



# How to Deal

**Author:** *Shey Stahl*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** I loved my job. After meeting the owner's son, I hate it. He's making my life difficult, and I'm positive he only comes to work to annoy me. I contemplate quitting just because of him. That is until I realize who he really is. A famous wedding photographer whose clientele ranks among the rich and famous. Getting Elliott Warren to be your photographer comes with a price tag and it just so happens my best friend has been trying to book him for her wedding. The dilemma? He's so famous that asking him to take her wedding photos is like asking Michelangelo to paint your apartment. I can't let my best friend down. The deal? Go on a date with him and he'll take the photos. It's supposed to be a simple business transaction. Pfft. Impossible. Not when you're dealing with someone as devastatingly attractive as him. Just when I think I have it under control, he makes his next deal. And this time, I find it even harder to resist. He knows exactly how to deal.

**Authors Note:** A portion of *How to Deal* was previously released as a novella titled *Deal* in 2014. *How to Deal* is now a full length novel and includes brand new material to complete the ending of Tathan and Amalie.

**Total Pages (Source):** 87

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

“Listen to me. You chew up my shoes, and I will take your food. I will. And you so much as drool on my Christian Louboutin heels and I will make you sleep in the bathroom on the cold floor. How about that?”

I know I shouldn't be so mean, but the mere thought of Oliver touching those Louboutin heels makes my stomach sick. Physically nauseous. Those heels are mine! I saved for a year for those and the fact the little bastard feels the need to chew them makes me livid.

“What are you doing?” Casey asks, causing me to jump nearly out of my skin and drop the phone in my lap.

Picking up the phone, I turn to face her and slide my finger over the screen to end the call. “Leaving Oliver a message on my answering machine.”

Despite not offering her a seat, Casey sits in the chair beside my desk, crossing her right leg over her left. I don't care that she's invading my personal space—the only space I have in this small office I spend most of my time in—no, what I care about it that she's wearing my black knee-high boots she stole from me last week and paired them with my rag & bone jeans. If it wasn't for my wardrobe, I'm not sure Casey would have anything to wear to work.

Sadly, they look slightly better on her and not exactly what you would expect the manager of our payroll department to be wearing.

“How is he going to check the message?” she asks, her perfectly waxed and sculpted eyebrows knitting together.

“It plays as you’re leaving it. He hears it, trust me.”

Casey shakes her head as though she can’t believe I’ve resorted to leaving my puppy scolding messages to get him to behave. “So, about Saturday. . . are you coming with me this weekend?”

Crap. I’d almost forgotten about that stupid wedding expo. Almost meaning tried.

“Why do you need me there?”

“Because,” Casey whines, and I hate it when she whines. She sounds strangely similar to Oliver when he has to pee. “You promised you’d go and you’re the maid of honor. It’s kind of, you know, one of your duties.”

I know I promised, but the idea of spending my Saturday at a wedding expo isn’t exactly what I have planned for my weekend. Catching up on the shows I missed throughout the week, that’s in my plan. “I thought Zane was going with you?”

Casey sighs heavily. “He is, but I want you there too. You know Zane. I need someone to help me keep him under control. And I need to find a photographer and a dress. Imagine what Zane would make me choose if you weren’t there to rein him in.”

She has a valid point. Zane—our coworker and flamboyant gay friend—at a wedding expo will be like a kid in a toy store. We’d never get him to leave.

Much like the perfect black dress, every girl needs one amazing gay friend, and Zane Thomas is our BFF with a penis. Where Casey will hold back in fear of hurting my feelings, Zane tells me the way it is. He’s brutally honest with me, and I need that.

Damn it. She wore me down. “What time is it again? I have to work on Saturday.”

Letting out a squeal of delight, Casey claps her hands together. “It starts at ten, but we can be late. I’ll pick you up here at noon.”

Going to a wedding expo frustrates me because every weekend there’s something to do with this damn wedding. Since agreeing to be her maid of honor, it’s like I have to plan my damn life around Casey and her wedding. Which—if we’re being honest here—I understand. Sort of goes with the territory. She’s getting married, and it should be all about the bride. Casey and Bryan got engaged four months ago; it’s literally been the topic of conversation every day. Now here we are three weeks until the magical June seventh date, and this shit has gotten intense. Think cake samples, dress shopping, looking at every possible flower known to man, and everything else planning a wedding entails.

I should probably backtrack just a bit so you understand why I’d put my life on hold for someone. Casey McDaniel is my best friend in the whole world. No one has been there for me like she has. So in reality, I would most certainly be there for her this weekend and every other weekend for that matter. I’d take a bullet for this chick. I wouldn’t like it, but I’d totally do it for her.

With that said, I understood Casey’s desire to go to the wedding expo because she still hasn’t found a photographer or a dress which is completely unlike her. She’s been more than picky about every minuscule detail with this wedding and the importance of the photographer kind of makes or breaks the wedding. How else are you going to remember the day? And the dress, well, you get it, but still, the fact that she hasn’t found either is not what you’d expect from someone like her.

Getting in my face with that big grin I swear she reserves only for me, Casey kisses my cheek. “Meeting time.” She says this as if I should be thrilled about attending a meeting this early in the morning.

I’m not thrilled about anything before eight in the morning unless it has chocolate and

coffee in it.

Stealing a pen and notebook from my desk, Casey takes off down the hall to the meeting room.

Reaching for my notepad, I take a quick glance around my neatly organized desk and double check if anything needs my attention before I disappear into meeting hell for the next hour.

I used to love my job, and now I kind of hate it.

Every morning I stare at my computer and think to myself, who am I and how did I get here?

