my office and stopped short. Almost as if my thoughts had conjured him, my grandfather sat in the chair at my desk. He didn't notice me, so I walked

back out of the office and went to the receptionist.

“How long has he been here?” I asked.

“He was waiting in the lobby when I got here,” she said.

I gave a single nod. “Fantastic.” I looked back over at the office, then at her. “Any idea why he's here?”

She shook her head. “No. He just said he wanted to talk to you.”

“Perfect.”

I walked back into the office and my grandfather turned around to look at me. His stare was instantly disapproving and I knew he was silently judging everything I was doing, from the fact that I was wearing my gym clothes to the horror of drinking coffee out of a disposable cup.

“That's how you choose to be seen in an office? It's not very professional,” he sneered.

Apparently, his judgment wasn't all that silent.

“I go to the gym in the mornings, Grandfather. It helps me to stay in shape and keeps my mind clear. I would think that you would appreciate me watching over my health,” I said. “We wouldn't want me to suffer from any serious health problems, would we?”

It was somewhat of a low blow, but I wasn't feeling particularly warm and fuzzy about seeing my grandfather. Especially not having him pop up in my office first thing in the morning so I didn't even have a chance to prepare myself for it.

“The least you could do would be to change clothes before you come into the office,” he said. “Don't you want to exude an image of being in control?”

“I think that's exactly what I'm doing by wearing this,” I said, holding my arms out to my sides to indicate my shorts and t-shirt. “I'm in control of how I want to run my day and how I take care of myself. Maybe this way people will know I am going to be in charge for a long time.”

“That's actually why I came to speak with you,” he said.

A cold feeling rolled down my spine. Not that I thought this was a social visit or he wanted to swing by and check in on his beloved grandson or anything, but that made me feel like this was a more serious moment than I originally thought.

“Give me a moment to get changed,” I said.

I went into the bathroom and took a shower, put on the suit I always had waiting for me, and walked back into the office. He looked even more disgusted than he had when I first came in. I sat down at the desk and folded my hands in front of me as I stared at him with anticipation.

“You are in a very important position as head of this company,” he said. “And with that come certain responsibilities. It may not be the popular or accepted thing to say these days, but your personal life has a tremendous impact on how you are seen professionally. What you do outside of this office does reflect on the company itself and on your ability to run it properly.”

“What are you getting at, exactly?” I asked, even though I felt like I already knew. It wouldn't be the first time I heard it.

“You aren't married, Bryan. And you are well beyond the age where it is expected

that you would have found someone and established yourself. People expect to be able to look at the head of a company and see a man that they can trust and depend on.”

“And my marital status dictates that?” I asked.

“Yes,” Grandfather said. “Perhaps you don't like to hear it, but you are seen as a playboy with an unstable reputation. That's not what people want to see as the head of a company. Not being married gives off the impression of being unreliable, undependable, and immature. I don't like having to defend you to members of the board and other important people in our social and professional circles.

I don't feel I need to remind you that I am still the majority stockholder of the company. Which means I continue to wield power, even if I am officially retired.”

“You don't feel the need to remind me, and yet you just did,” I said.

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His face darkened. “I came here today to have a civil conversation with you. But I see that you are going to resist my every word. Just as I expected you to. You are just as you always have been. A spoiled child who feels entitled to a world that will hand him everything even if he has no responsibility and no need to live up to his position.

So let me make myself very clear. You need to straighten up and prove yourself if you want to continue with this company. And if you want to continue to benefit from the family bankroll. You have very high expectations to live up to, and if you don't, there will be no other recourse for me than to simply sell off my stock. You will then be ousted and the board will replace you with someone they see as fit.”

“My entire career and the legacy my father left for me is contingent on a life choice other people believe I should have made by now?” I asked. “So, I could be in a miserable marriage and be cheating on my wife continuously while she bangs the gardener every time I leave the house, but as long as we are discreet about it and wear our wedding rings, I look like a standup guy and things are just fine? It's all about the theater?”

“Appearances are valuable, Bryan. It's only the naive who think anything other than that.”

“And what if I didn't buy into the theater? What if I didn't want to show off? Or the woman in my life wanted a more private existence and didn't want our relationship on display for everyone in the world to see and scrutinize?” I asked.

His eyebrow lifted at me. “Are you saying that you are seeing someone?”

“I could be,” I said.

My grandfather scoffed and pushed himself up from out of the chair.

“Keep in mind what I said.”

With that, he walked out of the office and shut the door behind him. It was obvious he didn't believe the suggestion that I was in a relationship. Of course, it wasn't true, but that didn't matter. He pissed me off and left me in a terrible mood.

Chapter Nine

Courtney

The encounter with Bryan in the lobby wasn't exactly the way I would have liked my day to start, but I wasn't going to let it stop me from doing the work that needed to get done. If anything, the awkward interaction just made me want to prove myself even more. The last thing I needed that day was for him to realize he made a mistake and go hunt down the actual person who was hired for the position.

I really hated anybody looking at me like I was stupid. I got enough of that in my life already, and I was ready to be taken seriously. Even if it was for doing something not at all in my job description or on the career path I intended.

But first I wanted to get my office together. I brought a few things from home so I could try to make this place look a little bit more like me. I didn't know exactly how long I would be working there, but I figured I might as well be comfortable for however long it ended up being. Besides, transforming the generic office into something that was personalized to me was a way of exerting my presence and cementing myself within the awareness of all those in the company. It stopped me from looking temporary and created a sense that I was fully integrated into the

corporate tapestry.

That was a bit of throwback knowledge to my interior design days.

I finished putting up my plants and pictures, then the tiny crystal elephant Vanessa gave me for luck years ago. When everything was in place, I gathered up the work I did the night before. I thought I would just see if I can come up with a couple of ideas but ended up getting wrapped up in the whole process and now I had several ideas for the fundraiser. And now I wanted to go over them with Bryan.

His door was closed, but he answered as soon as I knocked. When I went inside, I found him bent over his desk, looking at papers lined up in front of him. I hesitated at the door, not knowing if he actually intended on me coming in or not. After a few seconds, he looked up.

“Courtney,” he said. “Come on in.”

He gestured like he was beckoning me to the desk and I went up to it. Looking down, I saw he was going over plans for the new boutique and retail space in the hotel. The original project I was supposed to be working on for the company but had abandoned in favor of the massive paycheck and bonus attached to this fundraiser position.

“Those look interesting,” I said, and he looked up at me sharply almost like he had forgotten I was standing there.

“Oh,” he said. “Not really. This is just another project that's going on right now.”

“What is it?” I asked, feigning interest and hoping I didn't come across as already knowing what he was looking at.

Even if I did sound suspicious, he didn't let on. Instead, he looked at the papers and

shook his head slightly.

“There's a space in one of my new hotels that's supposed to be developed into a boutique. I wanted it to be something different, but I didn't exactly have anyone hiring a professional to handle it for me,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“There were interviews for a new designer, but they were all terrible. Nobody seems to have any type of vision whatsoever and everything was coming across as completely generic. One person didn't even bother to show up.”

A blush crossed my cheeks and I was glad he was looking at the desk rather than at me.

“Well,” I said, “I'm sure you'll figure out exactly what to do with it.”

He looked up at me again. “What are you doing here?”

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“I wanted to show you some of my ideas,” I said. “Last night I went over the information you gave me and sketched out a couple of possibilities for the fundraiser. I wanted to go over them with you so I could narrow down the scope and start developing the most promising ones.”

He gestured to the other side of the desk and I walked around to the chair. Perching on the very edge of the cushion, I set the files in front of him. At first, Bryan seemed almost impressed at the amount I had already gotten done. But when he started flipping through one of the folders, the look on his face changed.

What had been an expression of something close to interest shifted to a scowl. He looked at a couple more pages and the look became one of disgust.

“What is this?” he asked.

I craned my neck to make sure I knew which idea he was looking at. “That one is a masquerade ball. I know that's a fairly straightforward concept in terms of large gatherings, but I feel it could be done in a truly interesting way. That next one is a little more unique. An ice theme. All in shades of blue and white with little silver as an accent. Professional ice carvers creating sculptures and possibly even doing demonstrations. Ice luges for drinks. Cold foods served in flavored ice vessels.”

I started to pull another of the folders toward me so I could elaborate on other ideas, but his almost flailing gesture over the folders made me stop.

“No,” he said. “I mean what is this? What kind of ridiculous ideas are these? You said you looked at the information I gave you.”

“I did,” I said. “I went over every single bit of it thoroughly. Several times to make sure I fully understood the scope of what was expected.”

“Clearly, you didn't,” he snapped. “If you did, I wouldn't be looking at such ridiculous crap.”

The bitter, unprofessional, and harsh response took me aback. For a second, I couldn't even figure out what to say.

“Excuse me?” I finally managed.

“None of these look anything like the events the company has had before,” he said. “They are so different than anything any of the galas have been in years past. It's almost like they aren't even the same type of event.”

I stared at him for a few seconds, trying to decide if he was joking. But his face didn't change and no punchline came. I realized he was actually being serious.

“That's the point,” I said. “You came in here as the new head of the company and this event is the first big gesture you're making. You want to stand out and make a statement. So why do the same thing that's been done a thousand times before? The same thing everybody who walks into that room is going to predict and feel completely bored by?”

That changed his demeanor. What had been flippant and dismissive turned to anger.

“Don't tell me what I want,” he said. “You need to do what you were hired to do. Not fly off the handle thinking you are more creative and insightful than anyone. I told you to do exactly what I wanted you to do. And that was to look at the events from the last few years, get inspiration from them, and make something like that.”

“You told me to come up with themes and plans,” I said, fighting to keep myself sounding calm and steady. “That is what you asked me to do, and it's what I thought you wanted me to do. I thought you wanted some creativity and a fresh perspective on what is essentially a dried up, worked over, canned event no one is going to want to attend again. If that's what you put in front of those people, they're going to see right through you.

I put a lot of work into coming up with these ideas. But if all you wanted was a carbon copy of the last event with just a shift in the color scheme or a couple of gimmicky additions, I could do that in a second. And in the end, it will be a derivative and heartless, kind of like you.”

I didn't bother to wait for any type of response from him. I didn't want one. And I definitely didn't want to stay in the same room with that man for any longer than I absolutely had to. Leaving my work spread out across his desk, I turned on my heel and stalked out.

Chapter Ten

Bryan

I was so shocked by what just happened, I didn't move for several seconds after Courtney walked out of the office. It was like I've been hit by a truck and couldn't fully process it. The way she spoke to me caught me completely off-guard. Nobody ever talked to me like that and I didn't know how I was supposed to react to it.

At first, I just sat there. I figured out any second she was going to realize what she had done and feel embarrassed about it. She was going to realize she had just chewed out her boss and was going to be horrified that she did it, and terrified I was going to fire her. That meant she was going to hurry her cute little ass right back into my office and grovel.

So, I waited. And waited. And then waited a little bit more.

She wasn't coming back.

I got up and went down the hall to Courtney's office. The door was standing open, so I didn't even have to go inside to see her rapidly packing things back into the box she had been carrying through the lobby when I first saw her that morning. Even from the distance I could see that her jaw was set hard and her cheeks and the back of her neck were flushed.

“Courtney,” I started. “About what just happened...”

I was expecting her to stop and look at me, but she just kept right on going. She finished packing things into the box, then sat down hard on the chair behind the desk and typed something into the laptop keyboard with hard, pecking strokes. I could only imagine that was her signing in using the log-in information the secretary gave her the day before.

“Courtney,” I tried again. “I need to have a word with you. We need to talk about the work you did.”

“I believe you already had more than enough words with me,” she said, standing up sharply and sweeping the box off the top of the desk into her arms.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

She didn't hesitate even for a second. She walked around the side of the desk and brushed past me on the way to the door. This woman was seriously not even going to give me the time of day. I was stunned. And pissed off at myself for just how intrigued I felt. That shouldn't be the way I was reacting to this. I should be infuriated by her. I should be enraged and offended, and not want a single second more to do with her.

After all, that would have been the way I would have reacted if it had been anyone else who tried to pull a stunt like that with me. There wasn't a single person on the planet I could think of who I would let get away with talking to me like that and still want to interact with them.

Even my grandfather was a pain in the ass but managed to maintain at least some sense of decorum most of the time and didn't lash out at me like that. And I still didn't want anything to do with him. I was forced into his presence and could only indulge in a few of the responses I wanted to make toward him. Most of the time I had to bite my tongue so I didn't end up tossed out in the cold without the cushy income and perks of my family.

No one, particularly no one in a subservient position to me, had ever even close to attempted something like that. I could only imagine if they ever had, I would have cut them off at the knees without a single second of hesitation.

And yet, that wasn't happening with Courtney. Not only had I not ripped into her because of the way she had spoken to me, but I'm trying to get her to speak to me

more. She wasn't backing down and hadn't come crawling back to try to excuse her behavior. In fact, it seemed she was on her way out. And all I wanted to do was follow after her.

Something about her had me fascinated and I ended up chasing behind her as she left her office and headed downstairs. She didn't even bother to look back over her shoulder as I followed her across the lobby.

"Courtney," I shouted after her. "Courtney, stop. Courtney. Courtney, I need to speak to you."

I spoke as loudly as I could, purposely causing a bit of a scene. I figured she would only tolerate that but for so long. And I was right. She was only about halfway across the lobby when she stopped and whipped around to face me.

"Could you lower your voice?" she asked in a harsh whisper. "There are other people around here."

"I'm aware," I said. "I wouldn't have had to lower my voice if you weren't being so stubborn and stomping away from me like a child."

"If all you want to do is call me names, then I'm leaving," she said.

"Stop," I said before she could make it more than a couple of steps away. She turned back to me but didn't say anything. I stepped up closer to her. "No one has ever spoken to me before the way you did upstairs in my office."

She was unfazed by my lowered voice and even the intense way I purposely met her eyes.

"Maybe they should," she said defiantly.

I nodded. “Yeah. Maybe they should.”

My response surprised both of us. Her expression loosened and her eyes opened a little wider. We looked at each other in silence as if neither one of us knew where to go from there. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed someone approaching. I thought for a second it might be security, but then realized it was a young woman. She walked up to Courtney's side and glanced at me before leaning a little closer.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, a confused expression on her face.

Courtney nodded. “Yeah, everything's fine. Could you wait for me over in the sitting area for just a minute?”

“Sure,” the other woman said. “I'll be just over there.”

She looked at me suspiciously before walking away.

“Come back upstairs,” I said, speaking with more sincerity. “Don't leave like this.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because you have a job to do,” I said.

“According to the reaction you just had to the work I already did, anyone with half a brain and the ability to make phone calls for local vendors could do what you want me to do. I can't imagine it would be too challenging for you to find somebody to do it for you.”

“Perhaps my reaction to the ideas you came up with was premature,” I said. “I'd like to go over them further.”

I wasn't going to go so far as apologizing. But if I had to give a little bit in order to convince Courtney to come back, it was what I had to do. Eventually, she relented.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll come back.”

“I want you to understand I’m not going to tolerate you acting like this. This is your one pass,” I said.

Courtney looked directly into my eyes. “I’m going to lunch. We’ll talk when I’m back.”

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She turned and walked away from me, heading directly over to the sitting area where the woman was waiting for her, watching us intently. They interacted briefly, then walked out of the lobby. I could feel people looking at me, probably wondering what they had just witnessed. But I didn't care. I turned back around and went to the elevator to head back to the office.

I ordered lunch to be delivered to me and went over the ideas she had left on my desk. It was still a bit of a shock seeing things so completely different from the events I'd told her to look over. It hadn't occurred to me she would take such a radically different approach to planning the event. Now I had to decide how I really felt about it.

Chapter Eleven

Courtney

Maybe there would be a time when I would walk out of the office and not feel completely stunned by what just happened. I was going to go ahead and write that down as my top goal for continuing to work there. I would really like to know what it was like to be able to stroll out of the lobby not shocked and trying to process exactly what was happening in my life.

But that was not the day. I was possibly even more shocked walking out of the office to go to lunch with Vanessa than I was the day before when I was hired. At least then I was just thrown off by the sudden detour that brought me from thinking I was going to have a brief placement as a designer for a hotel gift shop to accepting ludicrous money to be an assistant and party planner. The stunned feeling came from trying to

figure out how it had all gone down.

Now I was shocked by the way I'd talked to Bryan. And the fact that he hadn't fired my ass so fast he could have sent it out on a plate and called it rare.

Vanessa looked just as surprised, and more than a little confused, as I walked over to the sitting area in the lobby. I was still holding my box of things from the office and she eyed it suspiciously.

“Hey,” she said when I got to her. “I thought I'd come by and check out your new office. I wanted to surprise you for lunch on your first day.” She paused for a second, then waved her hands around beside her. “Surprise.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate it. I'm sorry you had to see that.”

“Well, I don't know exactly everything that I saw, but I can tell you one thing I did see and that would be the absolutely gorgeous man you seemed to be arguing with,” she said.

I rolled my eyes and let out a heavy breath. “That would be my boss.”

Her eyes widened further. “That? That was Bryan Callahan?”

“In the flesh,” I said.

She looked behind me across the lobby even though I was pretty sure Bryan was already on his way back up to the office by now.

“And it was certainly some flesh,” Vanessa said wistfully. “Why didn't you tell me how hot he is?”

That was really the last thing that was on my mind at that moment. I shook my head.

“Come on. Let's go to lunch. I'm starving,” I said.

Vanessa eyed the box in my arms. “How long a wait are you expecting? I don't think you need to move into the restaurant.”

I looked down at the box and sighed, rolling my eyes again and shoving the box at her. “I'll tell you about it when we get to lunch.”

Vanessa brought me to one of her favorite restaurants and we settled in with a drink before I started talking.

“Alright, so I already told you about the whole gala thing and him basically hiring an assistant just to plan the stupid party.”

“Right,” she said. “And he's offering a ton of money for you to do it,” Vanessa said.

“Yep. Which is how I ended up taking it in the first place. But I figured even though I wasn't really the one the former assistant hired and despite it not being anything close to the type of work I thought I would be doing, that I should do the best job possible. So, I started making plans last night. I came up with a few ideas, drew some sketches, even came up with little sample menus.”

“Wow. That's a whole lot of overachieving happening there,” she said.

A waiter came by with a basket of bread and a plate of dipping oil. Vanessa immediately ripped a chunk of bread off and swirled it around on the plate before biting into it. I followed her lead, but got lost in the swirling step, watching the bread make a path through the oil.

“I guess,” I said, then snapped out of the trance and looked at her. “You know what? It was. It was a shit-ton of work and I did it because I wanted to be the highest quality employee he could have hired. I wanted to do well and have him be happy with what I produced for him. And you know what he did?”

“I'm guessing it wasn't praise you for a job well done and ask you to stay on as his permanent event planner,” Vanessa said.

“That would be correct. He yelled at me for putting too much thought into it and having interesting and original ideas rather than just ripping off the former planners and doing exactly the same party as before,” I said.

She screwed up her face and looked at me like she wasn't following me. “Seriously?”

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“Seriously. He told me I needed to do what he hired me to do and not go off the rails,” I said. “Can you believe that?”

“What did you do?” she asked.

“I told him off, packed up my office, and stormed out. Don't you think that's what any self-respecting person would do in that situation?” I asked.

“Well...” she said, seeming to lead into something, but not going all the way into it.

“Well?” I repeated incredulously. “Well, what?”

“Okay, yes, he was totally out of line. That sounds like a really awful way to react and an even worse way to talk to you. But maybe he's just a hardass who wants things done in a very specific way and you didn't live up to it in exactly the way he anticipated. It isn't like you've worked there for a long time and he knows how good you are at those kinds of things. Besides, you can't expect somebody that gorgeous to also be tolerant and good at their job. It just wouldn't be cosmically fair.”