I think a lot of twenty-three-year-olds find themselves at similar crossroads, not knowing if this is the job they want to spend the next five years at. Hell, even spend the next five minutes, but when I sit at this desk, I think my shelf life is close to its expiration date. I'm an administrative assistant for a construction company called Madsen Construction.

The title seemed important when I applied for it, although I had no idea what an administrative assistant actually did. Casey and Zane—who worked here for the last two years—told me about it and hyped it up like it would be the best job ever.

For the most part, it's been good. I've been working here six months, and I get to work with my two best friends.

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Bonus, right?

Yep. I'd like to think so too. Nothing like working with friends. Do you sense my sarcasm there? No really, I do enjoy working with them.

The downside?

The boss man's son who sits across from me.

I'll get to him later. We're not there just yet.

Being an assistant has some downsides. You have to do everything and be willing to help everyone. Even employees who are not your boss. Maybe that's where I got confused on my actual job title, but apparently, that's what an administrative assistant does.

In reality—and from what I've come to understand—being an administrative assistant is a fancy title for “I'm your bitch and how do you like your fucking coffee?”

I make coffee runs for the office at least three times a day. Three. Who drinks that much coffee without getting an ulcer? Apparently, these assholes who have me as their indentured servant do.

Before taking this job, I thought I had a problem with coffee addiction, but surely my dependence on caffeine is nothing compared to these jerk offs. And the specialty creamers they request, it's like they think this is Starbucks. Sure, I can make you a triple espresso latte nonfat mochaccino. . . said no administrative assistant ever. What

I really want to say is shove that latte up your ass, fuckface.

I'm tempted to offer an IV to them. At least if I did that, my feet wouldn't hurt so badly, and I wouldn't be tempted to spit into every cup of coffee I make.

Now here I am, six months into said job and thinking there's gotta be better jobs out there for a college dropout.

But then again, I'm twenty-three with no idea what I want to do with myself past waking up each day. I leave messages on my answering machine to my dog for crying out loud.

Who does this?

All I know is making coffee for a bunch of lazy-ass construction company employees becomes less and less appealing with each passing week.

I wasn't always on this never-ending path of intensiveness. In high school, I graduated with honors and had a steady boyfriend. My life was going perfectly. We both went to the same college together and had plans to get married after we graduated. Or maybe that was just in my plans because I'm not sure he felt the same way after high school. We only made it a few months into college and I found him cheating on me with some chick. I've since sworn off men. Who needs the added drama and heartbreak?

Not this chick.

The same month my ex ripped my heart out, my dad got sick and eventually passed away. He was all I had left besides a few aunts and uncles, so you can imagine where that left me. Wondering who I was and what I was doing with my life. And let's not forget having a conversation with my dog over an answering machine.

I was like the crazy cat lady. Only I had a chocolate lab who shit and pissed everywhere and chewed my favorite heels.

After my dad passed away, I thought I would go back to school, but I still haven't found what some would call a semblance of a life.

Instead, I'm here, taking notes at a meeting and pretending to give a shit about city projects, council meetings, and building permits when in reality, I want to slap myself that I didn't do anything with my life after my dad passed.

## Page 3

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After an hour of sitting in a meeting where our budget manager preached to everyone about cutting marketing costs, Zane—remember my gay friend—calls me, laughing, “Hey, come over to my office.”

Zane is Madsen Construction’s computer programmer, and there’s a good chance this call is another instance where he’s installed spyware on someone’s computer and wants to show me their search history.

The shit people google is just bizarre, and often creepy. If someone comes up missing at this place, there are a few suspects I’ll be pointing my finger to when the police ask questions based on their browser search history is all I’m saying.

“Sorry, dude. I don’t have time for website creeping today.” As I set the receiver down, my eyes catch sight of a tall figure standing in front of me. Glancing up, I find a man standing in front of my desk.

He’s tall, handsome, with dark hair and gorgeous brown eyes, and he’s waiting for me to either acknowledge him, or say something. Only I can’t. My response seems frozen between my lips as I stare into his eyes. They remind me of gold wrapped in chocolate. Like a caramel-filled truffle and they are absolutely beautiful.

After what seems like hours—and in reality is only seconds—I find my words. “Can I help you, sir?”

Or you could help me out. Maybe bend me over my desk and tell me what a naughty girl I’ve been?

Clearly, it's been a while since I've had any action.

Cautiously, I eye the man, praying he can't read my mind. If he can, I'm totally screwed and will probably lose my job.

"I'm not sure if you can." Leaning against the partition to my cubicle that's right at leaning height, he smiles. His long fingers drum against the partition, and I admire his hands. He has nice manly hands. "Are you my new administrative assistant?"

Well, shit.

Remember when I said I hadn't met my boss yet?

Nope? Well, I haven't. My bad, must have left that important detail out. Up until now, I hadn't actually met my boss, only talked to him on the phone. He's been out of the country working in Japan. And wouldn't you know it, here the man is, right in front of me looking like something out of aGQmagazine orMuscle and Fitness.

"Paul Madsen?" I ask in a voice that's more of a timid whisper.

How the fuck was I going to work with him as a boss? Look at him. He's beautiful. No way he's my boss. I know. I'll buy contacts in the wrong prescription so my vision is impaired, and it'll make him look like a shitty version of Chris Hemsworth.

Excellent idea.

Mentally, I make myself a note to call my optometrist to see if he would help my sorry ass out. Surely someone has thought of this before. This can't be a new request.

Standing, I reach my hand out to him. "I'm Amalie Davis," I manage to say after he stares at me as if something is mentally haywire with me. I can't blame him at for

looking at me like this. I was just thinking of obtaining new contacts to impair my vision. Kind of screams crazy, doesn't it?

“Well.” Paul smiles softly, tipping his head casually. “Zane didn't tell me you were so pretty, sweetie.”

Aw, that's sweet.

“Zane likes men, so my beauty wouldn't be at the forefront of his mind, but thank you.”

Speak of the devil, Zane comes around the corner, upset I hung up on him. “Hey, get your ass in my office. I wasn't joking. You need to—”

His words fall short when Paul turns toward Zane, amused, and raises an eyebrow. “She needs to do what?”

Zane has no social civility at all, and I sense he feels comfortable around Paul with what he says next. “She just needs to get her ass in there.”

Paul doesn't seem fazed by his rudeness at all. If anything, he seems entertained by it.

I'm not sure what provokes me to do what I do next. I'm really not. “Zane!” I fling my tape dispenser right at his head, smacking him in the cheek.

Zane's hand rubs the bull's-eye I'd just made out of his face, glaring in my direction. “Was that necessary?”

“Yes.”

Paul chuckles and twists toward the door, but then glances back over his shoulder.

“Welcome to Madsen Construction—” He pauses, smirking. “Amalie.”

This is where my nicely shaded creamy complexion turns a color similar to puce. A color that clashes with every item of clothing I’m wearing. It’s like a neon sign pointing in my direction letting everyone know, “Hey, I just made a complete ass of myself and am secretly crushing on my boss!”

“I hate you,” I whisper to Zane when I immediately sit back down, trying to calm every nerve in my body down after meeting Mr. Hottie McHot Madsen.

That certainly didn’t go anything like I planned, or hoped.

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As Zane walks away, the worst part of my job peeks his head from behind his computer.

Mr. Madsen might have had the makings to be a great boss, but when he departs behind the closed door of his office, I'm reminded of who shares that man's DNA.

"Are you blushing?"

I refuse to make eye contact and refuse to answer Tathan, Paul's son. And here I thought making coffee for the office was the most annoying part of my job. Wrong. Tathan is.

"Hmmm," he says as though he's considering something. I can see the grin even though my vision is intently focused on my computer screen.

It's the very reason why I despise my job lately, the part that makes me sure I just might end up in the insane asylum.

Tathan McSlut Madsen. McSlut is clearly not his middle name, but it should be.

I'll save you the trouble of getting to know him. Just listen. He's the biggest motherfucking slut alive, and he sits right in front of me. My computer faces Tathan's.

It sucks. No really, it's absolutely awful. There's nothing worse than having to stare at the person you despise for eight hours a day. It's the worst kind of punishment.

Moments after our small interaction where he teases me, and I ignore him, he's back to sweet talking the receptionist. I've named this one Sweet Cheeks because she's obsessively sucking on a lollipop, which I'm sure is causing Tathan to squirm.

I name all the girls pining after him with names indicative of their behaviors and looks because I apparently have nothing better to do with my time. Sure, he's hot—that's a lie—he's fucking delicious. But I'm not going there. I refuse to go there.

I'm at a self-induced standstill with my love life, and because of that, I won't allow myself to contemplate a relationship with Tathan or anyone, because I have more dignity than these girls who basically throw themselves at him.

My focus turns back to Tathan when I hear his laughter. It draws me in every damn time. As much as I don't like him, everything he does and says lures me in.

At the fading sound of his laughter floating through the office, Sweet Cheeks staggers off with weak knees to the rest of his Crush Brigade to discuss in-depth how good he is in bed. I listen to every word, who wouldn't? I'm bizarrely drawn to this because really, I sit in a goddamn cubicle all day and have no life outside of this office, so this is my entertainment.

Silently, I live vicariously through Sweet Cheeks, but I know I'll never be that type of girl—life or no life. I'd rather be alone than be the next step in the revolving door that's Tathan Madsen.

Trying to ignore him, I'm working—that's a lie—I'm looking on Urban Dictionary for new slang terms to call Tathan. No new words have posted since yesterday, so I stick with manwhore; it's original and suits him just fine.

Paul emerges from his office an hour later and hands me a set of floor plans that need

to be delivered to the fourth floor. Why he can't take them and his Armani suit up there himself is beyond me, but I do it anyway because he smiles at me and, well, it's actually my job to do these things.

It's sad. I feel like a slave who will never be free from the ties that bind me to this place and this job. And when I think about it, everyone usually has someone they answer to, even when you own the company, you answer to your clients. We're all slaves in some way or another.

Swinging around in my chair, I stand and reach for the plans tucking them under my arm. On my way out the door, I accidentally drop them near Tathan's desk. It seems as though he has some kind of magnetic pull on me. He manipulates the laws of gravity and I drop shit when I'm near him.

Refusing to look at him, I attempt to bend over without showing any cleavage but in a pencil skirt, it's nearly impossible to bend and pick something off the floor. With great effort, I succeed only to have Tathan clear his throat.

My eyes snap to his like a laser beam.

Go ahead, say something, asshole.

"Hey, Amalie, while you're down there can—" Tathan begins but is cut off when I take the plans and knock him upside the head with them, quickly shutting him down.

"Fuck off!" I whisper, straightening my posture and smoothing out the wrinkles in my blouse.

This is our relationship. He provokes me. I react. Usually with violence.

On my way to the elevators, I pass by Tathan's harem of women. I hear fragments of

their encounters with him, and I'm curious. Not because they now all have Chlamydia, but because I haven't been laid in a really long time and the juicy details they give about said manwhore are pretty hot.