I ignored her. Even though I really couldn't argue with what she was saying. As much as it infuriated me, I couldn't help but admit Bryan was extremely attractive. Obnoxious, rude, and entitled, but hot as hell. There was something about him that worked me up. It got me thinking about things I never thought about, like stripping him down and climbing up on his desk with him. Or disabling the elevator while we were inside and seeing how much we could do before someone came to rescue us.

That was not at all normal for me. Those were the kinds of thoughts that never went

through my head. Not just not for my boss. Not for anyone. I wasn't one to get frothed up thinking about men. I just didn't get those sexual feelings. In truth, I had never enjoyed sex.

I spent my whole youth hearing about how amazing sex was and getting inundated by the message in the media and entertainment that it was the best thing in the entire world. It was worth going through anything, it was worth giving up friendships for, it was life-changing and created undeniable cravings that would drive a person crazy if they didn't get enough.

And then I had sex for the first time and it was none of those things. Convinced it was just because it was my first time and first times were always awkward, I tried again. And again. Rather than discovering the greatest thing in life, I felt let down and even a little put off by it. In the end, my resistance to sex became a big part of my marriage ending.

Now I was suddenly having all these thoughts about my boss, a man I didn't even like, and I couldn't figure it out.

I dragged lunch out for as long as I possibly could before heading back to work. Vanessa handed me my box of office goodies out of the back seat of her car before hugging me.

“Go get 'em,” she said. “And then when you're all done with that, get some work done.”

She winked at me and got in her car to drive away. I shook my head and went inside. It took less time to put everything away in my office the second time around, but finishing the decorations ended up the same way as the time before. I braced myself and walked down the hallway to Bryan's office.

He had it partially open and I stepped inside. “You wanted to see me?”

Bryan beckoned me inside and gestured for me to sit down.

“Tell me about these ideas again,” he said. “I have some thoughts I want to go over with you.”

We went over each of the ideas and I did my best to listen to him when he interjected. Bryan had some requests and more than a few demands. Some of which were supremely stupid. But I gritted my teeth and reminded myself I was only doing this to make money for school so I could push right ahead.

After leaving his office, I returned to mine and buried myself in the plans to sift out the ones that seemed the most popular and the most potentially successful. It felt like I had only been there working for an hour or two when the sound of a knock on my office door made me jump and my heart pound in my chest.

I looked up and saw Bryan gazing in at me.

“The office is closed, Courtney,” he said. “You can go on home now.”

I looked at the time and realized it was well past closing time.

“I’m doing some work on the ideas,” I said.

“Alright. Well, I’ll tell security to lock up after you when you leave,” he said.

I was surprised he wasn't staying. I genuinely expected him to horn in on what I was doing and try to take over. Instead, he just packed up and rolled out of the office as fast as he could. That was when I realized he really was just punting this to me.

But I was still going to give the very best I could. I needed to push through as fast and hard as possible. After all, my classes started in just a couple days so I wouldn't have as much time after that.

Not that I had any intention of sharing that little detail with Bryan.

Chapter Twelve

Bryan

After going over all of her ideas with her the day before, I had to admit Courtney did have something going. She was creative and insightful, and her visions for the event definitely had possibilities. But that didn't mean I was just going to accept them at face value. After all, this was still my reputation that was on the line. Everything needed to be exactly perfect so I could prove I was fit to run the company.

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The dog and pony show aspect of it all pissed me off. I hated that my position in this company was the only legacy my father left for me, the only thing he ever did that could really be considered caring or loving in any definition of the term, and it all rode on what a bunch of elitist people thought of a damn party.

There was something particularly infuriating about the idea of having to jump through hoops and perform tricks to avoid losing something I didn't want in the first place but also didn't want to lose.

But that meant if I was going to do this, I was going to be all-in on it. Doing something different for the party was certainly going to stand out. Whether it was in a good way or not was the issue and that was to be decided based on the theme I chose and the way the details fell into place. Both of which were decisions I wasn't just going to leave to Courtney.

She had her fun. She had her moment of glory and defiance and threw her weight around a bit. It got her what she wanted, but that was the extent of it. I wasn't going to just roll over and let her walk on me because she had managed to get my attention. I wanted to make sure every element of this gala was to my exacting specifications, and that meant changes needed to be made.

I threw a lot at her when we were going over everything the day before, so it wasn't that much of a surprise to find her still in her office after everything closed down and it was time to go home. She didn't seem bothered in the least to be staying after hours and I wasn't going to discourage her. I figured she would finish up what she was doing at that moment and leave pretty quickly once she realized how empty and quiet the huge building could get after everyone but security and the cleaning crew went

home for the night.

Not that I was terribly familiar with that. I didn't make it a habit of working late. The way I saw it, sticking with the company and taking on this position rather than just going off on my own and finding a different way was fulfilling my duty in and of itself. There was no real need to go out of my way to overachieve in my performance. Especially in a company I had very little attachment to. This wasn't my dream. It never had been. But my dreams didn't matter. Loyalty to the family and keeping up appearances did. Which was why I needed to step into the role of who Grandfather and the Board wanted me to be so I could keep my bank account happy.

Despite my own perceptions of work, I knew there were some people who were far more dedicated and driven than me. That didn't stop me from being surprised at the files waiting for me on my desk when I got into the office that morning.

Courtney and I walked through the lobby at the same time that morning just as we had the two mornings before. It seemed that was going to be our routine now. This time, she got to the elevator first and waited while I stepped in. There was no effort to keep the door open, but she also didn't try to crush me in them, so I felt that was progress. We didn't talk on the way up and went our separate ways as soon as we arrived on the floor.

Which meant this was all work she had done while staying late and had turned in before going home. I was actually impressed. She'd taken all the modifications I'd made along with my guidelines and ideas, and transformed them into solid concepts I could see developing into successful events each in its own right.

I was still going over the details of one of them and taking a few notes about it when a rap on my door stopped me. I thought it might be Courtney, so I called out for her to come in. When the door opened, it was actually Rainey, one of the Board members who was silently scrutinizing me from afar. There was no way in hell he was going to

say anything critical to my face, but after my conversation with Grandfather the day before, I knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Good morning, Bryan,” he said as he came toward the desk.

“Morning, Rainey,” I said. “What brings you by?”

“I heard you might be having some trouble piecing together the gala. I don't think I need to impress upon you the importance of this event from a professional and social networking position. It is a critical moment in the year for the company and therefore its success is crucial. Because of that, I wanted to come and offer my help. I can give you recommendations, go over vendors with you, and help you to put this event together in a way that would be satisfactory,” he said.

My skin started to crawl, but I didn't let my expression show it. He would have loved to be the one to say he had helped me throw the party. There was no way I was going to give him the satisfaction of being able to go back to the Board and say they were absolutely right and I was so incompetent he had to rescue me.

“That's kind of you, Rainey, but I won't be needing your services,” I said.

His face fell slightly and he looked confused. “You won't?”

“No. I'm not sure who has been talking about me behind my back in such an inappropriate way, but I appreciate the insight into that. I won't ask you to divulge names because I'm sure you don't want to get involved, but I can assure you I'll be making reminders about respect and the company culture. As for the gala event, I am well on my way in the planning process,” I said.

“You are?”

“Yes. I've decided to take a different approach to it this year. Something fresh and different to usher in the new chapter of the company and celebrate advancements we've only just achieved and that are still ahead.”

That was lifted right off of one of Courtney's plans. I wasn't sure which one, but it tumbled right out when I started saying it, so it must have been effective.

“I'd be interested in seeing some of these plans,” Rainey said. “Unless you are trying to keep them a surprise.”

Some of the sneer was back, like he thought he'd painted me into a corner. I smiled at him.

“Absolutely. I was actually just going over some of them, if you'd like to take a look.”

I gestured to the papers on the desk and he stepped up to see them more clearly. We were going over them when I heard someone clear their throat in front of me. I looked up and saw Courtney standing on the other side of the desk. She had fire in her eyes and her jaw was set so hard it looked like her teeth were going to break.

“I have some paperwork for you to fill out, Mr. Callahan,” she said, tossing a stack of papers down on the edge of the desk.

“Thank you, Courtney. This is Rainey McAllister,” I said, gesturing toward the Board member. “I was just showing him the plans for the gala.”

“I'll leave you to it,” she said and quickly left the office.

Scooping up the papers, I looked at Rainey. “I'm actually going to have to see to these things. But thank you, again, for stopping by.”

He nodded. “Of course. And good work. I'm impressed.”

I returned his nod and walked him to the door. As soon as he turned to the elevator, I made my way to Courtney's office. I half expected to find her packing up her office again. That seemed like it would be a fitting mid-point to our daily interactions with each other. We'd start each day with our dance at the elevator, then round about lunchtime she would pack up her office and walk out. I would just have to decide how often I was going to try to stop her.

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That day it was a moot point. She wasn't packing. She was sitting at her desk, typing into her computer.

“Hey, Courtney,” I said when I walked into the office.

“Hello,” she said without looking in my direction.

“Thank you for bringing these vendor lists to me. I'll go over them this afternoon and make sure you have them back as soon as possible,” I said.

Her eyes snapped to me. “Is that the way this is going to be?”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm going to do all the work and you're just going to sit around and take all the credit for it?” she asked.

I was surprised by the question and didn't immediately respond. She gave a tight smile and a single nod.

“Got it.”

“Look...”

She held up a hand to stop me. “You don't need to explain. I understand. This is your company. Your name. I get it. But now I have to work.”

Her focus turned back to the computer and I felt summarily dismissed. Without another word, I left her office. It only took a few steps for me to realize I actually felt bad. That wasn't something I was used to. I had always gotten my way without bothering to think about anyone else. Now I actually cared what someone else thought and that was weird.

Chapter Thirteen

Courtney

Once again, I was still sitting behind my desk long after everybody else had left the office. I was going over some papers while I talked to Vanessa.

“He was seriously standing there talking to this guy like he had come up with everything in those folders. There wasn't a single shred of acknowledgment that he had even gotten any help, much less that I'd actually be the one to do it. And you know what? I would have even given him partial credit for it. He did give me some changes to make and a few guidelines to follow. I would have happily played along and let him look good in front of the Board. That wouldn't have been a problem.”

“If he hadn't tried to just take all the glory for himself,” Vanessa said.

“Exactly. It was just such a jackass thing to do. Of course, that fits perfectly with what I already thought about him, which is that he's a jackass. So, I suppose I shouldn't be all that surprised,” I said.

“Did you say anything to him about it?”

“I asked him if that was the way it was going to be and he didn't respond. I guess he didn't really have to. Then I told him I understood because it's his company and his reputation. What else was I supposed to say? He was standing there taking credit for

all the work I had done. I could either just deal with it and remind myself of the paycheck waiting for me at the end of this. Or I could throw a temper tantrum.”

“Like you did yesterday?”

“That wasn't a temper tantrum. That was a statement,” I said.

“Whatever you want to call it. I think you've reached your limit. At least for your first week of working at the company.”

Before I could say anything else, the door to my office opened. When I looked up, expecting to see the cleaning crew, I was surprised to see Bryan.

“Vanessa, I've got to go,” I said. “I'll call you when I get home.”

I hung up, wondering just how much of the conversation he had overheard. Even if he heard all of it, he didn't say anything about it. Instead, he stepped the rest of the way into the office and I noticed a bag of takeout food in his hand. He lifted it up and turned it around so I could see the name of the restaurant.

It was called Olive Branch.

I shook my head. “Wow. I didn't know you were capable of such bad, corny jokes.”

He shrugged. “Thought I'd give it a try.”

“Come on in.”

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He obviously wasn't one to apologize very much in his life. If at all. Part of me wanted to wait for him to say he was sorry, but a much larger part of me realized it wasn't coming. That just wasn't the type of man Bryan Callahan was.

“You haven't had dinner yet, have you?” he asked.

“No,” I said, shaking my head as I pushed back slightly from the desk. “I was thinking about ordering something, but I hadn't gotten around to it yet.”

“Good. Now you don't have to.” He set the food down on the corner of the desk and I moved the work I was doing aside so it didn't get in the way of the containers as he unloaded the bag. “You're working hard enough. You don't need to think about dinner, too.”

It was an odd comment, but I felt like it was his attempt at getting close to admitting he was wrong without actually taking the leap to say it.

“It smells good,” I said.

“If you want, I can stay late with you and go over what you've done,” he offered.

I didn't really want a repeat of the day before. Collaboration wasn't something I was particularly used to or fond of when it came to my creative endeavors. I never worked with other designers and encouraged my clients to give me as much space and leeway as absolutely possible so I could just do my thing. Bryan had completely thrown that out the window and spent an inordinate amount of time picking apart the ideas I gave him.

It was almost like he wanted to make sure he had poked and prodded at every single one so there wasn't anything left that was really my vision. Just for the principle of it. That wasn't something I felt like going through again, particularly after having to shoehorn in a few of the more absurd demands he had. But the food smelled amazing and I was starving, so I nodded.

“Sure,” I said.

He sat down and handed me a fork and a paper plate. I examined the plate and gave him a questioning look.

“I made a stop by the break room before I came in,” he said.

“Ah.”

We doled out the food and started eating. It tasted even better than it smelled and I figured I would be perfectly happy to just sit there eating for the rest of the night and not even bother to do any more work. Unfortunately, that wasn't really an option. After a few minutes of eating, we tucked into the planning again.

“One thing that I really liked about all of your ideas is the way you integrated the food into the theme,” he said. “I can't remember that ever really being something that was done at the parties before.”

“That's the impression I got,” I said. “From everything I went over about the previous parties, it seemed to me the menu was basically a generic catering menu. High-quality food and impressive in its own right, don't get me wrong, but just... predictable. There wasn't really anything about it that made it stand out from any other gala, wedding, or other social event. Integrating the food into the overall theme will make it more interesting and really make the guests take notice.”

“I agree,” Bryan said. “Food is an important part of the experience.”

“If it's done correctly,” I said.

“If it's done correctly,” he repeated. “And I have a feeling you'll make sure it is. What do you think about a dessert bar?”

We went back and forth about the menu options for a little while and I noticed how much more he seemed to come alive when he was talking about something like this rather than just the company itself. Bits of information about himself trickled into the conversation and I offered a couple of details of my own.

“I hope you don't mind me saying it, but you really don't seem to like your job very much,” I pointed out when I ventured into the realm of talking about the company and noticed him stiffen up.

He chuckled a little. “Somehow I don't think you actually care if I mind.”

I shrugged. “Probably not. But the observation still stands.”

A breath seeped out of him. “It's not about me liking it or not. That's not what matters. This is what was expected of me my whole life and so it's what I'm doing.”

“Why was it expected of you?” I asked.

“Think of it as my inheritance. I got the job because my father died,” he said.

There wasn't any emotion behind the words, which surprised me.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

Bryan brushed it off. “It doesn't really matter to me. We weren't close. The only impact his death made on my life was this job. What about you? What's your family like?”

It sounded less like a curious inquiry than an attempt at detouring the conversation. He was obviously not comfortable talking about his family, so I decided to give him a break. I told him a little bit about my family and what it was like growing up. I skirted around any mention of my interior design experience, wanting to steer clear of that potential pitfall. Eventually, we found our way back to discussing the actual work in front of us.

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“You didn't tell me exactly where you are planning on hosting the event,” I said. “You mentioned a new hotel. Was that your plan for the venue?”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “I want to highlight the new hotel and bring more attention to it. Fundraising events like this tend to be more successful when the guests feel like they are getting something out of it. Even if it is just a glimpse at the newest hotel in the list.”

“I think that sounds like a good idea. It will also help to put over the different theme and approach to the party. It will be more impressive for the guests when it's something totally new also set against a new backdrop rather than just the same old thing they're used to.”

He let out a breath. “That just means I've got to figure out something to do with the boutique space. I can't exactly have a construction zone happening during a gala.”

“And there's another thing you don't seem thrilled about.”

“Definitely not. I just hate the idea of a cheesy gift shop in my hotels, even if it is presented as being high-end and unique. In the end, it still feels shallow and transparently money-grabbing. There is already a branded shop designed right into the hotel. It specifically carries the robes, toiletries, and some of the bedding used in the rooms. That's it. No collectibles. No art. None of that. Just the items found in the rooms so that guests can recreate the experience in their own homes if they want to. Not so they can snag a souvenir for Aunt Sally on the way home from their vacation.”

I laughed. “Alright, well what do you think should be in that space? If not a boutique,

what would enhance the hotel?"

"I don't know," he said.

His eyes met mine and I felt the tension growing between us. The heat there was obvious, which I found confusing. We didn't know each other, we didn't even like each other. So, why did he make me feel a little breathless when he was sitting that close and looking at me that way?

There was a brief moment when the draw between us got so strong I thought he might lean in to kiss me. But almost as soon as I noticed it, the feeling passed and we got back to work.

We stayed at the office for a couple more hours before calling it a night and heading home. When I got back to my place, I couldn't stop thinking about him.

Chapter Fourteen

Bryan

My workout ran late that morning and when I got to the coffee shop, I impulsively let somebody step in front of me to order their drink first. It threw off my entire schedule for the start of the morning, so I decided it wasn't going to be a normal day at all.

When I got to the office, it was considerably later than I usually arrived and Courtney was nowhere to be seen in the lobby. I figured she had already made her way through. The thought briefly flickered through my mind as to whether she had hesitated outside the doors or if she waited inside for me to get in with her.

Hopping in, I rode up to the right floor, went for my shower, then headed directly to Courtney's office. She looked up at me with a surprised expression when I walked in.

“Good morning,” she said. “I thought you had decided you put in enough hours last night and weren't going to come in today.”

“Grab your stuff,” I said.

Her expression fell. “Are you firing me? Just for that comment? Because I have said and done a lot worse. Is it like a cumulative effect?”

I shook my head and rolled my eyes at her. “I'm not firing you. Good lord. Just get your stuff. We're leaving.”

“Where are we going?” she asked, pulling her purse out of the drawer at the bottom of the desk and closing her computer.

“You'll see when we get there,” I said.

I was surprisingly excited as we got into the back of my car. I'd already told the driver where I wanted to go, so he didn't wait for me to give him any instruction before pulling out and heading across town. Courtney sat by the window, her head tilted so she could look at everything as we passed. I remembered she told me she had just moved here recently so it seemed she was absorbing everything as we went by.

When we arrived at the hotel, she looked over at me.

“Here we are,” I said.

“Is this your new hotel?” she asked.

“Yes, it is. Come on inside. I want to show it to you.”

The driver opened the door for Courtney and she stepped out as I walked around from

the other side. I thanked the driver and we went into the building.

“It's beautiful,” Courtney said, looking around.

I shrugged, following her gaze. “If nothing else, it will be. It's not done yet. There's still a lot to get done, but it will be ready for the party. Come this way, I want to show you the retail space.”

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I headed across what would soon be an immaculate lobby to a corner that looked bare and empty compared to the rest of the space. Built into a section against the sidewalk to the side of the building, it featured a massive picture window now covered with paper and tape.

“This space definitely has a lot of potential,” Courtney said. “It could be just about anything if it was in the right hands.”

“And therein lies my problem,” I said. “I don't have the right hands to do it. This space is the most frustrating area I've ever had in one of my hotels. Usually, I know exactly what I want and how I want it to be. But this is just not gelling for me. Not to mention the whole right hands part. I don't have a professional to oversee the project.”

“Are you still looking for an interior designer?” Courtney asked, sounding almost cautious, like she wasn't sure how I was going to respond to the question. Not that I could blame her. My attitude had been somewhat unpredictable in her brief time knowing me.

“Not right now. I decided to put a hold on finding one because I'm still not completely positive what this space is even going to be, which would make it hard for a designer to put together. I'm not sold on it being a boutique, but I'm not sure what else it could be,” I said.

“You'll figure it out,” she reassured me.

“Want to see the rooms?” I asked.

If I didn't know any better, I would think she had just blushed. She looked down and brushed her hair away from her face before looking at me again.