To be exact, I haven't had any in six months, and for good sex, it's longer than that. Sex-deprived, I live for these details. The last time I had good sex was about eight months ago, and the details are fading fast. Sadly. One Halloween party, a bottle of gin, and a cat woman costume will do that to you.

On another note, going without sex for this long can do some alarming things to you. For me, I say some fairly inappropriate things at times and confuse words. When they say her mind's always in the gutter, it's a true statement for me.

Take yesterday for example. I asked Tathan for a box of paperclips, but instead, I asked him for a box of paper cocks.

Tathan's immediate mouth drop, then grin had me fumbling to correct my obvious faux pas.

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Not exactly my finest moment there.

Much to my surprise, he laughed at me and began unbuttoning his pants, prepared to give me a full-blown cock, not the paper kind apparently.

I'm losing my mind. Honest to God, losing my fucking mind with Tathan around me.

Every time I look at him, I picture him naked and more importantly, menaked with him. I can't stop either, and I want to because he's a manwhore and has Chlamydia.

Of course, I don't know this for sure, but I'm pretty sure. Like 96.9 percent positive.

At least I hope he does because it's my reasoning for staying away from him. I'm clinging to the fact that he has Chlamydia. I need him to have Chlamydia.

"Chlamydia. He has Chlamydia," I tell myself, chanting it as I walk the plans to the fourth floor. I decide to take the stairs as opposed to the elevator. Maybe exerting some physical energy will exhaust me and I'll have no strength to think of Tathan naked.

It helps some, but when I return to my desk, I'm more annoyed than when I left because he's smirking.

"What?" I ask callously as I sit back down.

His head pops out from behind his screen, his beautiful golden eyes sparkling with

amusement as he watches me. “Come to lunch with me.”

I’m not sure why, but Tathan tries this every day and my answer remains the same. At some point you’d think he’d give up from a wounded ego, but no, the persistent shit never does.

“Nope.” My answer remains the same every day. “I have no desire to join your Crush Brigade,” I tell him, checking my e-mail and avoiding eye contact. Avoiding his eyes is very important. If you do happen to make eye contact with Tathan, you’re shit out of luck. The Force is strong with this one.

“What’s a Crush Brigade?” He stares at me with amusement, sweet caramel orbs wandering over my body as he runs his hand down the side of his face and his beard, and damn it, I desperately want to be the one rubbing the side of his face. Or other parts of him.

He has my attention, as does the grin he’s drawing me in with. It widens when I say, “Harem.”

My computer dings, my eyes shift away, and when I do, it’s like clouds blocking the sun and I’m suddenly chilled.

On my screen, there’s an e-mail from Casey telling me to be strong and to fix my bra. It’s peeking out. Thankfully, I can always count on her to look out for me.

As discreetly as I can, I glance down, and sure enough, my bra is showing where my mustard colored blouse has fallen down past my cleavage and revealed the girls hanging out of my obnoxiously bright purple bra.

I like bold and bright colors. Lights up my dull, lackluster life.

Staring at my tits on display, I smile. That certainly explains the amusement on Tathan's face, doesn't it?

"Amalie, you'll give in," Tathan whispers, and glances back at his computer screen, as if he's actually working.

"Stop asking me out. It's annoying, and you sound desperate." I turn in my chair and chant to myself again that he has Chlamydia.

Tathan doesn't say anything in response, but I catch sight of his face, the expression, the moment I know there's certainly more to him than being the office dog. He looks almost offended I keep turning him down. No, offended isn't the right word here. It's more like disappointed.

I'm sure deep down Tathan could be a nice guy, but there's something about him that rubs me the wrong way. Probably because I'm sure he's slept with most of the women in this office—aside from me and Casey—and had he swung that way, I'm sure he would have hooked up with Zane by now. That's what turns me off about him.

Some of my hostility toward Tathan comes from being cheated on. Why can't men be happy with one woman? Where's the appeal in having a different girl every night?

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Between phone calls and meetings, I eat my lunch at my desk. Alone. And it's a lot like my dinners at home. Alone. I think that's why I ended up getting Oliver.

As for the office version of *The Bachelorette*, Tathan takes Lizard Lips to lunch today. I'm not positive, but I think her name is Regina. Whatever her name is, she'll be gone tomorrow, and Lizard Lips sounds better to me. It's better that I don't think of these women as having names because then I'd wonder how they can possibly let themselves fall into his trap.

Watching Lizard Lips prance around Tathan's desk like a female cat in heat, I want to vomit.

Deliberately leading her on for his own amusement, Tathan smirks. "I'm sure that can be arranged," he tells her, winking.

What the fuck are they talking about?

I don't know why she's getting excited by the lazy lift of his beautiful pouty lips. Tomorrow it will be a different girl. There's absolutely nothing special about the way he's treating her compared to what he says to every other woman in this office.

When Lizard Lips walks away, it's everything I can do not to roll my eyes that women keep falling for this shit. It makes us look bad.

Does she not have any self-respect? Without a doubt, no way.

Tathan takes note of my obvious derision toward the mindless fuck leaving his

domain. He waits for our eyes to make contact before whispering, “What?”

Disgusted, I make a gagging sound. “You’re sick.”

“You know. . .” With a twinkle in his eyes, he laughs. “I’ve heard that sound a lot.”

Being naïve, it takes me a minute to understand the meaning behind the words. You get it, right? Or does it take you a minute too? I’ll save you the trouble. It means choking on a cock.

Twisting around in my chair, I face my computer. “I bet you have.”

NEEDING TO RUN some paperwork upstairs to payroll, I gather my folders and the mail to drop it off on my way.

“It’s my lucky day.”