“Sure. Yeah,” she nodded. “That would be great.”

That was a lot of confirmation for not sounding at all confident with what she was saying. But I decided to take it at face value and bring her up to a section of the rooms that had been finished recently. We laughed slightly as we walked into the elevator together and I noticed Courtney looking around at the mirrors on the sides.

I smiled at her in one of them and she smiled back at me. My stomach tightened slightly and I made myself look away.

We got to the finished floor and I brought her into one of the rooms. As we walked around and I showed her the amenities, she seemed to be taking notice of all the details. Her eyes swept across the furniture, the art, the fixtures. When they got to the bed, they paused.

“Is this the bedding that's so wonderful you sell it in your shops?” she asked, a hint of teasing in her voice.

I nodded. “Yes. Feel it.”

I leaned down to run my hand along the top of the comforter. It was smooth and soft with a fresh crispness that came from never having been used. Courtney stepped up and touched the bed. She let out a little sigh.

“It's so soft,” she said.

“The sheets are bamboo,” I told her.

“I can see why people would want to buy them,” she said.

We looked at each other and there was another moment of tension between us. It both excited and confused me. Even though we didn't really know each other and didn't get along to start with, I was drawn to her and we kept having those electric moments. I didn't know what to think of it.

“Let me show you where the event will be held,” I said, breaking the moment and stepping away from her.

Courtney nodded. “That would be a good idea. It will help us visualize exactly how to lay everything out.”

We hurried out of the room and downstairs to the event space. She was clearly impressed and I found myself liking that. I was so accustomed to impressing people and having women fall all over themselves about me I had forgotten what it felt like to actually have to work to get that same reaction from someone. I wouldn't exactly say that Courtney was falling all over herself about me, but she was certainly impressed, and I would take that.

We walked around exchanging ideas and coming up with new ones to fit the space.

“What about dancing?” she asked, stopping in the center of the room.

My face scrunched up. “Dancing? I don't know if there needs to be dancing. Doesn't that sound kind of old school? And if there absolutely has to be dancing, the dance floor needs to be somewhere out of the way. We don't want people getting in each other's way. We can put the dance floor in that back corner over there. We hadn't talked about anything specific to go there.”

I looked over at Courtney and saw she was clearly horrified by the suggestion.

“There has to be dancing,” she said. “And the dance floor has to be right here in the middle of the room.”

“Why?”

She looked like she was trying to come up with a way of saying something, but eventually just gave in and reached out for me.

“Come dance with me,” she said.

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“Dance with you?” I asked. “There's no music.”

“I know,” she said, wiggling her finger toward me like they would help get me to her faster. “We don't need music. We can pretend.”

“I assure you, I need music,” I told her.

“Not for this. Come on.”

I walked over to her and took her into my arms.

“See?” she asked. “It's magical right here. The lights. The chandelier. It's the focal point of the room and that's what it should be when people are dancing. They should feel beautiful and impressive.”

I wanted to tell her those were words I would absolutely use to describe her and that she felt so good in my arms, but before I could say anything, a grumbling voice came at me from the door to the space.

“Is this why things are delayed around here?” Grandfather asked, stalking toward us across the space. “You're in here just having fun when you should be working?”

“I am working,” I said, reluctantly stepping away from Courtney. “I'm trying to finish planning the gala fundraising that is so precious to you.”

He scowled at me, then looked Courtney up and down.

“And who is this being so kind as to play the part of your date for the evening?” he asked, the sarcasm and judgment nasty and bitter in his words.

“This is Courtney,” I said, gesturing toward her. Something suddenly came over me. “My fiancée.”

Chapter Fifteen

Courtney

His what?

I felt like I had just gotten hit by a truck. I couldn't believe what I heard come out of Bryan's mouth. I was completely flabbergasted and confused, but for some reason I also had the sense I needed to go along with it. I had no idea why. I didn't even know who this man was, but when I looked over at Bryan for some sort of clue as to what was going on, I saw the pleading in his eyes.

He had a smile on his face, but he was looking at me with a sense of desperation, like something critical balanced on me just accepting what he said and playing along. The older man in front of us looked suspicious as he eyed me. There was something about him that was familiar. He looked vaguely like Bryan in that kind of way that if I saw them in two different contexts, I never would have thought they looked alike, but now that they were in the same space, I could see vague hints of each other in their faces.

That made me wonder if this might be the grandfather he told me a little about the night before. He hadn't gotten much into it, only that his grandfather was still very much in power and had a lot of expectations for the younger generation.

Bryan reached over and wrapped his arm around my waist, and I smiled, leaning my head against his arm and wrapping my other arm around to rest my hand on his.

“Courtney, this is my grandfather. Grandfather, this is Courtney,” Bryan said.

“Hi,” I said cheerfully. “I’m so glad to finally meet you.” I looked up at Bryan with what I hoped were adoring eyes. “Bryan has told me so much about you. I feel like I know you already.”

“Hello, Courtney,” he said. “I don’t think my grandson has told me anything about you.”

“Of course, I have,” Bryan said. “I talked about her to you just the other day. Remember, I said that she is very private and wanted to keep our relationship to ourselves for a while before we went really public with it.”

His grandfather’s eyes widened slightly as realization seemed to settle over him.

“This is her? And the two of you are engaged to be married?” he asked.

Bryan looked down at me and I looked up at him again. He nodded.

“Yes. It’s very new, but we are so looking forward to it.”

New was an understatement. This was confusing as hell. I really needed to know what was going on, but it didn’t seem like the grandfather, whose name I didn’t even know and who didn’t seem the type for me to call Gramps, was going to be leaving us on our own any time soon.

Suddenly, he looked happy. All the suspicion and frustration were gone from his face and he looked excited and maybe... relieved? I wasn’t sure what that was all about, but I was going to add it to my list of questions that were coming out of my mouth as soon as I had a chance.

“Tell me everything,” the older man said. “I want to know how the two of you met. How long have you been seeing each other? Do I know Courtney's family? What kind of plans have you made for the wedding?”

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He wanted to know a whole lot of everything about something that didn't exist and I was starting to feel a little bit panicked. I might have been able to pull off just agreeing to the idea of being engaged to Bryan, but I probably couldn't rattle off an entire relationship history without preparation. One disastrous improv class in college was enough to prove that.

Fortunately, Bryan seemed prepared to beg us away from the conversation.

“We would love to tell you everything and talk about the wedding sometime soon,” he said. “But right now we have a lot we need to work on. Courtney is helping plan the fundraiser. And she is absolutely brilliant. I think you will be really impressed and pleasantly surprised by what she's come up with.”

He squeezed me a little closer and gave my hip an encouraging rub. I wanted to think that was a genuine gesture, that he was reassuring me this spiral into potential disaster was coming to a close sometime soon.

“Oh,” his grandfather said, nodding. “I was wondering who was helping you. I heard the woman your father's former secretary hired was turned away on her first day. That made me very concerned. But now I understand.”

My stomach sank and my heart started pounding in my chest. Embarrassment crept up the back of my neck and burned on my cheeks. That was definitely not the way I anticipated Bryan ever finding out the truth behind me starting to work for him. Ideally, he was never going to find out. But if he ever did, I was hoping for some sort of nostalgic conversation years down the line where we reunited over drinks and I told him that funny story.

That definitely wasn't going to happen.

I did my best not to show how I was feeling, and also didn't look up at Bryan. He kept his arm wrapped around me and out of the corner of my eye I could see he was still smiling. We managed to extricate ourselves from the conversation with his grandfather and waited for him to leave before Bryan's arm dropped from around my waist and he started stomping out of the room.

I hurried to follow him and when we got outside, I saw him climbing into the back of the car. I got in after him and as soon as the door was shut, the whole happy coupled act was completely over.

“What the hell is he talking about?” Bryan demanded.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “It just kind of happened. I came in to interview for the interior design position and you just assumed I was there to be your assistant. Remember, I did question it. I tried to tell you I wasn't the person you thought I was, but you wouldn't listen to me.”

“So, you lying to me is my fault?” he asked with an incredulous laugh.

“Don't you dare try to act all self-righteous,” I said. “You just looked your grandfather right in the eye and lied to him. That is so much worse. At least I didn't know you and I wasn't making up a relationship that he was really excited about and eventually he's going to have to find out isn't real. That was cruel and I don't even understand why you did it.”

“I didn't do it to be cruel,” he said. “I did it because I needed to. It's no different than what you did.”

“Yes, it is! They are absolutely not the same thing. I took an opportunity that was put

right in front of me. You were handing the position to me and thought I was the right person, so I accepted it. You just turned me into your fiancée without even telling me, right in front of your grandfather who I had never met. What if I had a boyfriend?" I asked.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" he asked.

"No, but that's not the point," I said, feeling flustered and upset. "The point is, you can't just do that to a person. You can't just throw me out into the fray like that and hope for the best."

"And you can't steal someone's identity and steal their job from them," he said.

"I didn't steal her identity!" I shouted.

"Alright, we aren't getting anywhere with this," he said. He leaned forward to move the partition and talk to the driver. "Can you pull over in this park up here?"

The car stopped and Bryan and I tumbled out. I knew I was completely freaking out, but I couldn't help it. Walking around in small circles, I drew in deep breaths trying to settle myself down.

"What are we doing here?" I asked. "Is this where you're going to stage the proposals so we can start posting it on our couple's Instagram? Should we come up with a name now?" I thought about it for a second. "There isn't even one I can say facetiously. Our names don't even go together."

"We are here so that we could take a walk and talk this through," he said. "Come on."

"I hate when you tell me what to do," I said.

“Just come on,” he said.

We walked out onto a path that led through the pocket of nature tucked into the sprawling urban landscape. The trees and grass were surprisingly soothing. As we walked, Bryan explained everything about his grandfather and the expectations he had for him. He talked about his reputation and how it could cause him not to lose his position within the company, and the financial backing of his family.

“So, it really is only money you ever care about,” I said.

He looked over at me and instead of anger in his face, I saw pain.

“That's all I ever got from my family,” he said. “My mother was the only one who ever really loved me. I figure the money and the power are what they owe me.”

I nodded. “I guess I can understand that. And it's really shitty that they are pressuring you like that. But why me?”

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“I’m sorry,” he said. “It just kind of came out. I didn’t even realize I was going to say it until I heard it come out of my mouth. I panicked. But listen,” he turned to me, stopping in the middle of the path to face me. “This could be perfect.”

“What do you mean it could be perfect?” I asked.

“We keep it going. We just keep acting exactly like we did in there. It will keep Grandfather off me for a while and everybody will see me in a better light. I’ll secure my position in the company and gain more power and control. Eventually, Grandfather will give his stock to me and I’ll be able to do things my way. Which means I’ll need someone to help me with a lot of projects.”

“You want to keep pretending we are engaged? Don’t you think people will notice when nothing happens?” I asked.

“Really long engagements are popular these days. No one will question it,” he said.

I nodded. “Alright. I can’t believe I’m actually doing this, but alright. I’ll go along with it. But only as long as I can keep my job. That’s my one condition.”

I hadn’t explained to him why I needed the money, but he didn’t seem to care. He nodded.

“Absolutely. Thank you, Courtney.”

Bryan

The next morning, Courtney had an intense look on her face when she stalked across the lobby toward the elevator. She got there first and waited for me to step inside.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Where did we meet?” she asked, looking over at me with a serious expression.

I was both confused and concerned. Either she was having an alarming lapse of memory or she had just decided to pretend we didn't know each other and start rebuilding.

“I don't know if you count me taking the pastry from you in the coffee shop as us meeting. Or maybe we met when you shut the elevator doors in my face. But if you want to be really specific with it, I guess we met in my office when I thought I knew who you were but apparently didn't,” I said.

She shook her head. “No, I mean, where did we meet in the world where we are madly in love and engaged?”

“I didn't mention us being madly in love. Are we madly in love?” I asked.

“We better be. I don't want to fake dedicate my life to a man who would pretend to be engaged to someone he wasn't falsely madly in love with. That would just be a waste of both of our hypothetical time. I deserve to be artificially wooed by a man who pretends to not be able to imagine a single moment of his fake life without me,” she said.

I was stunned she managed to get through all of that with a straight face. I gave a single firm nod of agreement.

“Alright. Then, yes, we are madly in love.”

“Good. So, where did we meet?”

The doors of the elevator opened and we walked out onto the office floor. She immediately headed for her office. We were right in the middle of a conversation. At least, I thought we were. Maybe I'd managed to imagine all of that, too.

I went into my office, halfway expecting to find my grandfather sitting there waiting for me. It was fortunately empty and I took a longer than usual shower to give myself a chance to think. When I stepped out a while later, seeing Courtney sitting in the sitting area of my office made me jump.

“You are far too quiet,” I said.

“Alright, there we go. You have a complaint about me. That's good. It adds authenticity to the relationship. But we need more. We have to figure out our whole relationship story.”

“Relationship story?” I asked.

“Yes. If we are going to pretend to be engaged with any chance of it actually being believable, we have to make sure it looks real. That means we have to know each other. There has to be a story for us to go on. Think about what your grandfather did yesterday. As soon as he heard that we were getting married, he wanted to know everything. That's the way everybody is going to be.

They are going to want the details. Where we met, how we fell in love, the types of things we've done together, how you proposed. All of it. We have to have a story we can share with people that sounds authentic, not just like a script. And we have to have all the little relationship nitty-gritties.”

“What is that?” I asked, sitting down on the couch beside her.

“All the things that make a relationship about two people sharing their lives. We have to have memories we can talk about, stories about each other we can tell people. We need jokes. A song. Food we like to eat together. Plans for the future. We need all those things. It has to feel real if we're going to pull this off,” she said.

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“This is very high maintenance,” I said. “I don't know if I'm ready for this kind of commitment.”

“You should have thought about that before you didn't put a ring on it,” she said.

“Alright,” I said. “You're right. In order for us to really pull this off, we need to have a basis with each other and some relationship stuff we can throw around to make it plausible.” I thought about it for a second, then stood up. “This is what we're going to do. We're taking the rest of the day off. You go home and pack some clothes.”

“Pack some clothes?” Courtney asked. “What do you mean?”

“Just fill a bag with all sorts of different outfits. Things from different seasons, different types of activities. You might want to bring along your makeup, too. We're going to take a crash course in each other and start making some memories together. I'll meet you back here in two hours.”

She left first and I spent the next twenty minutes researching places to go. When I had a list, I headed back to my place and gathered some clothes of my own. I didn't know if we were going to be able to make this happen, but the least we could do was try.

When Courtney showed back up, she was in jeans and a lightweight sweater and her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She was carrying a large duffel bag and a smaller bag in the other hand. She looked like she was ready for about a week of vacation. Which was good because we needed to have several months of a relationship in the next day.

I'd given my driver the day off, deciding it was just easier to drive ourselves around and not have to explain any of this to anyone. We climbed in the car and I showed Courtney the pages I'd printed out.

“Alright, all of these places are close enough that we can hit a bunch of them today. We'll change clothes and things in between so it looks like a bunch of different situations.”

“We'll have to do the ones with winter clothes inside,” she pointed out. “Or wait until tonight when we can pretend it's really cold and be bundled up without the pictures actually showing much of what's around us.”

She seemed into the plan and I couldn't help but feel a little bit of excitement. It was ridiculous, but it felt like an adventure and I was all for it.

We spent the rest of the day running around to as many tourist attractions, locations, and picture backdrops as we possibly could. We took pictures and video, pretending it was different points in our relationship. In between settings, we changed clothes and Courtney altered her makeup so it was more believable that we weren't just doing this all in one day.

It was ridiculous. It was completely over the top, but it was also more fun than I'd had in as long as I could remember. We ended up laughing and being silly together, getting to know each other as we shared real memories and offered up little bits of ourselves.

As night fell, we changed into evening clothes and I headed to a location I'd been looking forward to all day. The fountain on the university campus was one of the most beautiful places in the area and I knew it was lit up at night. It would be the perfect backdrop for a date.

Courtney looked somewhat hesitant when I pulled onto campus and we started walking toward the fountain. She looked around, not seeming as excited and willing as she had been in all the other locations.

“Don't worry,” I said. “Security isn't going to stop us.”

“No, that's not what I'm worried about,” she said. “I just don't want anybody to see us.”

“People have been seeing us all day,” I pointed out.

“Yes, but not ones who I might potentially know and could cause trouble for this whole plan,” she said.

I looked at her curiously. “Why would anybody know you here?”

We got to the fountain and she let out a sigh. “Alright. There's something I haven't told you.”

“Go ahead,” I said, starting to take pictures of the area. I walked up beside her and took a selfie.

“The reason I was so eager to take the position with you after I heard how much you were willing to pay is that I'm funding my way through law school,” she said.

I turned to her in surprise.

“What?” I asked. “You're in law school?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I started my career in interior design and was really successful, but after my divorce, I decided I needed to do something for myself. I wanted to pursue

law when I was younger, it's actually what my best friend does, too, but I didn't do it. Now I'm doing it.”

“I can't believe it... I'm fake engaged to a co-ed. What kind of law are we talking about? Because my family might be really upset if you are going to be like an environmental lawyer or something like that. Do you think it's too late to change your focus to corporate law? High power prosecuting, maybe?”

I laughed, but Courtney didn't laugh along with me. She looked angry.

“Go ahead and make fun of me,” she said. “You wouldn't know what it feels like to have a dream and not go after it. Or to have to claw and fight for it. You've never had to dream or hope for anything in your life. You've had your entire existence laid out for you. You have all the success in the world and you don't even want it.”

She was getting more upset, and I didn't want the fun we'd had all day ruined. I wanted to defuse the situation and get back to what we were doing. I stepped in front of the fountain with her right as the lights under the water changed to blue and purple. Grabbing her, I pulled her in for a kiss and snapped a picture.

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I thought it was just going to be a brief kiss to capture the moment. But it was instantly amazing. My breath caught in my throat and my stomach tightened. As I pulled away from her just slightly, my heart pounded in my chest and I didn't want to stop. I leaned back in for another kiss, taking a picture of this one for good measure.

Chapter Seventeen

Courtney

The kiss stunned me, but I tried to play it cool. It was fake. I knew that. I had to keep reminding myself that. It was all just for show.

Then why did I feel tingling all over my body? Why could I feel out of breath every time I looked at him and even my toes tingled? I tried convincing myself that it was just that he was a really good kisser. If I could convince myself of that, then maybe I could be mad at myself later when I got through all this.

For now, though, I could enjoy it.

We went to a few other places, some more regular haunts like restaurants and stores and some famous touristy spots too. At each one, the kissing became an essential part of the picture-taking process. Simple kisses to the cheek, tiny pecks, deep, closed mouth embraces. It was a lot, but it was manageable. I tried to trick myself into thinking I was like an actress with a super-hot co-star.

Then we went to a high-rise hotel, wound up on the roof, placed his phone on a timer on a pillar nearby and he pulled me in again. This time though, his lips parted mine

and his tongue slid inside. We stayed that way far after the picture was taken, tasting each other, our tongues wrestling one another.

When we finished our kiss, we stood apart, our eyes burning into one another and our lips stretched into stupid grins. It was becoming rather obvious that we were kissing now just because we wanted to. It was an explosive kind of attraction that was unlike anything I had ever felt.

“It’s getting late,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess I should drop you off now,” he said, his body still close to mine. I could smell his cologne on me, rubbed off in one of our embraces. It was intoxicatingly dark and sexy. Mahogany and whisky. A trace of smoke.

We drove back to my place in near silence, the tension in the car absolutely unbearable. I squirmed in my seat. My core was on fire, wet and hot. I wanted him. I didn’t want to say the wrong thing, but I had to take a shot. We pulled up to my place and he turned in his seat as soon as the car was parked, bringing me in for a deep kiss.

“Come up with me,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his hot breath on my cheek.

I nodded.

We escaped from the car like it was trying to eat us, throwing ourselves to the door of my house and I fumbled with my keys until it was unlocked. I barely had the door open before I was crawling onto him, our lips pressed together as he carried me back into the room and shutting the door behind him with his foot.

I leaned back and he came with me, my hands behind his neck, pulling him further

into my room. Our kiss broke and his lips moved to my neck and his hands, roughly at first, moved me toward the couch. My jaw went slack as my voice bubbled up out of me. His hot breath on my neck sent tingles down my body and the growling sounds coming from his chest worked like a command. His fingers were pulling at my blouse and I raised my hands obediently. It came up and off in a split second.

Cool air hit my skin and I broke out in goosebumps. I didn't care, though, especially with the heat between my thighs warming the rest of me from the inside out. His teeth had reached the clasp in the center of my bra and I gasped as he yanked it open. My breasts tumbled out and he made a hungry, desperate sound as his hands filled with them and I fell back, letting the bra hit the floor.

I fell backwards and hit the couch on my ass. Some primal instinct inside of me just decided to yank at his belt, unbuttoning him and pulling down harshly. His cock sprung out and I wrapped my hand around it. It was so thick and hard in my palm. The taboo thought of holding my boss's cock in my hand only sent me deeper into the spiral and I lost all ability to control myself.

I dove down, taking him into my mouth. Stroking him as I let my lips purse around his head, my tongue flicking, taking the sweet, sticky fluid that collected there and mixing it with my saliva. Tasting the very essence of him. I slid my hand down to my skirt and pulled it up, unable to stop myself anymore. I pulled aside my panties and touched myself as I took him deep into my mouth, the head brushing the back of my throat.

Bryan groaned deeply as I sucked on him, bobbing back and forth, stroking him into my mouth with concentrated movements. I turned my grip as I stroked him, wrenching lightly on his cock and making him cry out in pleasure. I moaned as I pleased his staff and suddenly, he pulled away. I looked up to see that he had removed his shirt and my eyes trailed down his muscular frame as he kicked away his pants.

He was naked, his incredible body tense and heaving as he breathed heavily. I felt like I lost the ability to move my limbs and I fell back into the couch. I was his for whatever he wanted to do. He could do anything and I would let him. I would enjoy it.

He knelt in front of me and my interest spiked even higher. A grin on his face made me feel like I would pass out. His head dove between my thighs and I spread them open further to let him in. Suddenly, the world was on fire.

My eyes clenched shut as I came instantly to the touch of his tongue to my clit. My thighs squeezed shut, hard over his ears and my toes curled in on themselves. I shouted out in a cry I was sure the whole world could hear. I didn't care. Let them know.

His tongue swept through my folds and kept brushing my clit, sending me into spirals as I clenched his hair in my hands. As I shook and vibrated, he moaned lusciously. When I finally felt like I had some measure of control again, he stood and held out his hand. I took it and he picked me up, my legs wrapping around his hips and my body sent into shivers as his cock pressed against my core. I wanted him inside me. I needed it.

He carried me back to my room and tossed me on the bed, climbing up between my open, waiting legs. I yearned for him, begged for him silently with my eyes.

He did not make me wait.

Bryan settled between my thighs and guided his cock to my opening and thrust. A world of pain and pleasure filled me and I cried out into the night. He held himself there, letting me adjust to him as my walls pulsed at his thickness. When I began to relax, he rocked back, thrusting back and forth into me over and over.

I felt my eyes roll into the back of my head as he pressed his hands on either side of me for leverage. He took one breast into his mouth as his hips slammed into me and the crashing wave of orgasm after orgasm rolled over me in such a rush that it felt like one incredibly long, intense climax.

Suddenly, his voice rose in a deep growl. The slamming, thrusting movements got harder, faster, so much that I couldn't make a sound.

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Couldn't think.

Couldn't breathe.

I lost myself in the climax and he roared above me. His cock exploded in my pussy, emptying himself in me as my body milked him, draining him completely.

When he was spent, he collapsed into me and we struggled for breath for a moment, sweat rolling between my breasts and my ability to focus slowly returning. Then, when we both regained some measure of control, we giggled, his lips pressing small kisses to the side of my breast while I kissed his forehead, brushing the hair away from his eyes.

The headlights of his car were long gone down the street when what just happened between us really sank in. Up until that point, I was in a daze. Every kiss and touch was so incredible. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. So much so I almost felt like it couldn't have actually happened.

But something about not being in the same space as him anymore snapped me into reality. As if getting away from him got me out of the effect of the cloud he created in my mind. Once his scent was gone, it all came crashing down on me.

Not just the sex. The fake engagement. The conversation about Bryan's grandfather. Everything.

There was no way I was thinking my way through this by myself. I went into my room to change and wash off my makeup, then got my phone and curled up on the

couch to call Vanessa.

“Hey,” she said, sounding somewhere between surprised and relieved. “Where have you been?”

I realized then I hadn't looked at my phone throughout the day. She must have been calling or messaging me and I didn't respond.

“Sorry,” I said. “It's... well, it's kind of a long story.”

“You know I'm always up for a long story. Wait, let me get a snack,” she said.

Before I could protest, I heard the rustling sounds of the phone being put down and Vanessa making herself something to eat.

“Ready now?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Alright. It started when Bryan brought me to the new hotel his company is building. He wanted to show me the space where the fundraising event is being held. While we were in there, we ended up dancing...”

“Wait... dancing? Why were you dancing in a hotel that isn't even finished yet?” she asked.

“I wanted to show him the importance of having a dance floor at the gala,” I said.

“Clearly,” she said. “Alright, carry on.”

I told her about dancing with Bryan and then his grandfather coming in and catching

us. I had been trying to choose my words carefully, but once I got to that point, the whole story came tumbling out. I told her everything from agreeing to the fake engagement to the day of creating our entire relationship story. I finally got to the sex and Vanessa, controlled and admirably quiet up to this point, freaked out.

The pitch of her voice went up to dog training levels and she demanded more details, but didn't stay quiet long enough for me to actually say anything else. But rather than freaking out right alongside her, I was just feeling confused.

I had never enjoyed sex. There wasn't a single time in my life I could remember really deriving pleasure from it. Sometimes I just tried to convince myself that it was what a married woman was supposed to enjoy with her husband, but... we ended up divorcing anyway.

The fact that sex with Bryan was so amazing kind of scared me. And yet, intrigued me. I wondered what it could mean.

Chapter Eighteen

Bryan

I didn't know what to expect when we got back to work. This wasn't a situation I'd ever found myself in. Not ever getting involved with a woman at work wasn't just a tendency of mine the way that not having long-term relationships was. It was a hard and fast rule.

That kind of thing brought up all sorts of drama and complications that were just too messy for me. As much as it might have seemed like a fantasy for some guys to have their lover at work so they could access her at any time of the day, it always seemed suffocating to me.

Not just because it meant she was always there and you couldn't just live your life without having her know everything that was going on. But because there was always the question of what was going to happen when it ran its course.

Ending a dalliance with any given woman had never been all that challenging for me. There was no emotion, no tight bond I was having to break through in order to move forward. Unfortunately, that wasn't always the case for women in quick flings. I was always upfront and clear with the women I dated, so I didn't come upon any trouble.

That didn't mean it wasn't a possibility, so I steered clear of work-related women.

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That had blown up all to hell when it came to Courtney.

Now she seemed a little unsure around me and I did all I could to try not to make her feel awkward. I didn't want her to think I'd been angling for that to happen, or that I was trying to manipulate her at any point.

Obviously, having sex with her wasn't planned. It was fantastic, but it wasn't planned. And it wasn't lost on me how much it could complicate what we were trying to do. When we were just acquaintances who barely knew each other, much less liked each other, it was somehow easier to think about pretending we were in love and planning to get married.

Now that there was something much more personal between us, it was more challenging. I felt like we were walking a really fine line. Now when we were near each other and I went to hold her hand or to lean close, there was going to be that wonder of whether I was doing it because I was pretending or because I wanted to.

And the question of how this was all going to come to an end loomed large over me. When it was all just a big charade, the thought of the whole thing eventually running its course seemed easy. We would just drag out the engagement longer and longer as I built my reputation in the company and among the important people surrounding it.

Eventually, they would decide I was good enough and I would have made enough of an impression in the company they wouldn't feel so jumpy about me. When that happened, she and I could just drift apart and quickly end our relationship. It would have worked out perfectly.

Except now it wasn't going to be that simple.

That was what was coursing through my mind when Courtney stepped into the elevator with me that morning. We stood in silence, both of us staring directly in front of us. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what would be right at that exact moment. It was hard to read her. I didn't know what she was feeling or how she wanted to handle everything.

I figured I got her wrapped up in this whole situation, the least I could do was give her the space to figure out how she felt and what she wanted to do about it.

We stayed silent until we got to the office floor. As she was stalking toward her office, Courtney gave a brief glance in my direction.

“I'll bring my new notes for the event to your office,” she said.

Without waiting for any response, she made her way down the corridor. I took my shower and got dressed, and when I stepped out into my office, I saw that she was already sitting there.

“How long have you been waiting there?” I asked.

“Since you were washing your hair,” she said.

“You can time my showers that precisely?” I asked.

She still hadn't looked up from the notes in her hands, but at that point, her eyes lifted up to me.

“Yes. Isn't that part of my job description? Know every detail of your schedule and daily routine?”

She had me there. That was something I'd emphasized to her. I didn't really expect her to throw it back in my face, but it was what it was.

“You said you have some notes?” I asked, pushing the conversation on through.

“Yes,” she said. “I wanted you to look over these and let me know if they are on the right track. I've done some cursory sketches to give you an idea of the visual I hope to achieve. This is the point when your recommendations or modifications would be really important for me to hear so I can take those into account before I've gotten too far.”

If there was any question about whether we were going to talk about our night together, that put the end to those really fast. It was obvious Courtney wasn't in the talking mood. She just wanted to bury herself right back into the event and put anything else going on behind us.

I decided to go along with it. At least for now. I was going to have to talk to her eventually, especially considering the phone call I got the night before and what the weekend was going to bring to us.

Pulling the notes closer to me, I went over everything with her. There wasn't much I needed to change or suggestions to offer. Now that I really understood what she was going for when it came to her plans for the event, I believed in her completely. I knew Courtney would be able to take her ideas and the suggestions and guidelines I'd already given her and turn them into something amazing.

When we finished making a few very slight tweaks and talking about what else needed to be done in order to prepare for the event to come, she tucked everything away in her folder and shoved it down into her satchel.

“Are you busy right now?” I asked.

Courtney narrowed her eyes at me and gave me a quizzical look.

“I have to work. Why?” she asked.

“I thought it might be a good idea to do some more work on our relationship building tonight,” I said.

Courtney stared at me for a few seconds like she wasn't sure what she was hearing.

“You want to do more of that?”

“I think we got some great pictures and stuff, but I don't think it was enough to really convince anyone that it's been a long relationship. Do you?” I asked.

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She shook her head, obviously resigned to the reality. “You're right.” She let out a sigh. “Alright, you make the plans and I'll be ready this evening.”

“Let's go now,” I said.

“Now? Shouldn't we be working?”

“If we don't pull this off and convince everybody that we are the happy couple getting ready to walk down the aisle, there won't be any work for us to do pretty soon. We can talk about the gala in the car,” I said.

She nodded. “If that's what you want to do. I'll get my things.”

We went through the same process as last time with her going to her place to pack some things and then meeting me back at the office. This time I had her bring outdoor clothes and we took a drive to a park with hiking trails. I brought along camping supplies and she looked at me strangely as I went about setting up the tent.

“What?” I asked, looking up at her from shoving a stake down into the ground.

“You just don't strike me as the type to go camping,” she said.

I grinned at her. “Well, there you go. There's still a lot for you to learn about me.”

We took pictures as we hiked a short loop, then built a fire at the campsite. I'd hoped Courtney would warm up and be able to have fun like we did the last time, but she still seemed distant when we sat down with marshmallows to toast.

I decided now was the time to ask her about it. I couldn't just pretend everything was fine.

“It seems like something's bothering you,” I said. “I think we should talk about what happened between us. I know it was unexpected. And I want to reiterate that. It really was. I didn't try to seduce you or have a big complicated plan or anything. It was just as much a surprise for me as it was for you. But we can just put it behind us and move forward.”

She looked at me and for a second it seemed like she was battling with herself over what she was going to say. Finally, her shoulders dropped.

“It isn't that,” she said. “It isn't that it was so much of a surprise.”

“Then what?” I asked.

“Sex has never really been a part of my life,” she said.

That confused me. “I thought you said you were married.”

“I was. For years. I didn't say I was a virgin, just that sex wasn't a part of my life. That's because I never enjoyed it. I never wanted it. It didn't interest me and when it did happen, it just wasn't something I liked. That made a huge impact on my relationship, especially because I couldn't just be upfront with my husband and tell him what was going on. I just never talked about it and that caused a lot of difficulty. So, being with you was really unexpected not because it happened, but because I enjoyed it,” she said.

As I listened to her explain her sexual history, I realized just how much I was drawn to her. It meant a lot to me that she was opening up that way and I felt an intense pull toward her. It wasn't just wanting to have sex with her, even though that was

definitely on my mind. It was something more than that.

“That's not something you should feel embarrassed about,” I said. “Or ashamed in any way. Sex isn't something that just happens. Most people don't just automatically have great sex with anybody. Compatibility is a big aspect of it and maybe you just didn't have that compatibility with your ex. You shouldn't feel bad about enjoying it. There's a lot of fun in exploring and discovering.”

We stared at each other and I felt the heat building between us. I wanted to reach out and touch her, but there was something heavy on my mind that I knew I needed to tell her before even considering another go with her. I didn't want it to seem like I was always manipulating her or trying to keep her on the end of a line.

I pulled back and focused on my marshmallow in the flames. It was burned to oblivion at that point, but I tried to play it off by blowing out the flames and eating it anyway.

“What's wrong?” she asked. She sagged and shook her head, turning her attention to the fire. “I shouldn't have told you all that.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “That's not it at all. I'm glad you did. There's just something I need to talk to you about.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“My grandfather called me. He's planning an engagement party for us at his estate. This weekend.”

Her mouth dropped open for a second, then her jaw hardened and she glared at me.

“You can't possibly be serious. An engagement party?”

“Yes. He's really excited and you made a great impression on him. He wants to introduce you to everybody and celebrate with us,” I said.

I was trying to sound as positive and enthusiastic about the prospect as possible even though I could see Courtney was not pleased.

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“I agreed to pretend we are engaged for the fundraising party,” she said. “The whole point was that we weren't going to get too involved with this. An engagement party is pretty damn involved.”

“I know. I know it's a big, big ask. But think of it this way. His place is absolutely gorgeous, which should appeal to your interior design roots. And a lot of his friends are a little bit shady, which might be fun for your lawyer side.” She let out a short laugh and I knew I was reeling her in. “It will be like a little vacation. We stay in a beautiful room, get spoiled, and relax. And all we have to do is be cute and smile at people.”

Courtney thought about it for a second, but finally she sighed and nodded.

“Alright.”

I grinned. “Perfect. I promise it won't be as bad as you're thinking it will be.”

Chapter Nineteen

Courtney

I couldn't believe I was doing this. I had just wrapped my head around the idea of shoehorning myself into the position of an assistant so I could make the extra money I needed. But this was all coming at me so fast and I felt like I was just getting deeper and deeper into this mess.

I was just trying to go to school. I just wanted to take the leap and finally pursue the

dreams I had for myself by reaching for the career I always wanted. Then somehow I ended up getting mistaken for an already hired assistant and now I was pretending to be engaged to my boss and getting ready to go be trotted out in front of all his grandfather's rich friends.

All in all, it was completely overwhelming. Especially when I added in the intensity of my attraction to Bryan.

The additional complication that brought up wasn't lost on me. I had fully intended on keeping all the details of my sexual history to myself. After all, that wasn't exactly something people had a casual chat with their bosses about. Of course, people didn't usually sit around a campfire toasting marshmallows while faking a several months-long romantic relationship with them, either. Now probably wasn't the time for me to start comparing my experience with other people.

Vanessa thought I did the right thing by telling him. I needed to be upfront and honest, to give him the full picture of me and what this whole situation meant. She was even more on board for the whole thing when she showed up for a late dinner at my place and I showed her the thick stack of bills Bryan gave me to go shopping with.

“This is going to be so much fun!” she gushed.

“Really?” I asked. “I'm not so sure about it. It feels weird.”

“Why? He didn't give you the money and tell you it was payment for sleeping with him, did he?” she asked.

I cringed. “No. It's for clothes for the weekend. We're supposed to be at this estate for a couple of days and he wanted to make sure I had everything I needed for anything that might come up. Including a dress for the actual party.”

“See? So he was actually being courteous. You're doing a huge favor for him. It's the least he can do to make sure your expenses are covered.” Vanessa could say I still wasn't completely convinced. “Just think of it as a bonus. Consider it a down payment on the wardrobe for when you are a fancy lawyer and need to go to big events.”

“Yep,” I said. “Because nothing says reliable lawyer like a little bit of fraud.” Vanessa let out a burdened sigh and I relented. “Alright. I'll take the money and go shopping. But you have to come with me and help.”

She looked at me incredulously. “I didn't realize there was an alternative.”

The next day, I took the second half of the work day off so I could meet Vanessa in the nearby shopping district. She looked like she was ready to bounce out of her skin with excitement when I pulled up. Apparently, my expression wasn't thrilled enough for her and she gave me a pouty look.

“I'm here,” I said as if in my defense. “But I feel like I've taken more time off work than I have actually worked. Doesn't that kind of defeat the purpose of having the job to make the money to go to school?”

“He's still paying you, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you're still doing all the work to plan the fundraiser?”

“Yes.”

“And adding on extra hours by doing all this fake relationship stuff?”

“Well... yes.”

“Then I think you have more than made up for it. Come on. Let's have some fun,” she said, taking my hand and pulling me toward the first store.

The whole situation was having definite Vivian and Edward vibes for me as we walked into the store and a single mention of Bryan's name had the store clerks flocking to me to help.

“Did you really need to mention him?” I asked Vanessa in a low whisper as we followed a chattering pair of women toward the dressing rooms at the back of the store.

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“Why not?” my best friend said with a grin, looping her arm through mine. “At least until the end of this whole thing, he's your fiance. You should get all the benefits of it.”

Something in her voice told me she wasn't just talking about the wad of cash in my purse or the promise of a luxurious weekend at his grandfather's estate.

At first I wanted to just get through the shops as quickly as possible with just a few things to carry me through the weekend. But after a little while in the shop with the clerks fawning on me, the glass of champagne sitting on the table by my side, and the never-ending supply of gorgeous clothes flowing into the room, I started to relax and enjoy myself a bit.

“How's it going?” a text from Bryan asked when I had a small selection of items put aside. “Remember, this isn't just for this weekend. We're going to have more outings and things. And you have the gala to think about. Get whatever you like. If you run out of money, give me a call. I can make sure you have whatever you need.”

That was all the motivation I needed. If I was going to do this, I was going to go all in. If nothing else, having fun shopping and picking out my fantasy wardrobe helped distract me from the actual situation. As long as I was choosing dresses and trying on silky lingerie, I didn't have to be stressed and worried about the party that weekend.

Of course, that high faded a bit by the time Friday afternoon came and I was packing my bags. Bryan and I spent the entire week working on our stories and coming up with little details that would make our relationship look more believable. But I was still worried someone was going to see through us and figure it out. And if that happened, I couldn't imagine the kind of fallout waiting for us.

Bryan's car pulled up in front of my house right on time and he got out to help me carry my bags. The chauffeur was back behind the wheel and he gave me a quick glance and a smile over his shoulder as I got in the car.

Bryan closed the door behind us and I looked over at him as I hooked my seatbelt.

"I can't believe we're doing this," I said. "This is crazy."

"It's going to be fine," he said. "Don't worry."