Damn it. I really should check who’s in the elevator with me before I push the Close Door button. Anticipation and anxiety knot in my belly the moment I realize who I’m in the elevator with.

For my own safety, I make an effort never to be alone with Tathan in an elevator, but sometimes it happens.

“Come to dinner with me.” He breathes out the words, erotic and alluring, and it’s everything I can do not to grab his face and shove it between my legs.

With steady breaths on the wall, I don’t even look at him. “How do you keep your floozies straight and then have the audacity to ask me to dinner? As if saying no to lunch isn’t enough, you want to be shot down twice in one day?”

“Floozy?”

Can you believe he’s laughing? Making fun of me as usual. “You won’t go out with me because you think I have floozies?”

“No, that’s not why. I just don’t like you.” Blinking slowly, I shake my head and let out a sigh, as though it’s depressing to me he’s asked me out again. I stare at the glowing numbers on the elevator panel. “And I have plans.”

“Walking your dog and watching reruns of Friends isn’t plans.” Tathan steps closer, his warmth pressing to my side. He knows me pretty well, doesn’t he?

I shift, my heart racing, my skin prickling with thousands of needles, all telling me to run away from him. I don’t want to. I want his warmth, his presence, his hands on me.

With the gentle brush of our shoulders, he whispers, “I like it when you play hard to get. Gives me a challenge and I’m definitely up for a challenge.”

I’m sure you are.

Shoving him against the wall, I’m so tempted to kiss his beautiful lips and wipe the arrogant smirk off his god-like face. It’d be so easy and more than likely we’d both thoroughly enjoy it.

Luckily for me, I have willpower, unlike the women in this office. “I will never go out with you. Stop asking.”

That’s partially a lie because the idea of going out with him isn’t as awful as I make it out to be in my head. It’s actually dream-worthy, but I’m not about to tell him.

Catching himself against the wall, he laughs. “I like it rough,” he tells me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me hard against his chest, his lips about an inch from mine. “I bet you do, too, don’t you, Amalie?”

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I know exactly what he's trying to do when his hands go lower, just above my ass. Not gonna lie, it feels nice to have his hands on me.

There's something, a small part of this or his embrace that feels familiar. Strangely. Like I've been here before, with him.

Regardless, this can't happen no matter how pleasant his touch is.

Hold your ground, girl. Don't be like Lizard Lips. You're better than her.

In an attempt to keep myself from melting into his arms, I use the only self-defense mechanism I know. I bite him. . . only I bite his lip because that's what's in front of me.

It takes him all of two seconds to pull away, his brow pulled together in confusion.

"Did you just bite me?" Blinking rapidly as if he can't believe I did that, his fingertips touch his bottom lip.

"That's how rough I like it," I tell him, smiling. My hands rest on his chest pushing him away from me and into the wall of the elevator.

Without another glance, I exit the elevator and leave him standing there, alone.

You're probably wondering to yourself why I'm playing hard to get with him?

I'll tell you why. I'm scared. My heart was torn by my former lover. My skin's

marred, my soul black and defenseless, and if I let someone like Tathan in, there's no telling what will be left of me. If anything.

## Page 8

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I'm tired on the drive home. It's late when I finally pull into the parking lot of my apartment complex. Avoiding Tathan is hard work, and I'm exhausted at the mere thought of doing anything else tonight.

The moment I'm out of my car, I remove my shoes as I walk down the hall toward my apartment. I hate shoes and wear them as little as possible. Being in Arizona, it's hot as balls most of the time, it's fairly easy to go without shoes.

He probably hears my keys when I'm opening the door, but the very second the door's cracked open, my chocolate shoe-eating lab puppy, Oliver, practically launches himself through the air at me. It's my standard greeting from him for the last four weeks since I brought him home. I have to say, it's nice to have someone that excited about your return. Dogs are good for something.

Oliver and I go about our nightly routine, me loving on him, and then me cleaning up his messes he's made throughout the day. He chews everything, but I guess that's what puppies do. He's twelve weeks old and a little monster. Our nightly routine consists of him licking me all over, me walking him until he's almost comatose, and him peeing about a dozen times. Then it's time for his dinner, which is essentially useless because he just knocks over the bag and gets it himself, so I don't bother; I only knock it over for him. He eats like a cow, and I have absolutely no idea where he puts it all.

Zane has Oliver's sister, and she's totally calm. She likes to sleep all day and is prissy as hell. I got the hellion of the litter. I think subconsciously the breeder must have known I needed some excitement in my life and gave me Oliver.

I will say having a puppy is a lot like having a child—so everyone tells me—and I'd have to agree now that I'm the mother of a puppy.

Having a puppy is nothing like I expected.

SINCE IT'S A Thursday night, I don't have a lot going on. These days it's clear I have no life outside of this dog, planning Casey's wedding, and my life-affirming job of getting coffee for slackers.

And that's depressing too.

I do, however, look over some wedding magazines Zane gave me and dream that maybe someday I might find a man worthy of getting me in a white dress. That's the thing about weddings, they always make you think about your wedding day. At least it's where my mind has been venturing to lately. It's depressing.

From the time I was around seven, I've dreamed of my wedding in detail. Everything from the dress to the cake and anything in between. Now all I need is the guy.

The thoughts make me think of Tathan, which annoys me because I don't ever want to think of that man and me together in that way.

Who am I kidding? My mind totally went there.

As Oliver and I lay on the floor playing with his chew toys—an old pair of my heels he's insisted are now his—I hear a door open in the hall.

Scrambling along the floor in full-on stealth mode, I crack the front door to see Tathan's now home.

Did I mention Tathan lives next door?

Yet another reason my social life sucks.