"Don't worry? Do you have any idea how bad it's going to look if somebody finds out we're lying? You think you have a bad reputation and are seen as being irresponsible now. I can't even wrap my brain around what your grandfather would do if he figured this whole thing out," I said.

"Then we just don't let him find out," Bryan said. "That was the whole point behind your plan, right? You said we needed to have evidence and come up with stories and details to share with people so they would really believe we are a couple and have been for months. And you were totally right. We've been working on it, so now we put it to the test. Don't worry. We're going to be ready."

The car pulled away from the curb and I felt the butterflies swarm in my stomach. For the rest of the drive, Bryan and I quizzed each other on the stories we made up and our fake relationship history. It wasn't the most fun road trip game I'd ever played, but it was feeling like it definitely had the highest stakes.

Chapter Twenty

Bryan

Courtney was so incredibly hot in her evening dress that I thought I might not be able

to focus at all. From the second I arrived at her place and saw her all done up and ready for the engagement party, I couldn't keep my eyes off of her. She was stunning, and I knew that everyone there was going to be just as enamored with her as I was.

When we arrived at the party at my father's estate, I could see the wonder in her eyes at the size and opulence of my grandfather's home. It was one of those older-style mansions, designed to look like the DC architecture with its roman columns and gleaming white. On the inside there was crystal and glass shining in every corner off mahogany wood and black and beige tile. I thought it was all insufferably boring, but I had seen it all my life. To Courtney it was apparently so much more. I enjoyed seeing it through her eyes, finding the things that she loved and noticing them for the first time.

We met my grandfather in the main hallway, just as he was coming from his suite on the bottom floor. I had only been inside that suite a few times in my youth, and still only once or twice as an adult. It was his place of solitude and relaxation. A bedroom of his own, a library, a study, an office and a lounging area connected to the kitchen on one end. But he kept the doors shut and locked, keeping it for himself, only ever allowing the maids and the other servants in to bring him food or changes of clothes.

Yet, this time, the door stood wide open, showing off the impressive study that led to the door. Just beyond it, the library loomed with its arched door and shelves covered in books. He held out his hand and smiled like I hadn't seen in decades. I took it and shook and he turned his attention to Courtney.

"My goodness, you look lovely," he said. "Our guests have already begun to collect in the dining room. Please, let me bring you." He held out his arm and Courtney and I shared a glance. As she took his arm, I chuckled and followed behind them.

"This is your dining room?" Courtney said as we entered the massive room. The long dining table had been moved, though I had no idea where or how. Now the room was

a long, thin room where a couple dozen people comfortably, but intimately meandered around with drinks. The door to the back yard and the incredible marble porch was open and I could see several others out there, smoking cigars and laughing.

“I apologize,” he said, “the ballroom is under some unfortunate repairs. I promise I will make it up to you later.”

Courtney turned to look at me, her eyes wide. I laughed and nodded.

“It’ll have to do,” I said.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, getting the attention of the room. “May I introduce my grandson Bryan and his lovely fiancée, Courtney... er...”

“Reynolds,” she whispered.

“Reynolds,” he said, then whispered, “Thank you, dear.”

There was a round of applause and I took Courtney’s other hand and led her away from my grandfather, who was already being attended to by a butler and another man I didn’t recognize but assumed was an attorney or advisor of some sort.

I led her into the crowd and we began to mingle with the guests. Quite a few of them I recognized from the offices. Some of them were board members, and I pointed them out to her when I could. They were the ones that were most important to convince of the engagement. With Courtney looking as gorgeous as she did, it wasn’t hard to wow them, and I found myself getting closer and closer to her, my hand sitting on the base of her spine, so dangerously close to her ass.

She was charming and funny, graceful and elegant. Everyone was charmed by her, including myself. She spoke about her law classes with another guest, the wife of one

of the board members. She had also attended the same school and they shared a professor and swapped stories. I listened in as she spoke about how forward he was with some of his students and they laughed about how one day he would say the wrong thing and get fired.

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Then, Courtney recounted her own story. The professor was younger and had asked to talk to her privately. They had spoken about her grades and how she seemed distracted in class. She laughed it off, but it was obvious that he had tried to seduce her. At least it was to me. It made me uncomfortable, and the idea that he still had contact with her, that he still had something to say over her schooling career, pissed me off.

I tried not to say anything about it, letting her wrap up her story and move on to the next group of people waiting to talk to us. I didn't want to ruin the moment. Group after group we walked around the room shaking hands, making small talk, and slowly the jealousy and discomfort wore off. Occasionally, I would make eye contact with my grandfather, who looked pleased and happy. The ruse was working.

Maybe better than I even intended.

As the night wore on, I had trouble keeping my hands off her. Occasionally, I would pull her in for a kiss and she would melt in my arms. It was hard to let her go and focus on the others, but when we would break our embrace we would be met by knowing glances and people nudging each other. I ignored them, but part of me felt good about it. I wanted them to think I was going to take her home and that we would find ourselves twisted up in each other's bodies. Perhaps the more they thought it, the more it would manifest itself in the universe.

One could only hope.

I kept the drinks to a minimum, partially because it was the etiquette-proper thing to do, but also because I wanted to stay sober. I wanted to take all this party in, with the

way she looked and acted and made me feel, and never forget a second of it.

When we finally made our way out of the dining room, Courtney remarking on the structure of the rooms or pieces that had been carefully curated as we went, I was happy to get out of there. The room had been getting hotter and hotter, and I wasn't sure if it was the temperature or my need for her. It was more than I could handle and I felt the adrenaline pumping through me as I guided her upstairs and across to the suite set up for us.

It had been my father's suite for years, though I wasn't sure he ever stayed there. The design had remained exactly the same since my grandfather originally designed it to be a place to house important guests. When he made the addition on the bottom floor that added a massive guest suite, the upper floor one became a place that my father referred to as his.

Now it was mine.

Mine and Courtney's, that was.

I opened the ornate white door, inlaid with gold design and revealed a set of rooms that was just as unfamiliar to me as it was to her. A living area flowed into a small office, a door propped open but capable of being shut. To the side of that was a massive bedroom with its door open as well. A huge bed had been turned down recently, and two roses lay on white sheets. That was a touch from the maids.

Courtney spent a few moments gawking at the room and then told me she would join me in the living area in a bit after a shower. I nodded and watched her disappear into the bathroom and waited to hear the water running. I meant to go relax on the couch, maybe turn on the television that I was almost certain never got used, but the urge for her was too great. On impulse, I made my way back to the bathroom.

I creaked the door open slowly, trying to keep my breath low as I saw her shadow behind the curtains, the smell of lavender and mint filling the room. Quickly, I took off my clothes and tossed them aside in the bedroom before making my way to the shower. I opened the curtain and she flinched as she saw me, then relaxed. A smile crossed her lips and I was eager to kiss it.

“I thought I would join you,” I said as I climbed into the hot water coursing from the three faucets. I made my way to her and embraced her, pushing her body against the wall and bringing my lips close to hers. “I can stop if you want me to. But I thought you might want to explore your sexuality a little bit more.”

Rather than speak, she wrapped her leg around my hip, and her hand dipped low to stroke my hardened cock. I crushed my lips into hers and found her quite receptive to continuing.

Chapter Twenty-One

Courtney

His lips dipped to the curve of my neck and spent time exploring every inch of me. I had wanted him all night and was thrilled to see him join me in the shower, and now, my back against the wall of the shower, water coming down from three directions, I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the overwhelming, luxurious pleasure.

Bryan’s tongue flicked on my collarbone, and began to slide down my wet, dripping chest. The soap had already disappeared, but water cascaded down my breasts and they shined, reflecting the light. He took a nipple into his lips and I groaned as his tongue caressed it slowly. One hand slid down my stomach and slid through the small tuft of hair to find my clit.

I cried out as his middle finger swirled over my sensitive pearl and then slid further

toward my opening. I lifted my leg, resting it on the massive tub's rim, and filled my hand with his hair. Bryan moved down my chest to my stomach, his tongue flicking against my skin as his finger hovered over the entrance of my aching pussy. I arched my hips toward him, begging him to enter me and he did.

My body took in a sharp breath as he entered me, his finger brushing against the upper wall as his tongue found my clit. He swirled the tip of his tongue over it while his finger penetrated me, and I looked down to watch him. His free hand was on his cock, stroking himself as he licked me and I bucked on his lips. He encouraged the hood to open and I felt the oncoming rush of a powerful orgasm begin to build.

His finger dove deep in me and he began to press my pearl with his tongue, sending a sensation over my body like I had been washed over with hot wax. I couldn't contain it any longer and my hips rocked as I came. I shook violently, pulling at the back of his head so he stayed where he was, his magic tongue on my clit and his finger jammed deep inside me.

When my leg stopped shaking, he stood, pressing kisses up my stomach and to my chest. I kept my foot on the edge of the tub and as he reached my lips his cock brushed through my folds. He was so hard and thick, and I tried to prepare myself for him. He grasped the base of his staff with one hand and the other spread my lower lips. Angling his hips forward to press the head to my hole, I held my breath and put one hand behind his neck, the other grasping at the walls of the shower.

He slammed into me, the angle of his cock slamming upward and filling me with a new sensation of pain and pleasure. I cried out as he filled me, stretching me and forcing me to make room for him. His hands reached around me to grasp my ass and he lifted me, pressing me against the wall. It was dangerous and slippery and it only added to the moment as he held me aloft against the wall and fucked me.

Our lips crushed into each other and our tongues twisted together as he slammed into

me and the sound of his balls slapping against me mixed with the sound of the pouring water from the shower. It was intense and powerful and I lost myself in the moment, my only thoughts carnal and needful.

After a few moments, he lowered me again and stepped back. Water rushed down his hard body and I dropped to my knees in front of him. I took him deep into my mouth and held him there, slipping him as deep down my throat as I dared. I cradled his balls with my hand and massaged them as I bobbed back and forth, eliciting a groan of appreciation from above me. I wanted to bring him the pleasure he had brought me, and I stroked him with my hand, clasped just in front of my lips.

I released him after a few moments, holding his shaft near the head as I ran my tongue up and down the ridges, my eyes locked on the look of intense pleasure on his face as he watched me. I could feel he was getting close, and I was willing to take him there, to let him spill his essence in me, on me as I worshipped his cock.

But he reached down and pulled me up by my arms and I let my tongue linger on him until I was beyond it. I loved the taste of him, and wanted more, but he had other ideas. He turned me around, and my hands splayed on the wall as he pulled my hips toward him. One hand filled with my hair and pulled, gentle enough to only hurt a little, but the pain made things more intense.

His cock slammed into me from behind and I cried out. The head brushed against my upper wall and a sound moaned out of me that I had never heard myself make before. He fucked me hard, his grip tightening for a while on me and making me disappear into the sensation, wave after wave of climax washing over me in rapid fashion.

I lost track of time, of space, of anything. The only thing that existed was his body pleasuring mine. He pulled onto me and I stood, my breasts pressed against the wall of the shower. His thrusts were more intense, more needing than before and I turned my head to meet his lips. His tongue slid into my mouth and wrestled with mine as he

continued to slam into me, hands holding my hips in place as his cock split me in two.

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“Oh Bryan,” I mumbled. “Don’t stop.”

His thrusts increased in speed and he pounded into me harder. Suddenly, he stepped away and I turned, expecting him to come. Instead, he pressed his lips into me again, and picked up one leg around the thigh, his cock hovering at my opening.

“I want to see you,” he slurred. “I want to look in your eyes while I come.”

I nodded, my knees feeling weak as his grumbling, commanding voice spoke directly to my body. I couldn’t deny him if I had wanted to. Thankfully, I did. I wanted to with everything in me.

I wrapped the leg around him as he slid deep inside me again. My breasts brushed against his hardened chest as he slammed into me with long, slow thrusts. Our eyes burned into each other as he increased his speed. I could feel myself about to climax again, but I wanted him to experience it too. I wanted to hold off so we could do it together.

His cock was throbbing in my aching pussy and my voice rose in high-pitched yips with each thrust. Slowly, his voice joined mine, a low grumble at first and then rising, both in pitch and volume as the intensity overwhelmed him. Our eyes stayed locked on each other as I felt my body quiver, my toes curl.

“Come for me,” I cried. “Come with me.”

His head threw back and his eyes clenched shut as his body stood still after one last massive thrust. He exploded inside me and I fell tumbling over into the most

powerful orgasm of my life. I screamed out a shout of carnal joy and reveled in the sensation of my body emptying him. Slowly, we crumpled into the floor of the shower together, spent and satisfied, letting the water cascade down our hitching chests.

A while later, I was draped next to Bryan in his massive bed, reveling in the new experience.

I could definitely get used to lying in Bryan's arms. It felt comfortable and peaceful, like the rest of the world didn't exist for that bit of time when it was just us in the humming afterglow. We lay there in silence for a while, just enjoying the feeling, my head rested on his chest and his arm around me.

I was just starting to drift off to sleep when his chest rumbled as he spoke.

“Hmmm?” I asked.

“A baker,” he said. “I've always dreamed of being a baker.”

I lifted my head and turned it so I rested my chin on my arm folded across his chest and looked at him.

“What?” I asked.

“The first time we were going around taking pictures and you told me that you're in law school because you want to be a lawyer, you said I've never wanted anything. That I didn't know what it was like to have dreams. That's not true. I've always dreamed of being a baker. It might sound ridiculous, but I started watching baking shows years ago and wanted to learn, so I secretly started learning. I really enjoy it and if I could choose what I could do for my career, that would be it.”

“You want to be a baker?” I asked.

He nodded, staring up at the ceiling. “I want to decorate cakes and make amazing pastries and breads. I want a bakery where people can come pick something up for breakfast or lunch, or get a treat. I would love for somebody to order their birthday cake or wedding cake from me.”

The revelation stunned me. I stared at him for a beat, processing what he told me and the vulnerability he was showing.

“Why don't you do it?” I asked.

He shook his head. “It's just a stupid dream.”

I lifted my head up and moved up closer to his face. “No, it's not. It's fantastic.”

Now he looked at me and I could see a swirl of emotion in his eyes. “My family would never go for it. My future was set for me, and that's just the way it is.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bryan

I woke up the next morning to Courtney stretching in the sheets beside me. It made her skin stroke against mine and it took everything in me not to scoop her into my arms and greet the day with another romp.

She smiled at me when I turned to the side to look at her.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning. How did you sleep?”

“So well,” she said, leaning over to give me a quick kiss.

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“I’m glad. I was worried all the ghosts in the big scary house would keep you awake,” I said.

Courtney gave me a playful whack on my bare stomach and glared at me. I laughed and reached over to pull her into my arms. She kissed me but wriggled away before I could turn it into anything else.

“I would love a shower,” she said. I gave her a look and she laughed, shaking her head. “An actual shower.”

“Our shower from last night was a lot more fun than that,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll need a reminder sometime soon,” she said with a devilish little glint in her eyes.

As she climbed out of bed and scurried naked across the room toward the bathroom, I couldn’t help but think I was creating a monster. And I was loving every single second of it. If I had my way, I was going to keep right on feeding that monster and seeing what would come of it.

I drifted in and out of sleep while she was in the shower, but I was on the phone to the kitchen when she came out of the bathroom wearing one of the robes that were put there in preparation for our arrival. As she dried her hair with a towel, she gave me a questioning look.

“Mushroom and onion quiche sounds delicious. Bacon and sausage on the side. Croissants. Any fruit you have around would be nice. And plenty of coffee, please,” I

said.

I hung up and Courtney went to the dresser where she'd put her clothes.

“That sounded like the most awkward telemarketer conversation I've ever heard,” she said. “Were you doing some sort of breakfast survey?”

I laughed. “Not exactly. Well, kind of, actually. I called down to the kitchen to have Grandfather's cook send up breakfast for us.”

She immediately looked unhappy with the idea. “No. You shouldn't have done that. I don't want them thinking I'm here to push them around.”

“You aren't pushing them around. First, I'm the one who made the call, not you. So if they were to think anybody was pushing them around, it would be me. But the staff wouldn't think that because this is their job. Maybe you've forgotten what that's like,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “Hilarious. I would point out that this technically is work, but that might hurt your feelings. So, I won't. But, seriously. Isn't it weird for us to have breakfast delivered up to us? We're not in a hotel with room service.”

“No, we're not. But we are in a very well-managed estate with staff members in that kitchen who have been here since my father was a little boy. They're used to taking care of my grandfather and whoever happens to be in the house with him at any given time. Trust me, this isn't us asking them to go out of their way. I know better than to ask Penny for anything she didn't already have cooking or what would be easy for her to make.

Besides, having the kitchen deliver our breakfast will make this morning a lot easier.”

“Why?” Courtney asked.

“If we were to go downstairs for breakfast, that would mean having to get dressed, hair, makeup, the whole thing. Be meticulously presentable and then deal with the awkwardness of a whole group of people who are going to be staring at us and thinking about last night,” I said.

She cringed a little and nodded. “Have them deliver breakfast.”

I laughed. “It's on its way.”

She finished dressing and I decided it was probably time for me to put some clothes on as well. I reluctantly got out of bed and put on the most comfortable outfit I could get away with without just putting on a pair of pajamas.

The food arrived a few moments after I finished dressing and I stepped aside to let the staff bring in the trays and plates on a rolling cart. Courtney looked impressed, but also thanked them profusely. I brought the food out onto the balcony and we settled in to eat. She took a bite of the quiche first and let out a little groan.

“That is so incredible,” she said. “I've never had a quiche that good before.”

“Penny knows what she's doing,” I said, sipping the rich, robust coffee before ripping off a piece of croissant and eating it.

“I have an idea,” Courtney said.

“Oh?”

She nodded. “It popped into my mind while I was in the shower.”

“I think I like it already,” I said.

“That area of the new hotel. The one that's supposed to be the boutique but you don't want it to be,” she said.

“Yeah. What about it?”

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“You should turn it into a bakery. Your bakery. You can make the special treats and things you dream of making, but for the hotel guests. And you can be right there, available for special orders for people who are staying there. And even people who aren't,” she said.

Courtney sounded so excited by the idea she was tripping over herself to talk about it. I could understand why. It sounded amazing. But I wouldn't let myself think about it any further.

“That can't happen,” I said sharply, shooting the idea down firmly so she wouldn't push it more.

“Why?” she asked, apparently not caring about the tone in my voice.

“Because it's not an option. Not in my life. We're not going to talk about it anymore. That dream was something I told you about in private and nothing more. You understand?” I asked.

Courtney looked a little taken aback, but she finally nodded.

“Alright,” she said. “It was just a thought.”

We ate in silence for a few seconds and I felt an awkward tension starting to form between us. I wanted to push past it and I searched around in my mind for something else for us to talk about. She brought up the dream I told her about, so I decided to detour over to hers.

“Tell me about law school,” I said.

She scoffed. “So you can make fun of me?”

“No. I really want to know about it,” I said.

Courtney looked at me for a few seconds, evaluating me like she was trying to determine if I was actually being serious. Finally, she gave a slight shrug.

“Alright. What do you want to know?” she asked, picking up a piece of bacon and nibbling on the end.

“What are your professors like?” I asked.

“Well, right now I'm only taking a couple of classes and they are with the same professor,” she said. “That's good, though. I like him.”

That struck me in a way I didn't expect. I took a sip of fresh orange juice, giving myself a second to process it through, but it didn't settle.

“You like him?” I asked.

“Yeah. He's a good teacher.”

“What's he like?”

She shrugged again. “He's just a kind of quirky guy. He's really helpful, good at taking the time to answer questions and have meetings.”

“Meetings? Like away from the rest of class?”

She gave me a quizzical look. “Yeah.”

“It sounds like maybe this professor likes you a little too much,” I said.

Courtney gave a short laugh. “That's ridiculous. He's just my professor. Like you said about the kitchen staff, it's his job to help me. He just wants to make sure everybody in his class does the best they can. So, he takes the time out of his schedule to help. And I fully intend to take advantage of it as much as I need to in order to get the grades I want.

As a matter of fact, I have to leave work a little early on Monday to go to a meeting with him to discuss a project.”

“I don't think that's going to be possible,” I said, feeling defensive and protective.

Courtney looked up at me from her food and gave me a surprised look.

“What do you mean you don't think it's going to be possible?” she asked. “You seemed supportive of me going to school and going after my dream of being a lawyer.”

“I am. But that doesn't mean you can just not be at work. You still have a job that needs to be done.”

Courtney looked shocked. “I didn't say I just wasn't going to come to work at all. I just needed to leave a little early so I could make it to this meeting. I'm working on a major project and I need insight to make sure I'm on the right track.”

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“I think you're probably doing just fine,” I said. “If you want to be a lawyer, you're going to have to be more confident in yourself.”

“Asking a professor for help on a project isn't about not being confident in myself. It's about wanting to do well and get my career started,” she argued. “I can't believe you're reacting like this.”

“Reacting like what?” I asked. “I'm just saying maybe this professor is encouraging you to come to him for all this help because he has some other motives, and you should stand on your own two feet and thrive on your own.”

Courtney stood up from the table and started toward the doors leading inside. She whipped around to face me.

“I'm here to help you. I want to remind you of that. This little game of yours wasn't part of the deal. And I really don't appreciate feeling like you are trying to control me the way you seem to be able to control other people,” she said.

She continued inside and I stood to follow her. “We still have another day here.”

Courtney turned around again. “I know. I made a commitment to help you and I'm going to. But right now I just need some time to myself.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bryan

As Monday morning dawned, I felt the jealousy reaching uncontrollable levels. The way she spoke about this professor, defending him and the way he acted toward her, drove me insane. How could she not see he was using his position to get something out of her? Just so he could notch his belt or then turn around and ruin her reputation.

What bothered me more, though, was the thought that she liked the attention. That she liked this older man paying attention to her. That she was interested in him.

Just letting that thought batter around in my brain was enough to make me absolutely crazy. I knew she had her meeting with him and she had mentioned where his office was. That meant I could go there and give him a piece of my mind. Let him know that his game was transparent to me, and that if he kept it up with Courtney, he'd be dealing with a lot worse than reprimands from the school.

I drove to the office in a fog. I was swerving in and out of traffic, cutting off other people and generally being a dick. Normally, I hated people who drove like that, but there I was flying down the road well over the speed limit. I gripped the steering wheel tightly as I pulled into the parking lot and slammed on the brakes in the spot closest to the building.

Slamming the door probably only alerted the people in the building someone was coming, but it felt good. I needed to try and stay as calm as possible when I got in there, or else I would just launch at him.

I found the door with the Professor's name on it and swung it open. Sure enough, he was standing all together too close to Courtney, a leering grin on his face.

"Hey," I called out. "Get the fuck away from her!"

"Bryan?" Courtney called out, but my eyes were focused on the man in front of her, his surprised expression only fueling my anger. Didn't he expect that one day this

would happen?

“Who the hell are you?” he asked, seeming to gain his bearings again. I slammed the door behind me.

“A big fucking problem is who I am,” I said.

“Bryan, stop. This is ridiculous,” Courtney said.

“What is going on?” the professor said.

“You, and how you act with your students. Especially this one,” I said. “You are being inappropriate, and you know it. Everyone knows it. And I won’t stand for it.”

“Excuse me?” the man said, his brows furrowing and an indignant look crossing his face. “Just who the hell do you think you are?”

“The man who is putting a stop to this,” I said, stepping closer. He puffed out his chest and something clicked. I didn’t have the time or the patience to deal with an argument. Not when white-hot rage was flowing through my veins.

I hit him, hard, with a closed fist to the jaw.

It was a simple right cross but it did the job and he went sprawling across his desk, papers flying everywhere.

“Bryan!” Courtney screamed. “Get out! Get out!”

I turned around to face her, the anger still pounding through my heart so hard I could feel it through my chest.

“Let’s go,” I grumbled.

“No!” she cried. “You get out. This is insane! Go, now!”

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“What?” I said, shocked. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously, go. Now.”

She was furious, her bottom lip trembling and tears stinging the corners of her eyes.

Frustrated, angry and coming down from the high adrenaline rush of smashing that bastard in the jaw, I turned to her before leaving.

“I’m sure he will forgive you if you put out,” I said, then turned, slammed the door behind me and headed to my car.

I didn’t even process driving back to the hotel. I knew I did it because I suddenly woke up from the drive in my parking space, my knuckles white from gripping the steering wheel so tightly. I took a deep breath and decided that I just wanted to head in, go find an empty room and sit there for awhile. Let the adrenaline run out of me. Then I’d get a cup of coffee and get back to work.

I headed inside, made my way to one of the rooms and shut the door, locking it. The master key I had let me in anywhere, and the smaller rooms were all ready to go, unlike a handful of the Presidential suites. I crashed into the bed and dozed for a good bit before finally coming to. I had turned off my phone and it was by absolute luck that I woke up in time for work.

Grabbing my phone and sticking it in my pocket without turning it on, I headed down to my office on the bottom floor. I hadn’t bothered to do much with that office yet, which is one of the reasons I didn’t head straight there in the first place. The other

being I didn't want anyone knowing I was there, and therefore wouldn't be bothered.

Leaving a note for the staff to go fix the room I had been in, I left the front desk, went into my office and headed to the bathroom to change. I was mostly ready when I heard someone shouting outside the office door and then the door swung open. The offices were a short hallway of rooms with a waiting area outside. It was primarily for the hotel manager, myself and the head of housekeeping to have a place to organize and work without interruption. Unfortunately, the small nature of the offices meant I didn't have anyone to stop Courtney from storming in other than a very beleaguered and stressed-out event planner, who trailed her.

I held up my hand as they looked around the small waiting area and turned my attention to Courtney. She didn't bother shutting the door behind her as she crossed over to me, one finger wagging as she yelled.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" she said.

"I-," I began.

"You got me kicked out, you idiot!" she yelled. I tried to recall the last time someone called me an idiot and I couldn't. For some reason, it didn't make me angry, but made me feel small. Hurt, even.

"What?" I asked.

"They kicked me out because of what you did," she said, her teeth gritted. Her makeup was smeared from tears that had clearly been flowing.

"Why would they do that?" I asked.

"Because I was involved, don't you see?" she demanded. "They have a zero-tolerance

policy about violence or participating in violence. He called security when you were leaving, and that meant a report got made. He said he won't press charges, but who gives a shit now? Now that I am kicked out!"

"That professor deserved to get hit," I said. "He's a leering, manipulative abuser and he was taking advantage of you. I was just protecting you."

"I don't need you protecting me," she yelled, enunciating every syllable. "I don't need you caping up and coming to my rescue like I'm some damsel in distress. I can take care of myself just fine and it isn't your place to protect me. We aren't engaged. It's fake. You need to remember that. I wish I had never agreed to say we were."

Without giving me a chance to respond she stomped out. I walked to the doorway of my office to watch her as she slammed the door behind her. I was devastated, angry and confused.

But it got worse.

One of the doors opened, the one for the office of the hotel manager, and not only was he there, but so was my grandfather. He looked at me sternly and I immediately knew he had heard every word. He left before I could even think of something to say and I turned, kicking a chair all the way against a wall.

My protectiveness for Courtney was so powerful, so pure, it could only mean one thing. I knew that. But I had never felt that before, not for anyone. The complex slate of emotions all battling for my attention made me want to bellow with rage, and I swept everything off my desk and onto the floor in anger.

I needed to figure out what was going to happen next. And I needed to do it in a damn hurry. The gala was a couple of nights away, and everything had gone wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Courtney

I thought having a night away from Bryan and getting some sleep would help me to calm down. Maybe it would take the edge off the situation and I would be able to handle it with a touch more grace. Not that it would change anything. I was still going to quit. There was no way I was going to continue working for that man. Not when he pulled the shit he did at the school.

But maybe I'd be able to get through disentangling myself from Bryan Callahan without completely erupting again.

When I couldn't make myself settle down enough to sleep, I devoted my energy to drafting my resignation letter. The first several drafts were a bit more laden with profanity than seemed appropriate considering this was, at its core, still a professional position and anything that ended up on Bryan's desk might show up in front of future employers. After a few attempts I was able to pare the letter down to just the basics, all editorialization removed, and printed it out, signing it with a hint of flourish before I could change my mind and start sprinkling in the choice vocabulary again.

That was one obstacle down, but I still had to actually get the letter to Bryan and tell him I no longer worked for him. I was coaching myself not to show my emotion or give him the satisfaction of working me up as I walked toward his office the next morning. I was going to handle this with calm, maturity, and control, then move on with my life.

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Bryan looked up at me from behind his desk when I walked in. I couldn't really interpret the emotion on his face. Which might have been because there didn't seem to be any. He looked at me like it was any other day and I was coming in to give him notes.

And he still looked gorgeous and infuriatingly sexy, and I hated him a little bit more for it each passing second. Drawing in a breath and squaring my shoulders, I crossed the office and set the letter on his desk in front of him. Bryan glanced at it, then looked back at me.

“What's that?” he asked.

“My formal letter of resignation. I quit. Effective immediately,” I said.

He picked up the letter, gave it a cursory look, then tossed it back down and shook his head.

“No, you don't,” he said.

He looked back down at the work in front of him and I stared at him, open-mouthed, stunned by his reaction.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“You don't quit,” he said simply.

“You don't get to decide that,” I said. “I wrote that letter and I came here this morning

to tell you I'm not working for you anymore. What you did was reprehensible. There was no excuse for it and nothing you say is going to change that. I'm not going to work for someone who would behave that way. Not to mention you got me kicked out of school, the whole reason I came to this city in the first place and the only reason I was working for you at all.”

“I absolutely can decide that,” Bryan argued, standing up and facing me. “You made an agreement with me and you are going to live up to it. I need you there for the fundraising event. That is your job.”

I was confused and a bit dumbstruck. This wasn't how I saw the morning unfolding. I didn't think it was going to go totally smoothly. As much as I hoped he would just accept it and let me walk out before my emotion got involved, I knew the chances of that were next to nothing.

But I expected him to be angry with me. Maybe even be mad that I quit because he wanted to have the pleasure of firing me. After all, I did blurt everything out right in front of his grandfather. I didn't know how that worked out or what happened after I walked away, but I couldn't imagine it went smoothly.

Instead, Bryan was acting like everything was still right on track. We were going to do the event, he was going to impress the board, and all would be good with the world.

“After what happened, I don't think it would be a good idea for us to keep going,” I said.

“And I do. Considering I'm the one who hired you, it's my decision. And before you put too much effort into arguing any further, I not only wrote the contract you signed, but had it reviewed by three attorneys. But you're not just going to do it because you signed papers. You're going to because you're an ethical person and you gave your

word. We'll get through this event and you'll get your bonus at the end of it," he said.

There was literally nothing I could say. I did sign papers. I could probably have made a stink and dragged him to court over it, but that was just going to be a whole lot of hassle and expense to get myself out of an agreement I never should have made in the first place. I really didn't relish the idea of the first time the court staff saw me being when I was attempting to extricate myself from a few layers of fraud and some not illegal but definitely shady dealings.

I would get through this and get my bonus, then figure out what was to come.

"Fine," I said. "But we need to keep our distance until then."

"Courtney, listen. What happened the other day was unfortunate. The way you were talking about your professor convinced me he was looking at your relationship in a way you weren't. I didn't like it and I was trying to protect you. I didn't mean for it to turn out the way it did," he said.

It was one of his non-apology apologies and I didn't have the patience to listen to the rest of it. I held up a hand.

"That's enough. I really should be getting my day started. Is there any specific work you need me to do?" I asked.

Bryan shook his head and sat back down. "No."

"Fine. I'll be in my office."

I started out of the office, but he called me back. I turned around to face him and saw him holding my letter out to me.

“You'll need this.”

Letting out a sigh, I snatched the paper from his hand and stormed to my office, slamming the door behind me. For the rest of the day, I focused on putting the final finishing touches on the gala and waiting for the day to just be over.

After work, I went home and flopped down on the couch, feeling somehow exhausted and wired at the same time. I wanted to just go to sleep, but the thoughts coursing through my head wouldn't let me relax. Finally, I called Vanessa.

“Are you up for a girls' night?” I asked.

“On a school night?” she asked with a gasp like she was scandalized by the idea. “I'm in. Be there in a bit. Order a pizza in twenty minutes.”

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She had the timing of these nights down to a science. I ordered the pizza when she told me to and by the time she got to my place, duffel bag in hand, and changed into her pajamas, it arrived. We sat on the floor of the living room, the box open between us, and each pulled up cheese-heavy slices.

“I just can't believe he would do something like that,” I said, biting into my piece.

“Why?” Vanessa asked with a hint of a laugh. “It sounds right on par with what you've told me about him. This is a man who's used to controlling the people around him and getting treated like a god. You don't give into his bullshit and he laps it up. But that also means he's protective of you. You've brought out all the primal elements of him.”

“You say that like I should be flattered he stormed into my school, punched out my professor, and ended my career before it even got started,” I said.

“Alright,” she said. “Let's come at this from a different angle. How do you feel about him?”

“I'm furious with him. I hate what he did and can't believe my entire life just got thrown off because of his temper tantrum,” I said.

“That didn't answer my question,” Vanessa said. “I didn't ask how you felt about the situation. I asked how you feel about him.”

I knew what she was getting at and I wanted to deny it, but I couldn't. There was no point in even trying. The answer was so clear. The amount of pain I was feeling only

proved it.

“I love him,” I said. “I guess that's obvious by now. But he hurt me so much. I can't trust him. I can't overlook what he did.”

“And you shouldn't. You don't need to overlook it. But maybe you need to look at it from his perspective. He was doing something he thought was right. He was defending you. You talk about how he only thinks about himself. That wasn't what he was doing. He was doing that for you,” she said.

I thought about that for a second, then shook my head. “No. I don't believe that. He was just being manipulative and controlling like he always is with anyone who crosses his path. That's not something I can deal with in a relationship. I can't even pretend to be with someone like that.”

I said it with as much confidence and determination as I could, hoping to convince Vanessa. But when we went to bed, I was still thinking about him. I missed him and I hated myself for it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Bryan

The gala was going to be beginning soon but I only had one thing on my mind. Courtney. I needed to find her and tell her what I had done. Show her. Maybe then she would understand and we could put all this behind us.

As the doors opened and most of the staff began to filter in, preparing for the big evening, I kept my eyes peeled for her. I knew she would be there, floating around somewhere, keeping an eye on things from some hidden corner. Not that she fit well in the shadows. Anyone who saw her noticed her. She was gorgeous.

I found her just as things were getting ready, tucked away in the center of the massive ballroom, near curtains that she had picked out. Royal purple and gold around the edges. It looked masterful, much like her, in a purple dress to match. She had chosen her outfit to match the room, and was using it to blend in. Once guests got inside, I wasn't sure if she would even be visible.

Before I could get to her she noticed me and tried to walk away. I cut her off and she sighed heavily, rolling her eyes. I was prepared to cut her off again, but she just stared at me.

"What?" she asked.

"I need to talk to you," I said.

"There is a lot more to do before things get underway. The guests will be in soon. Like, soon, soon. I only have a few minutes to make sure everything is in place," she said.

"Fine," I said. "I get it. But once everything is going well, I will find you and we can go somewhere to talk."

"If we have to," she said, shrugging. "A lot is riding on this event, you know. It has to be perfect."

"I know, it will only take a few minutes," I said.

"A few minutes?" she asked, her eyebrow arching and her voice dropping an octave. I didn't know if it was sarcasm or criticism.

"Yes, just a few minutes," I said. "Then you can get back to the gala with me and we can finish this thing off."

I winced at my own words. They had a sense of finality to them, as if I was speaking of our relationship. She nodded and walked away, and I thought at least they seemed to be words she took as reasonable. The nod meant she would at least let me talk. That's all I needed. To talk and to show her what I had done.

I got into the swing of things after that, my mind racing the entire time as to how it was going to go with her. I didn't even care about the event, and maybe that was for the best. The pressure valve was off for me. I was free to be easygoing and dynamic with them, all while flittering between guests as they arrived. My mind was free from stressing about who they were and what the event meant, which let me just be charming.

It worked. Charity donations were rolling in. Check after check was either written or promised with a handshake, and I took each one to the table by the DJ, writing them down and dropping off the checks in a safe container Courtney had designed. I was feeling pretty good about the whole situation, and as the room started to fill, I kept my eyes on Courtney.

I wanted to get to her as soon as I could, and as I glad-handed one executive of some business after another, my eyes would flicker over to her, watching as she prowled the edges of the room. Her sharp eyes were taking in everything, and I could nearly see her taking notes in her head. As angry as she was with me, she was doing a marvelous job with the gala. What notes she had would most certainly be used for the next event.

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If there was one. Which I was convinced there would be, as soon as she saw what I wanted to show her. I was excited, and sure above all else, that it would fix everything. We would go right back to where we were, or even better, to where we pretended to be. I just had to get her alone and take her there.

Finally, the guests had all filtered in and the music began. It was the appropriate time to slip away since everyone else was preoccupied with one thing or another. I made my way across the room to where Courtney was standing by the platter of finger food set out. As I approached, she saw me and jumped a little, a crumb of a cracker falling off her lip. It was cute and I smiled, but she didn't return the expression.

"Hey, could I talk to you now?" I asked.

"I guess," she said. "Where do you want to go? The offices?"

"No, I have something I want to show you," I said, holding out my hand. Reluctantly, she took it and I guided her out of the door to the giant courtyard outside.

"We need to be outside?" she asked.

"No, it's just easier and quicker to get there by going out and cutting across the courtyard. Come on," I said.

"I am wearing heels, Bryan," she said.

"Then we stay on the paved areas," I said.

“They are cobblestone, Bryan,” she said, exasperated. She sighed heavily again and reached down, unhooking her clasp on her heels and taking them off, holding them in front of her. “This had better be good,” she said.

“It is,” I said. “I promise.”

She followed me across the courtyard and into the back door on the other wing of the building, near the front desk. I was so excited I thought I was going to burst, and when I opened the door, I held it so she could walk through ahead of me.

Dead in front of the doors was the entrance to the bakery. It was angled so that the entrance to it could be seen from both the front and back doors of the hotel, and it took up much of what had been the restaurant in that space. Instead, I had converted that into a small quick-service area with sandwiches and coffee, making the bakery something magnificent.

It was still under construction, and there were tarps all along the inside, blocking off walls and areas where they were still working. Brown paper covered the large windows and the main door, but I ran over to open it anyway. I reached inside and flicked on the lights so it bounced off the pink and white checkerboard tile floors.

I was grinning from ear to ear when I turned to look at her, expecting to see her smile as well as she walked inside. Instead, she stood several feet away, an unimpressed expression on her face as she looked up at the sign above the door and then around at all the papered windows.

“This is it?” she asked. “This is what you wanted to talk to me about?”

I looked back at the bakery, sure that I was missing something, then back at her. My smile faltered and my arms, which had been holding the door and then crossed at my chest as I bowed a little to let her in, went limp.

“What do you mean, is this it? Of course, it is,” I said.

“Well, it’s nice,” she said, and I perked up a little. Nice wasn’t glowing, but maybe she had a bunch of ideas on how it should look. “It’s nice that one of us will get their dream.”

The words hit me like a lead hammer to my heart. My hands dropped to my sides and the door slowly closed. I expected anger to bubble up in my chest, but it didn’t. Only massive, heartbreaking disappointment.

“I thought,” I started, but she shook her head and I stopped.

“I have a lot left to do at the event,” she said. “I know my way, thank you.”