Not only am I afraid to leave at night in fear he'll see me, but I'm also silently obsessed with his life and who joins him in that apartment.

Which, to date, hasn't been a single woman. It tells me he doesn't bring them home to his bachelor pad, probably bangs them in their car. Or worse, bathrooms.

Did I mention he has to have Chlamydia if knocking boots in a bathroom stall is his method of foreplay? No class. I convince myself he has absolutely no class.

As he's opening his door, I notice his mail in his hand, which probably has some of mine in it.

Here's another reason why I can't stand him. He steals my mail so I have to go to his apartment to get it.

In this day and age with locking mailboxes, you're probably wondering how this is possible. Me too! I don't know how it happens, or how he hasn't been arrested. Isn't stealing mail a federal offense?

Watching him retreat behind the door of his apartment, that's when it hits me, staring out across the hall. I should be making him as miserable as he's making me.

Why I hadn't thought of this earlier is beyond me. Seems so brilliant.

What if I can make him miserable? Maybe then he'll stop asking me out?

"How though?" I stare at Oliver as if he holds the answer to my question.

He gives me those pretty blue eyes that droop down and make you fall in love with

him and licks my cheek. Puppies are ridiculously adorable.

Unfortunately, Oliver doesn't answer me, but I hold him up in front of me so I can look at him. "Oliver, how come I never thought of this before?"

He wiggles in my arms as though each word I'm telling him lets him know he's the best puppy in the world.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

“It’s a genius plan. I can make him just as miserable and then maybe he’ll leave me alone.”

Where do I begin?

He already annoys the fuck out of me on a daily, hell an hourly, basis. I need to dream up something epic to mess with him so he will stop asking me out.

And then, like a lightning bolt scattering across the sky, it seems so obvious. Craigslist ads. I could post more and make his life miserable.

Now there’s an idea.

Setting Oliver down, I scramble to my computer, and immediately I get online and make a post that his car is for sale. I leave his cell number I stole from our employee files the other day. I knew it’d come in handy someday.

After this one, I’ll wait a few days and post another ad for someone looking to hire a pool boy, then another one wanting to adopt cats because why wouldn’t he want to be surrounded by pussy all the time?

You may think I’m crazy, and that’s debatable at this point, but if you ask me, I’m a motherfucking genius is what I am.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

It's a little after eight that night when Oliver and I are lying on my bed eating a bowl of Cheerios. He likes sharing a bowl of cereal before bed.

When I'm finished, because he licked my spoon, we discuss my plan in more detail while Oliver drinks the milk left in the bowl.

"I know it may seem wrong, but it's a good plan, don't you think?"

Oliver lifts his head and cocks it to the side. I wish he could talk to me. I feel like maybe he might be my soul mate and the relationship would be better if he spoke.

Just as I'm contemplating going to bed early—pathetic I know—my cell phone rings. I know who it is even before I look at the screen. There's only one person who calls me after 8:00 p.m.

"What, Casey?" I hold the phone against my ear and shoulder, using my hands to pet Oliver. Puppy fur is hard to resist.

"Meet us at the Red Revolver," she shouts, her voice so loud Oliver jumps into my arms.

"I can't," I tell her. "I threw my back out."

She laughs. "How?"

"Lifting Oliver."

“He’s ten pounds.” She laughs again, knowing damn well I’m lying. “How did you manage that?”

“Oh, please, he’s at least eleven.”

Casey attempts to change the subject. “Zane is here, and I only have a few weeks of freedom left. You have to come down here with us. It’s your maid of honor required duty.”

Maid of honor required duty? Another one?

Bryan, Casey’s fiancé, is amazing, but Casey is still having prewedding jitters, and it’s apparent on nights like this—while he’s out of town and she’s at the bar. It’s not like she’s going to go home with a guy or anything. She just likes the nightlife.

I can’t blame her. We’re twenty-three. It’s not like we’re old enough to be settling down.

And then she hits me with the hammer. Not literally, but she might as well have when she whispers, “The Madsen brothers are here.”

Did I mention Tathan has brothers?

If I didn’t, it was because I wanted to forget that part. Imagine what three Madsen brothers are capable of. Perfection. Beauty. Sex appeal. The list is essentially endless and anytime I’m in the same room with all of them, it’s like I suddenly have cerebral palsy and drool.

And then I think, how did I not hear Tathan leaving his man cave? Probably because I’m in my bedroom and I can’t hear his door from here.

“Girl, you know you want to come out. All you’re doing is sitting at home with Oliver and I’m guessing you’ve had your cereal already.”

Damn, she knows me pretty well. No matter how hard I try not to admit it, knowing all three Madsen brothers are in one place is incredibly tempting. It’s like knowing a celebrity is at the restaurant you’re dining at and trying like hell not to ask the waiter to move you to a table closer just so you can stare at them and their beauty.

Casey knows how to get to me. Though I despise the way Tathan’s presence controls me, his brothers are less obnoxious and just as hot to look at. Where’s the harm in wanting to lick them. . . I mean stare at them?

They’re a beautiful family. If I were their parents, I would have kept having kids just because they were genetically perfect in every way. The Madsen boys consist of the oldest, James, who owns a restaurant in Scottsdale that serves the most amazing pulled pork sandwich I’ve ever had in my life. I go there just to stare at him because he’s nothing like Tathan other than he’s drop-dead gorgeous. He’s also married so all I do is drool—I mean look.

Kelly is another brother, the middle child, and no one exactly knows what Kelly does besides occasionally showing up at work, and looking pretty.

And then there’s Tathan. I have no clue what the fuck he does at work unless his number one priority at his job is to make me miserable. If so, he’s doing great and deserves a raise.