With that, she turned and went back out of the door we came in, heading across the courtyard barefoot. I stood there stunned. I really thought she would be happy and understand what this meant. But she didn’t.

That meant there had to be something more I needed to do. Locking the bakery shut, I stood for a moment in the darkness and then followed after her. I had to think of something, and I had to do it quick.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Courtney

My heart was broken. There was no other way to describe what I was feeling in those moments as I struggled to not show the pain on my face as I returned to the gala. My chest ached and the backs of my eyes stung with tears. It was a crushing feeling, a deeper hurt than I could have imagined.

I wished I could just leave. I didn't want to be there anymore. I didn't want to be around these people and I definitely didn't want to be around Bryan anymore. I didn't even want to see him.

In all honesty, I wished I had never seen him to begin with. If I could just change a decision, a single moment, anything that would stop me from being here, I would do it. If I hadn't gone to the coffee shop that morning, I wouldn't have encountered him for the first time.

And if that hadn't happened, I would have gotten to the office building earlier, which would have meant I wouldn't have ended up closing the doors in his face. I would have gotten upstairs earlier and I would have been brought in for my interview rather than being mistaken for the woman who actually got the job. Or maybe it could have gone the other way.

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Maybe I could have gotten to the coffee shop just a few seconds later. I could have ignored him and not cared about the pastry. I could have stopped and considered something else to have for breakfast. It would have gotten him to the office first and I would have gotten there as the right woman was ushered into his office.

Either way, I wouldn't have ended up here, in this position. It would be so much for the better.

I thought he was going to apologize. When he said he wanted to talk to me, I thought he was going to open up, to tell me he was sorry, or how he felt, or something. Anything. Instead, it was all about him. As usual. It was just proof I'd done the right thing by ending everything between us. Proof that it would have been better if this had never started at all.

Only, I didn't fully believe that. I was right to walk away, but my heart was still clinging to the moments I had with him. He awakened me to so much it was hard for me to really regret having anything to do with him. Even if it was excruciating.

I managed to stretch a fake smile across my face and go back into the gala looking breezy and confident. Sweeping through the space, I did my best to mimic being happy and to seem like I was having a wonderful time. As I moved through the event, I also stayed vigilant, watching out for Bryan to show back up. I was doing my absolute best to avoid him and to get through the rest of the night without having to interact with him at all.

If I could choose, I would not have to say a single word to him ever again that didn't involve him handing over my bonus and accepting my resignation.

Pretending everything was fantastic was exhausting, and after a while, I had to step to the side and take a break with a drink. Vanessa came beside me, holding her own drink like she thought we needed the cover.

“How are you doing?” she asked.

“How does it look like I'm doing?” I asked.

“Well, if I was anybody else, I would say you look like you are in complete control and having a great time,” she said. “As your best friend I know that probably means you are right on the brink of falling apart.”

“Your observation skills never disappoint,” I said.

“I thought I saw Bryan and you walk away together,” she said.

“You did,” I said. “And I thought he wanted to apologize to me. I thought this was going to be the moment when he finally confessed his feelings and said he was sorry for everything. I was a complete idiot.”

“You aren't an idiot,” she said. “And you are strong. You can do this. You've been through worse and you can do this.”

“I don't know if I've been through worse,” I said. “I don't even remember my divorce being this bad. I'm trying, but I really don't know if I can do this.”

“You can,” she reassured me. “But if you can't, you don't have to. You can leave. And I will make a statement and leave with you.”

Hearing her say that told me I really couldn't just walk away. I had to put on my big girl panties, suck it up, and fulfill my commitment.

“No,” I said. “I put this event together and I’m going to see it through.”

“Alright,” she said. “If that’s how you feel, now would be the time to brace yourself.”

“What?” I asked, confused. “Why?”

She nodded toward the stage and my heart thudded in my chest when I saw Bryan climb up on the stage. He strode toward the microphone, clearly preparing to make his speech. It was something we talked about during the planning of the event. He would let the party go on for a while, let everybody get sufficiently impressed, then he would make a speech presenting himself as the fearless, highly qualified leader of the company and encouraging everyone to give generously to the fundraiser.

It was supposed to be his crowning moment of the entire event. Before everything, I’d been looking forward to seeing him take the stage and have that moment, to prove himself and shake the control of his grandfather.

Now I just felt sick.

There was nothing I could do to escape. If I tried to leave now, it would be obvious. The attention was on the stage, everybody still and watching intently. Me leaving would cause a stir and everybody would notice. I had no choice but to just stand there and hear it out. I downed my drink, took Vanessa’s out of her hand, and drank it as well.

It started out pretty much as we had planned and he practiced. I could almost mouth the sentences along with him as he embarked on the task of whipping everybody up into a generous, benevolent mood and encouraging them to give. Then, the speech veered.

“I’ve heard very kind comments tonight about the event. Many of you have expressed

how impressed you are with the changes and how much you are enjoying a change of pace compared to other years of the event. Everyone thinks I put this together and that I'm the one who pulled it off because as the new head of the company, it was my responsibility to throw this event.

But I'm here to tell you it wasn't me. I'm not the one who did any of this.”

“What is he doing?” Vanessa whispered.

I shook my head, staring at the stage.

“I have no idea,” I said.

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“There's someone who has been working diligently to make this happen. This is all her vision. She's the one who told me things needed to change and I should try something different. The one who came up with an idea and developed it into something this breathtaking. All of the credit should go to her. Courtney Reynolds.”

I gasped, feeling my heart jump.

“Oh, my...” Vanessa started behind me, but everything else she might have said was lost. I was drawn into Bryan and what he was saying.

Around me, the party erupted in applause. Bryan and I met eyes and he held mine with an unwavering, unapologetic stare.

“But she is so much more than just an event planner. Courtney is the most incredible woman I have ever met. She came into my life like a storm and she has changed everything. Including my belief that love isn't real. Many of you might have heard that she and I were recently preparing to marry. Unfortunately for me, I made a huge mistake and it cost me our engagement.

But I hope I can get it back. It's because of Courtney that I followed my dreams and now she is my dream as well. I can't imagine life without her and I hope with everything I have in me that she feels the same way. Courtney, I love you. I'm sorry I haven't always shown it and that I've put other things before you. If you let me, I will never do that again.”

Bryan got down off the stage and walked toward me. The crowd split in front of him, creating a path that led him right to me. I could barely breathe. I was vaguely aware

of Vanessa stepping away from me as Bryan got closer. When he was within a couple of steps of me, he got down on one knee.

“The way I did this the first time wasn't right. It wasn't us. So, I'm going to try again. Courtney, will you marry me?”

I was ecstatic and overwhelmed. It was a message he and I understood and it meant everything. I nodded before I could get the words to come.

“Yes,” I finally said. “Yes, I will marry you.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Courtney

I could hardly believe what was happening. I'd heard the proposal. I'd answered it. But it still felt like a dream. At any second, I was going to wake up and I didn't want to. I would sleep forever if it meant I could keep enjoying this moment with Bryan.

His face lit up. “Yes?”

Hearing his voice made me realize I hadn't imagined it. He really had asked me to marry him, and I really had accepted. I nodded, grinning until my cheeks hurt.

“Yes,” I repeated.

Bryan jumped to his feet and wrapped his arms around me, scooping me up against him and spinning around. I couldn't help but laugh. He had literally swept me off my feet.

When he set me back down, our mouths met in a passionate kiss. I'd never felt such

happiness in my life.

It took several seconds for me to realize everybody around us was cheering and applauding. I buried my head in Bryan's chest and laughed, but he tucked a finger under my chin to lift my face and kiss me again. Taking my hand, he turned me around to face the crowd of people at the gala.

"My future wife," he said, gesturing toward me.

The applause got louder, and I felt tears sliding down my cheeks. Toward the back of the room, Vanessa screamed and cheered louder than everyone around her. She jumped up and down, clapping. I knew she was happy for me, but I couldn't help but think she was also happy for herself and all the wedding preparations and festivities coming up. She was going to love every single second of it.

He pulled me toward him and wrapped his arms tightly around me, leaning down to bury his face in the curve of my neck. I giggled, embracing him in return.

"I love you," he murmured.

"I love you, too," I said.

He held me for a few more seconds, then let out a sigh.

"Everybody's watching, aren't they?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, nodding.

"So, I guess we can't just slip away."

"Not right now," I said. "This is kind of your event."

He sighed again and straightened up, interlocking our fingers between us.

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“So, we’re going to have to keep up appearances for a little bit?”

He was speaking low enough that only I could hear him, but I knew there were a couple hundred people watching intently and wondering what was coming next.

“Just a little bit,” I reassured him. “A couple of laps around the room.”

“Maybe a dance or two?” he asked.

I smiled. “I wouldn’t turn that down.”

On the way to the dance floor, we accepted congratulations and well-wishes. I felt like I said “thank you” more in that few moments than I had in the last few months. But I meant every one of them. By the time we got under the lights and Bryan spun me into his arms, I was breathless and felt flushed. We danced for a few seconds before he eased me slightly away from him to look at me.

“Are you mad I didn’t come completely clean?” he asked. “That I didn’t tell everybody the full truth?”

I shook my head. “No. What you said was true and I don’t care what people think. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is us. Well, and your grandfather. I haven’t seen him.”

Bryan glanced around. “He left right after I proposed.”

A flicker of worry moved through me, but Bryan didn’t push it. He slid me closer and

we kept dancing. We danced through a few songs until we noticed people didn't seem to be paying as much attention to us. We looked at each other and without saying a single word, started moving toward the exit. We slipped out of the room and when we knew no one was watching, we hurried down the hallway.

We barely made it into the elevator before we were on each other. Our lips pressed into each other as he pushed me against the wall. His hand flung over to the buttons and pressed the one for the top floor. I knew that it wasn't completely finished up there, but I figured he knew what he was doing.

His body smothered me against the mirrored walls of the elevator and I reached down to unzip his pants. His hard, rigid cock was bursting at the seams of his pants to escape and I pulled it out through the hole in the pants to stroke him. We both instinctively looked up, into the mirrors above us to see the reflection of his cock in my hand.

"There aren't cameras in here, are there?" I asked.

"Yes, but they aren't on yet," he said.

"Good," I said, sliding down to my knees.

I took him into my mouth as he continued to watch me in the reflection. My tongue swirled along the head, gathering up the sweet, sticky fluid there and swirling it around him along with my saliva. I reached into his pants and pulled out his balls, massaging them with one hand while I sucked him with the other. His groans above me were pushing me to be even more daring, and I slid one hand over to the straps of my dress and pushed it off my shoulder. I repeated with the other side and let it drop down until my breasts spilled out of it.

"Oh, yes," he groaned, and I grinned as I pulled him from my mouth and stroked him.

I looked up into our reflection and for the first time I felt sexy and empowered by how I looked. I had him in my hands and he would do anything for me in that moment. But all I wanted was to give him the same pleasure I knew he would give me.

The elevator dinged as it reached the top floor and he pulled away from me to glance out of the doors. I stood up and followed him as we walked out into the wide but short hallway. There were only two rooms on this floor, one on either side, and he guided me to the one on the right.

“The other one isn’t ready yet,” he said. “But this one is.”

He used his key and opened the door to the most opulent hotel room I had ever seen. Covered in red velvet and gold, it was a suite unlike anything I had ever seen. As we walked in, I was unzipping my dress from the back and I let it fall and pool at my feet as I turned to him in the center of the room.

Bryan was undoing his tie, letting it hang loose as he yanked on the end of it. Then he unhooked the buttons of his shirt, one by one, while keeping his eyes burning onto my body. He was worshipping me with his gaze and I felt so sexy in it. As he removed each article of clothing, he sat them down beside him, taking his time. There was no rush to get to me. He wanted me to want him as much as he clearly wanted me.

Soon, he was standing in front of me, completely naked. His rock-hard cock was ready for me, and I giggled as he picked me up and carried me across the room to the door of the bedroom. He kicked it open and carried me to the bed, all while our lips pressed into each other and my legs wrapped around his hips.

He sat me down gently on the bed and crawled up onto it with me. Parting my legs, he dove down, his tongue sweeping across my thighs and causing me to shout in

surprise and erotic tension. He trailed along my body until he reached my full lips, tracing them and making me quiver as I lay on the silk sheets of the massive bed. I was dying for his touch to reach my clit, but he took his time, brushing through my folds languidly.

I was moaning, deeply. I kept raising my head to watch him and then falling back to concentrate on the sensation. Suddenly, his tongue was inside me and I gasped. My thighs squeezed his ears as he brushed back up to my clit, licking and swirling his tongue until the hood opened. His fingers dove deep inside me, sliding across the top wall and making me arch my ass off the bed. He held me from underneath with one strong, massive hand while the other penetrated me. I lost control instantly and came, an orgasm riddling my body with pleasure and my legs quivering and shaking as I collapsed back onto the bed.

He sat up, pulling himself toward my core with tiny steps on his knees. I salivated at the sight of his gloriously hard cock, knowing the pleasure it would bring me. I angled my hips up again and he grabbed them, pulling me toward him and slamming into me.

My eyes shut as I cried out. He was so deep inside me I thought I might split. The cry from deep in my chest was one mixed with tight pain and intense pleasure, rolled together. He held himself there, my pussy pulsing and stretching to create room for him. When I finally lowered myself back down, my breathing returning to some semblance of normalcy, he began to rock.

Each thrust brought new pleasure to my body and I lost track of time as we embraced. What must have been hours went by as we pleasured each other in every way imaginable, my body submitting to each position he placed me in. Sweat rolled down my back, between my breasts and on my neck. He licked it away as he held me on top of him. His hips were raised, thrusting up into me as my eyes rolled into the back of my head.

One hand was clasped on my ass, the other crossing over my back to hold my shoulder, pulling me down deeper over him. With each increasingly frantic thrust, I felt waves of climax wash over me. Suddenly, he went lock still and the most incredible, earth-shattering orgasm took over my body. We came together, his cock emptying into me as he roared from deep in his belly. I joined him with a scream, my hands clenching into his muscular chest, digging into the skin as I let the sensation overwhelm me.

When he was spent and empty, I tumbled down on top of him, enjoying the flinching muscle spasms of his cock still deep inside me. We kissed and eventually I rolled over, resting my head on his chest and tracing my fingers along the ridges of his muscles. We spent some time there, happily resting in the glow of the most satisfying sexual experience of my life.

“So, we’re going to do this for real?” I asked.

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“If you will have me,” he said.

“Does it mean we get to do this all the time?” I asked.

“As much as you want,” he said, laughing.

“Does it also mean I get to keep my job?” I joked, which got a deep laugh from him.

“You can keep it until I can find a replacement,” he said. “I wonder if the woman that was originally supposed to be my assistant to begin with is still available?”

We both laughed and I nuzzled his neck. He kissed my head and we dozed together in the darkness, happily curled up into each other’s naked bodies.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Bryan

I arrived at the office on Monday morning a few minutes behind when I usually got there. Technically I was still early, but I was so used to getting there early enough that I could go to the gym that going later than that felt weird. Still, getting there before clock-in time was impressive as it was considering my workout had been done before I left the bed. I wasn’t exactly itching to leave it either.

All my good mood and excitement drained out of me when I opened the door to my office and saw my grandfather sitting in one of the plush leather chairs in front of the desk. He sat cross-legged, facing away from me toward my long oak desk, but I could

tell it was him even though his face was obscured by the chair. He always sat the same way when he was waiting, which was rare. It was the sitting stance of a man who felt personally attacked by being made to spend time waiting on another.

I was incredibly unexcited to see him. I hadn't laid eyes on him since Courtney stomped out of the offices at the new hotel and I saw that he heard her. I could only imagine how he was going to react to the spectacle that was the event itself. Bringing attention to oneself the way I did was something I knew he abhorred, and I was preparing myself to receive a long, drawn-out lecture about how I had sullied the family reputation by making our lives so public.

Not to mention what he would say about the revelation he had heard.

He was going to fire me. I knew that much. No matter what the lecture was going to sound like, at the end of it, I would be fired. It only made me less enthused to hear what he wanted to say because it would just waste my time before he got to the end.

I took a deep breath and realized I didn't really care. It hit me hard, but it was true. I didn't care if he fired me anymore. As long as I had Courtney, I would figure it all out. We would figure it out. Together.

With a new sense of confidence, I marched across the room and took my seat at the desk. There was no point addressing his presence. He would speak first. He always did. I would sit, make eye contact and the lecture would begin.

But as I reached the desk, he moved. It was unlike him. Usually when he was preparing to give someone the rundown on how terrible they were, he stayed impossibly still. Like a statue, he would perch where he was and calmly, viciously eviscerate a man until there was nothing left of his pride. But as I sat down, he had not only uncrossed his legs, but he had scooted to the edge of his chair, leaning forward with his hands clasped in his lap.

I looked up and made eye contact with him and was shocked not to see the simmering anger looking back at me, but a genuine, genial smile. It surprised me so much that I suddenly felt out of sorts, like someone was playing a trick on me. I instinctively looked around to see if there were assassins or cameras waiting around behind the curtains.

“Hello, Bryan,” he said. “I need to speak with you before I get going for the rest of the day.”

“I figured,” I said, still concerned as to where this was all going. “Is this about the event?”

He nodded and I settled back in my seat. Maybe he was just extremely happy to finally tell me off.

“When I was twenty-nine, I was the youngest CEO in our industry. I know you know that because it is in every press release and biography we do. But did you also know that I was single at that time?”

“What?” I asked. “You and grandma were together since high school. It also says that on every pamphlet we send out.”

“It does,” he said. “It’s also a bald-faced lie. Thankfully there aren’t many around who remember, but the truth is your grandmother wanted nothing to do with me.”

I was in stunned silence. No one had ever told me this before, and my mind was racing.

“Clara was a wonderful woman, Bryan. Smart. Beautiful. Empathetic. It was true we met when we were in high school, and we dated, but it was never serious. Not that I didn’t try,” he said, wagging a finger, his eyes misting over as he dove into his

memories. “But, she often told me I wasn’t ready. I was still too wild, too undependable. She made me want to be a better man.

Then, when I started this work, I thought it would convince her I had changed. We hadn’t seen each other in three years, or spoken in two, when I reached out to her six weeks into this job. I hated it. I hated the work, I hated the lifestyle, I hated the loneliness. That was what killed me. The loneliness. I would work all day and come home to an empty mansion.”

“So, when did she come back?” I asked, now fascinated.

“I called on her and she didn’t respond immediately. It took another month before she wrote me back. She said she wanted to know if I had grown up,” he said, laughing. “I wrote her back telling her that I had. That I didn’t want to carouse or party or any of that anymore. That I wanted a partner. And the only person I could imagine being with was her. That she was in my thoughts every morning I woke up alone.

She came to visit me the next week and she never left. We were married three months later. Not a month after we were married, our business boomed. I was convinced it was because I had finally found my own peace. My own balance.”

“So that’s why you wanted me to get married so bad,” I said.

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He nodded. "I likely wouldn't have pushed so hard had it not been for your father," he said. "You are aware that their relationship was tumultuous to be kind."

I nodded, thinking back to my early childhood when Mom was still alive. "Yes, I remember. They had separated before she passed."

"And your father tried to reconcile," grandfather said. "But it was too late. He had done enough damage by then. You were the saving grace of that relationship, as far as I was concerned. Your father was a screw-up, and I was constantly on top of him, fixing his mistakes. He never grew up, Bryan. He never ceded to the one truth. That people are made to go together. We are not meant to be alone on this Earth. And that the bond between partners, it is essential, and fleeting. It is so delicate, and if it leaves you, you are forever scarred."

I was scarred deeply when your grandmother passed. Your father was scarred deeply when your mother left him and then passed. What I did not want for you was for you to make the same mistake."

"Then why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

"Because it is a great shame," he said. "I have lived my entire life being the stern authoritarian. It is how this company runs." He paused for a second and shrugged. "Ran. How it ran. Not anymore." He leaned forward more on his seat, his eyes intense as they bored into mine. "I ran this company based on the scars of my past. Your father did the same. You must break that cycle, Bryan. I was immeasurably upset when I heard her say your engagement wasn't real, but after what I heard about what you did, the spectacle you made of yourself to win her back, I know our

business is in good hands. You are a good man, who handled yourself with integrity. She is a good woman, and you are extraordinarily lucky to have her.” He stood, straightening his jacket and holding out his hand. I stood and took it, shaking. “Don’t screw it up, son,” he said. “This company is yours now. With it and Courtney at your side, you have the world in your palm. Good luck.”

My grandfather’s words resonated in me as he walked away, getting on the elevator and heading down. I didn’t know where he was going, and truthfully, I didn’t think he did either. But it seemed like, for once, he had let go. And he was damn happy about it.

As soon as he was gone, I ran to Courtney. She was in her own office, going through something on her laptop and jumped up when she saw me, a smile on her face and an expression that only made me love her more. I scooped her up and planted a deep kiss on her before she could say anything.

“What was that all about?” she asked as we parted lips.

“I want to start planning for the wedding. For real. Right now,” I said.

“What?” she said, surprise, confusion and excitement mixing on her face as she processed what I was saying.

“I don’t want a long engagement. Let’s see what we can think up. I am sure you have a few ideas in your back pocket. Tell me,” I said.

“I love you,” she said, clearly thrilled, tears forming in the corners of her eyes as her lips stretched into a wide grin.

“I love you too,” I said. “So, got anything?”

“You bet I do,” she said.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Courtney

Neither one of us wanted a long engagement and with Bryan's money and connections, it was easy to put together the wedding of my dreams in only a few months. I didn't think that was possible. Everything I'd ever heard about wedding planning emphasized that it took a year or more to actually plan a wedding unless you wanted something small and simple.

And it was absolutely no surprise that Bryan wasn't in the market for anything small and simple.

He and Vanessa got along very well in that regard. Throughout the planning process, the only disappointment I faced was actually on the part of my best friend. She wanted more of the pomp and circumstance, more of the shopping trips and tastings. Everything was too fast and smooth for her. She told me a dozen times her best friend was only going to get married once and she wanted to be able to have fun with the planning and the buildup.

After the last time he heard her say it, over a final menu tasting for the reception, Bryan promised her we would have repeat weddings every few years and she could always be a part of the planning. That seemed to assuage her and Vanessa settled into nibbling through all the options and voicing her opinions.

I knew she was going to hold him to that. And there wasn't a doubt in my mind Bryan would live up to it. He might not say it, but he was enjoying the planning as much as we were. He always had an opinion to share and wanted to make sure everything was exactly perfect. It felt like there were a thousand little decisions to be made and things

to do, but they were all falling into place.

And then suddenly, it was there.

Even though the engagement was short, I was so excited to be Bryan's wife it felt like the wedding day was never going to come. The last time I could remember being so excited and looking forward to something so much was Christmas morning when I was a little girl.

When the day finally arrived, all the emotions hit me. I was bubbling over with excitement, but was also nervous. More than anything, I was completely amazed that life turned out this way for me. I never would have expected anything like this. When I made the decision to move and get my fresh start, the idea that I could fall in love and get married in less than a year was not even close to what I had in mind.

I thought that life was behind me. That maybe I wasn't designed to have a partner. I thought I'd resigned myself to that and was okay with not having that type of future for myself. I could immerse myself in my career and find meaning and purpose in helping other people through law.

And then Bryan. That was what kept rolling through my mind when I thought of how much life had changed. That one mix-up, the one moment when I made an impulsive decision I thought was just a means to an end, was what gave me the life I could never have imagined, but that turned out to be what I'd always wanted.

Vanessa and I spent the morning in the bridal suite of the hotel just enjoying being together. Champagne and treats kept arriving at the door and we indulged in them as we reminisced about our friendship and everything we'd been through all these years.

The morning seemed to go by fast and suddenly the makeup artists and hairstylists arrived to get us ready. I had never felt so beautiful and special as I did when I was

sitting there getting pampered.

That is, not until I walked down the aisle.

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Early in the wedding planning, I made the decision to make that walk alone. I wasn't a young, blushing bride being handed over to my husband in pure innocence, not knowing what to expect of adult life. As different and singular as this wedding was, I couldn't completely put aside that it wasn't my first. And I was a grown adult woman with a life behind me. I felt I'd earned the right to walk myself down the aisle and give myself, completely and fully, to Bryan.

We gazed into each other's eyes as we listened to the words of the beautiful, emotional ceremony. I had never been the type to like self-written vows. It felt so much more real and meaningful to speak sacred, treasured words so many couples had spoken before us, and I felt tears sliding softly down my cheeks as I repeated them to Bryan.

There would be a time for jokes and silliness. My gift to him was already waiting to be brought to the honeymoon suite. A custom-designed blanket, it proclaimed my own personal vow to him that I would always hold the elevator doors open for him. But right now was a moment to seal our souls to one another and I was more than ready.

It was a long, difficult journey, but now that I finally found him, I wasn't going to let Bryan go.

When the ceremony was over, we went to get pictures taken, then changed into our reception clothes. The same space where we hosted the fundraising gala and got engaged had been transformed into a massive, joyous celebration that had been personalized to the very last detail. I wanted no doubt this party was for us.

Our guests were milling around enjoying cocktails and appetizers when we were introduced and walked into the reception to cheers and sparkling confetti falling from the ceiling. It was the first time I heard my name linked with his that way and I could have listened to it said a thousand more times.

Bryan swept me around the edge of the dance floor, then spun me into his arms in the center. He held me in his arms, bathed in the glow of a monogram light cast on the floor, and we danced. I was lost in that moment, wanting to stretch it on for the rest of my life. Nothing could ever be as perfect as this.

When our first dance was over, we headed into the crowd to greet our guests as they settled in before dinner was served. Across the room I saw Robert and Tina. They both smiled broadly and waved. I crossed to them, opening my arms for hugs from both.

I was sure the interaction was going to get some judgmental or at least questioning looks from the people in the room who knew who Robert was. But I didn't care. That was for them to be uncomfortable about. I was happy to have him there.

In truth, I didn't know if it was really proper etiquette to invite my ex-husband and his wife to my wedding. It probably wasn't. There was likely some sort of social norm that said I should leave them out and just send an announcement. That didn't mean anything to me.

Tina and I were friends. We had been since we lived across the hall from each other before she even knew I was Robert's ex-wife and before I knew she was dating him. That whole situation was fairly awkward at the time, but it worked out better than any of us could have hoped. It brought the two of them together and it put the final closure on our marriage.

Most importantly, I credited Robert with proving to me that love could exist. Not

because of our relationship, but because of how desperately he loved Tina. They were so happy together and I wanted them to see me happy, too.

The party went on for hours, through several courses of dinner, dancing, and late-night snacks. Finally, it was time to cut the cake. Bryan designed it himself and had worked with his baking instructor to decorate it as a surprise for me. It was spectacularly gorgeous, more than I could have ever envisioned. The fact that he chose the flavors of that long-ago stolen pastry just made it all the better.

After the cake was cut and we made our final goodbyes, Bryan and I headed up to the wedding night suite to rest before our honeymoon started the next day. Holding hands, we walked slowly, talking about the future unfolding ahead of us. We were excited for everything to come, with me back in school and the bakery in the hotel opening soon.

But more than anything, we were excited just to discover what life could be together.

Epilogue One

Bryan

The honeymoon was everything I had planned it to be. Every step of the way I made sure to pamper Courtney and make her feel like she was an absolute queen. As far as I was concerned, she was.

I had originally thought she would want to go somewhere tropical, where the sands were white and the water pure blue. But instead, she had hinted that she had always wanted to stay in a cozy cabin in the mountains. So, for our honeymoon I had booked a trip for just that.

I didn't tell her where the private plane was taking us when we boarded and was

delighted when she started seeing snow-peaked mountains in the distance. She was nearly giddy with excitement and bounced in her seat when we began circling the mountain with its own personal helipad. At the top of the mountain was a series of cozy cottages, all separated by a mile or more of snow. It was technically a retreat, but there was no expectation for us to gather with the other locals if we didn't want to. I had no plan on us seeing anyone other than food delivery and the maids that would come and clean up while we went out.

The plane landed and we boarded the helicopter, covering ourselves in heavy coats that I had bought and hidden away. The smile on Courtney's face was so wide and so pure that even the cold didn't affect it. In fact, it seemed to make her sparkle.

I thought that when we arrived, we would spend time relaxing and exploring the cabin, but as soon as our bags were dropped, she was pulling me out of the door.

"I want to ski," she said. "Come on!"

I laughed as I followed her to the snowmobiles, which we took to the ski lodge a mile or two away. A long, fun day of skiing left us both exhausted and we made our way back to the cabins in the back of a heated carriage rather than taking the snowmobiles back. The driver assured us they would be parked back in front of our cabin within the hour. In the meantime, I ordered lunch for us to be delivered the next day and we rode in quiet happiness back.

When we finally got there, I felt a surge of energy and grabbed a fast shower while Courtney explored the kitchen. When I got out, we switched and I noticed she hadn't started anything, but had grabbed a bag of marshmallows and powdered cocoa. I looked in the small refrigerator and found milk and knew where she was going.

Courtney came back into the living room wearing the long, comfortable-looking robe that had been hanging on a hook in the linen closet. I had worn the other one briefly

before changing into thick pajamas. She looked incredibly sexy, even in a bathrobe, and as she curled up on the couch, I let my mind wander as I continued building the roaring fire in the massive fireplace.

“Milk is hot, I believe,” I said. “If you still wanted cocoa.”

“Oh, I do,” she said, reaching for the teapot and opening the top as she sat it on the living room table. I had placed the cocoa and marshmallows there, and she proceeded to add them to the milk and stir. The aroma was simultaneously decadent and nostalgic.

She poured me a cup and I took it, downing a fair bit of it as I continued to stoke the fire. She sat with her legs curled under her feet away on the couch, sipping her own. As a log popped and the fire jumped a little, I laughed.

“We are such a cliché,” I said. “It’s amazing.”

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“There’s nothing cliché about us,” she said. “Even if there was, I wouldn’t want to be cliché with anyone else but you.”

I smiled and reached for her. She put her cocoa on the table and slid off the couch, curling up with me on the floor in front of the fire. There was a large bearskin rug there, and it was warm from the heat of the flame. Slowly, we laid down, resting on the rug with the blanket over us and the fire crackling beside us.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you too,” she said and turned so she faced me. Our eyes locked for a short moment and then we kissed. It was sweet and full and loving.

Then, I parted her lips with my tongue, and the passion increased immediately. Like clockwork, our bodies responded to each other as they had since the first time, and as I was sure they would every time forever. We were meant for each other. Always.

Our tongues swirled languidly as we idly roamed our hands across each other’s bodies. The familiarity was there now, but it only enhanced the sensations of her touch on me, my touch to her. I knew where I could touch her to make her moan just this certain way, or squirm that certain way. Her body was like an instrument and I could make it sing in the most beautiful tones.

I pulled on the belt of the robe, unraveling it. It went loose and I slipped my hand inside, first cupping her breast and kneading into it and then sliding down to her ass and pulling her tight against me. She rolled with me and I lay on my back, my hard erection pressing against my pajamas into her core. She was hot and wet already, I

could feel it through the fabric, and she rocked over me, teasing me as the robe fell away from her shoulders.

The fire meant her skin flickered between light and darkness and the shadow of her breast was as enticing as dark chocolate. I sat up to take it into my lips and it tasted just as sweet. She moaned and I felt her reach down with one hand to unbutton the pants. There was only one button separating her body and mine, and rather than slip the pants off she didn't want to wait. She wanted me inside her as soon as possible. The feeling was mutual.

My cock sprung out and she seized it with her palm, stroking it and making me groan in pleasure. She rubbed it against her pussy, whetting it and soaking it in her fluids before she arched up to slide the head into her opening. As she sat down onto me, there was a hitching moment where she had to pause and let herself adjust to my thickness, my length. When she did, she sighed happily and began to rhythmically rock back and forth on top of me.

I laid back and watched, marveling at the creature before me. As she rode me, taking for herself the pleasure she wanted, I could not imagine a more perfect vision. Her breasts rose and fell softly with each thrust and her head lolled back with her eyes shut as she moaned. The sound filled my body with passion and a desire to ravage her. To show her just how incredible she was, how terribly, amazingly perfect she was at driving me mad with need.

After some time, I couldn't take it anymore and I rolled her to her back. I pulled out of her and she clamored for me, reaching for me and a sad, disappointed look crossing her face. I stood, removing the pants and she sat up, taking me into her mouth as soon as the pants were off me.

Lovingly, she stroked me into her lips, letting her tongue run the length of me and then taking me deep inside her throat. I cried out in ecstasy and again let myself have

the enormous pleasure of watching her satisfy me with her touch. She stroked me faster and I felt myself edging closer to release.

I pulled her away and pressed her into the ground, settling between her legs once more. She giggled as she opened her legs for me and I drove myself inside her, ending the giggling and replacing it with a deep moan. I began to thrust hard, fast, grabbing her hips with each hand and pulling her onto me as I penetrated deep inside her pussy.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I got faster and faster, the desperation for release growing stronger each time I buried my cock inside her. Her hands went to the sides, pulling at the rug and I knew she was near climax as well. It emboldened me to slam into her even harder. With each thrust our voices grew, filling the cabin with the sound of the newly married passion.

My fingers dug into her skin as I pulled her tight and my entire body went rigid as I came. I emptied into her, thrusting just a few more times as my body pulsed and unloaded my essence into her waiting core. She shook and squirmed as she came with me, and slowly we collapsed together, gasping for breath and finding it in each other's kiss.

Epilogue Two

Courtney

It's opening day for the bakery and it seemed like Bryan was equal parts excited and nervous. I tried to keep him distracted with little things while other people kept things moving smoothly. He was so worried about everything going perfectly that I knew he just needed to have the bakery open and get a few people in and out and he would calm down.

Just before the doors opened, Bryan took a stand in front of the doors, making a little speech to the employees and revving them up for what was sure to be a busy day. Then he disappeared to the back and came back out to me, bringing with him this gorgeous, tall, incredibly pretty cupcake dessert. It was shocking and endearing and I was thoroughly touched, especially when I noticed the little fondant figurines of himself and me.

I reached over to embrace him and then kissed him on the lips.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you too,” he said.

“And I am so very proud of you,” I said. “You worked so hard to make this happen.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Before the doors opened, a stream of orders went out to the rooms, pre-orders from guests staying on opening weekend and wanting to sample the bakery while they were at it. Guests were lined up outside and finally, Bryan unlocked the door and they streamed in. I tried to keep an eye on him as they came in, hoping he didn’t get too excited and overwhelmed, and just hoping he could hang on for that first rush.

Sure enough, about twenty minutes into the new bakery’s grand opening, and Bryan was not only shedding the nervous jitters, he was downright glowing. I had never seen him so absolutely in his own element as he was at that moment, whirling around the bakery talking with customers and friends who dropped by and at various times heading back into the kitchen to help the bakers back there catch up on orders.

I mostly stayed out of the way, preferring to help out at the registers if they needed it or to sit at one of the tiny booths in the corner when they didn’t. Years of doing

everything I could to make ends meet made it easy for me to hop on a register when needed and it only took a few moments of explanation from the other people there before I had the hang of how it worked.

I worked a surprising amount, as the bakery was packed with people all day. It was fun and exciting, even though I was regretting not being able to spend more time eating my special surprise dessert cupcake.

It wouldn't always be like this, I knew. Even if it was, Bryan wouldn't be able to spend all his time here anyway. He had a lot of other things to do as the head of the company, and while he loved baking and loved that he got to do all this, he had really embraced being the person his grandfather thought he could be. He was determined to bring his family's brand to even greater heights, and I loved listening to him explain how the bakery would help that happen to curious executives as they streamed into the bakery.

At one point, in the distance, I was sure I saw his grandfather himself. He was standing just outside the bakery, and someone who had been inside came up with a bag and the older man had picked a cupcake out of it, admiring it for a moment before shoving nearly half of it in his mouth. It was impressive, considering the cupcakes were already renowned for being on the larger side, but the old man took the bite and grinned happily before disappearing into the crowd.

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A little while later, one of the other executives came in and I recognized him as Joshua, a young executive that Bryan had been talking to a lot recently. He had been given the title of Executive in charge of Culinary Operations. Essentially, in Bryan's absences and stead, he would operate the bakery and any other restaurants and vendors that the chain owned.

He disappeared into the back with a polite wave and then when he came back out he was wearing a white apron and gloves, ready to pitch in and help out. It made me feel a lot better for Bryan that he had people in the company that he felt like he could trust and who were rewarding that trust with hard work. As if he were just another employee of the bakery, Joshua got right into the swing of things and I went into the back to find Bryan.

He was taking a break, sitting on an overturned bucket near the back door which stood open to a hallway that led to a private restroom and a fire escape. He grinned when he saw me and motioned me to an empty overturned bucket.

"You know, you can afford to put real chairs back here," I said.

"It's the spirit of the thing," he said. "In every restaurant and every bakery in the country is a couple buckets that people use to sit on. I am one with my brethren."

I laughed and he chuckled, wiping his forehead with a bandana and taking a sip of sweet tea.

"So, are things slowing down out there?" he asked.

“Just a little,” I said. “Plus, Joshua is out there now. I figured I could come back here for a little bit.”

“I’m glad you did,” he said, leaning in to kiss me. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” I said. It was true. Even though we were in the same building, yards apart, I had missed him. It was so wild to me how my view of the world had changed in just a few months. A few months ago, I didn’t miss anyone. Now I missed him even when I could see him.

“Well, when the shift is over, we are going up to the penthouse suite and firing up the hot tub,” he said.

“Oh, will we?” I teased.

“I think it’s the only proper response to a day like today,” he said. “I’ll need to come down from the stress of an opening day. Nothing better than a hot tub and a hotter woman.”

I giggled. “You are a silly boy,” I said.

“You like it,” he said. I nodded and leaned in for another kiss. “I love it.”

When the bakery finally closed its doors at five, leaving the remaining desserts in the restaurant for leftover orders, we headed to the elevator tired but happy. Once we got in, we looked around, realizing it was the same one we had sullied before the building was open and neither one of us could contain the giggles as other people boarded with us. We pushed ourselves into roughly the spot we had been exploring each other’s bodies in and waited until the elevator was empty a few floors from the penthouse before busting out in laughter.

The elevator brought us to the top floor, or what I had thought was the top floor. Then

he brought me to a little door I hadn't seen before and used a key code to get in. Inside was another, smaller elevator and it took us one more floor up. There was no hotel door to open here, no extra barrier. As soon as the elevator door opened, we were in the penthouse suite.

It was gorgeous and ornate and opulent. The windows were floor to ceiling and overlooked the city and an infinity pool rimmed the edges of the building, flowing down to the pool on the floor below us. It was the hot tub, tucked in the corner of the room with its own door just for it that we headed, shedding our clothes as we went.

I stripped down to nothing and dipped my toes into the hot water as I waited on Bryan who had turned around and headed back into the penthouse while I sat down. When I finally got my entire body in, I felt the tension release and I leaned my head on the back to relax.

Bryan returned moments later with a bucket that held two bottles of champagne. He handed me an empty glass and poured us both full glasses before he sat beside me, naked as well. I leaned my head into his shoulder as we clinked glasses and I took a long, deep sip of the sweet, bubbly champagne.

It crossed my mind that not only was my life very different from where it was a few months ago, it was more than any dream I ever even had for myself then. Life was so amazing now that if I had told my old self about it, she would have thought I was crazy. It couldn't be real.

Yet there I was, snuggled up with the man I loved, sipping cold champagne in a hot tub. Life was better than anything I ever could have thought, and I was so thankful for it.

The End