Still, the offer to go out is now there, and I want to accept. I really do.

“Please come!” Casey’s begs.

I sigh, trying to pretend like she’s inconveniencing me, though she knows I’ll give in.

“I don’t know. Doesn’t that place have a twenty-dollar cover?” Given my shopping habit, and really expensive apartment, I’m habitually broke. If you’ve ever seen my car, you’d know my priorities lie with my clothing.

“Yeah, but it’s ladies’ night. You get in for free.” Amongst the background noise, I can hear Zane bitching about how he should have gotten in for free too. He gets upset about gender-specific deals. He is one of the girls after all.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

“Fine, I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Great!” She’s displaying entirely too much enthusiasm. It’s obvious she’s already drunk, and it’s only Thursday night.

Personally, I make it a rule of mine only to drink on Fridays and Saturdays. It makes me feel like less of an alcoholic. Which I’m not. I hardly ever drink these days, but lately, like maybe the last few weeks, Casey is leading me that way with these jitters and preparing for her wedding.

In an attempt to look hot—since the Madsen brothers are there—I put on the sexiest black dress I have and borrow some three-inch heels from my neighbor Jade. She’s a stripper and has just about everything you can imagine to give yourself that “I’m not slutty, but I want to appear slutty” look.

Just don’t ask her what’s behind door number three in her apartment. I’m not kidding. It will scare the ever-loving shit out of you. If anyone in our apartment is ever murdered, I’m pointing the finger at her first.

As I prepare to leave, grabbing my keys and purse, Oliver looks a little sad that I’m not staying in bed with him. He always gives me the guilt trip. And if you’ve never gotten a guilt trip from a puppy, it’s the worst thing ever.

“I’ll be back soon.” I point my finger in his face. He perks up, ears flopping around and sniffs it. “Don’t eat any furniture or my heels!”

He tips his head at me as if my words mean nothing to him. I half expect him to say,

“But I’m so cute, Mommy.”

“You are cute, but so are the Madsen brothers.”

There I go again talking to my dog. Yet another reason why going out on a Thursday is exactly what I need in my life. Or lack of a life.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

Around nine, I pry open the door to my apartment, wondering if Tathan is in his apartment or if he's at the bar with his brothers. It's not like I can tell anything by looking at the door, but the mystery is solved in the parking lot.

Warmth blankets my skin, the sweltering Arizona heat licking my face as I fidget to smooth out my long brown curls. When I get to the parking lot, his silver Lexus RCF isn't in the parking lot. The only reason I know the model of his car is because I like cars. My dad was obsessed with them so by the time I was ten, I knew most manufacturers and the models they made.

Tathan's car is nice. Mine is not. Remember how I said I love to shop? Well, you certainly wouldn't think it looking at my car. I have an old '72 Chevy Impala my dad bought for me when I turned sixteen that gets horrible gas mileage, barely passes the emissions laws here in Phoenix, and has duct tape holding the worn upholstery together on the seats. Not only does it hold sentimental value for me, but I also can't fathom spending six hundred dollars a month on a car like Casey does. Think about the clothes I can buy with that money each month.

Knowing Tathan's car isn't in the parking lot makes me a tad nervous because there's a good possibility he's at the bar with his brothers. Then what?

My heart drums wildly in my chest, the idea of seeing him again today gnawing at me. I'm sure you can guess why I have such a strong reaction to him. Though my words are harsh and accusing, it's a defense mechanism. Like a puffer fish.

With shaky hands, I start my car, the throaty rumble of the engine roaring to life. Traffic in Phoenix is a bitch, no matter what time of the day it is, so it's more like

thirty minutes instead of twenty, and I'm entering the Red Revolver, convinced my plan to make Tathan miserable by dressing sexy might work based on the glances I receive when I walk from my car to the door.

I've always enjoyed the Red Revolver. It's a nice bar, with good strong drinks, and loud music.

Once inside, I scan the room. It's not hard to find Casey and Zane. He's tall, she's short, and both equally obnoxious when you walk in because they'll literally stand on a table to get your attention.

"Took you long enough!" Zane yells, moving so I can sit between him and Casey.

I decline and push him back down by placing my hands on his shoulders so I can sit on the end of the bench seat of the small booth they're in. I don't like to be trapped between them in case I need to leave quickly.

Conversation is quickly steered the direction of the wedding and the expo on Saturday when "Stolen Dance" by Milky Chance blares through the club. I'm in the middle of telling them about Tathan's latest attempt to ask me out and me biting him.

Naturally, the both of them are fully engrossed in everything I'm telling them until a group of men walk in, causing all the women in the bar to navigate toward them.

"Who's that?" I ask Zane as he peeks around Casey, staring at the guys surrounded by women.

It's not uncommon for athletes, even actors to come to this club and if it's either, Zane will know. The dude spends a good amount of time with his nose in aTMZmagazine. Honestly, Zane gets more action than most women. He's very attractive and well dressed. Believe me, if he wasn't gay, I'd consider dating him.

He watches the men, loses interest in another one by the bar, and then looks closer.

Zane leans into my ear so I can hear him over the music. My eyes follow his hand in the direction of the men. “Well, that one,” he points to the bigger guy with brown hair, “is Aldon Hernandez.”

I eye Aldon from a distance. He stands tall, heavily muscled, wearing a white polo shirt with a dark gray hat hiding his eyes. His smile, bright and gleaming with pearly white teeth peeking out, is familiar, but I can't place the face with the name right away.

Beside him, I notice black hair and that scruffy beard, and I know who the other guy is.

It's Tathan. I knew when I saw the missing Lexus he'd be here. It's when I'm staring at Tathan that it finally dawns on me who Aldon is. He's the quarterback for the Arizona Cardinals.

“Aldon Hernandez?” I take a drink of Zane's beer, attempting to be nonchalant. “Like the football player?”

Casey chooses then to butt into the conversation, and it's apparent she's had too many glasses of wine. “If that guy even looked my way,”—she gestures to Aldon, nearly knocking over her glass of red wine in the process—“I'd be on my back in seconds.”

“You would not,” I point out, trying to ignore her. Casey likes to talk like she'd mess around on Bryan, but she's been with him since she was fifteen. There's no way she'd jeopardize it even with a guy like Aldon Hernandez.

Zane stares at me as if he's trying to find the cure for cancer in my facial features. It's

creepy. “You know who Aldon is, right?”

“No,” I lie. “I’ve just heard of him before.”

I actually enjoy football, but I wouldn’t say I follow it. When my dad was sick, I spent a lot of time by his side watching it with him. He was an avid fan, didn’t really have a team he enjoyed more than the rest, just the sport in general.

“I’m not sure who the other guy is,” Zane adds. “Can’t see him with all those whores surrounding him.”

He’s right. You can barely make out Aldon let alone the guy next to him, who I’m positive, is Tathan now. I see his ass. I know that ass because anytime he gets up from his desk, I watch it. It’s a nice fucking ass.

“Is that Tathan?” Casey looks closer. “I think it is.”

Zane almost spits his beer out. “Oh my God, how does Tathan know Aldon and I didn’t know about this?”

In a panic, I stand immediately. “I’m going to the bar.” I quickly disappear before they can talk me into getting their drinks.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

Breathing out slowly, I try to calm my nerves. I knew coming here I'd see him, and while I'm not disappointed, I have a hard-enough time ignoring him at work. Imagine how hard it'll be in a club with liquor and music.

At the bar, since I'm not anyone important, the bartender ignores me, like I'm not even there. I yell out my order three freaking times, but nothing, not even a glance my direction. "No one cares what I have to say. Assholes."

"I'm listening," a familiar voice says from behind me.

I turn to look over my shoulder at him, giving him a judging once-over that he finds entertaining. "Well then, get me a beer."

All he does is give the bartender a nod. A motherfucking nod and he has his attention. It pisses me off because why do I have boobs if I can't get a bartender's attention?

Seems ridiculous.

When the bartender hands me the beer, I don't tip him. He doesn't deserve a tip after ignoring me.

Tathan smiles at him. "Thanks, Matt."

I glare at both of them while taking a drink of my beer. "Yeah, thanks. . .Matt," I mock, my words laced with sarcasm.

I set my beer down on a table near the wall out of the way of the dancing crowd, and

wouldn't you know it, Tathan follows me over there, like I owe him a favor for getting the bartender's attention.

“Dance with me?” He tips his head toward the dance floor, our fingers brushing for a fraction of a second, but it's enough my body warms at the slightest connection to him. His smile is soft, his gaze, intimidating. Like he's just waiting for me to say no so he's challenged.

I turn on my heel to face him, not prepared for how close he is. Our chests touch and I have to say, it's nice. Those around us would have thought we were a couple by our proximity and the way his hands always gravitate toward my hips.

Goddamn you, stupid beautiful man. Searching his eyes, his lips are inches away from mine again. I don't bite him this time. Tempting, but I don't because I'm caught off guard by seeing just how nice those lips look under the neon lights of the bar signs.

“What are you even doing here?” I raise an eyebrow at him. “Are you stalking me?”

“No, my friends are here.” He smirks, and I know what he's going to say next is going to be delivered in a teasing manner. “But you know,” he leans forward so his forearms are resting on the table, inches from my beer and his, “I could be a stalker if you like that sorta thing.” He winks.

There's that wink again.

I try to look away when he holds his phone in his hand and stares at the screen as it lights up. “Crazy thing happened tonight. . .” At the tenderness of his voice, my eyes drift to his and he smiles, one side higher than the other. He holds up his phone that says ten missed calls, and I nearly burst out laughing. “I keep getting these calls about my car being for sale. Know anything about that?”

Shit. How could I have forgotten about posting his car for sale?

“Nope.” I smile, looking around the bar and then back to him. Raising my beer to my lips, I keep my grin at bay. “Are you selling it?”

His caramel truffle eyes lock on mine, and he shakes his head, smirking. “Nope.”

His eyes drift south to my cleavage, which is on display for him. They linger there. Damn it, I know where this going. He’s wearing me down, and I can’t let myself go there. Not with him.

Deciding Tathan needs to know he can’t just have any woman he wants, I reach for my beer and begin to walk away, like I usually do in his presence. Only before I can get away, he grabs my arm.

“You know, I really wasn’t asking for the dance.” He laughs under his breath. “I was just being kind. I think you know I was demanding a dance.”

He’s confident, isn’t he? Goddamn it. Why is it so damn sexy when a man tells you how it’s going to be, rather than asking?

“I can’t dance,” I lie for the second time tonight. I pole dance with Jade on the days I don’t work out. If you’ve never tried it, I’m telling you now, it’s an amazing workout. So yeah—if pole dancing is considered dancing—I can dance.

“Amalie.” Tathan bends down so his lips tenderly graze my ear. He’s really trying to work the appeal he has and sadly, it’s done with little effort. He could melt a nun’s panties off just by glancing in her direction. He drags his hand down my back, stopping just above the curve of my ass and pushes my hips against his own. “Anyone can dance if they have someone to lead.”

Without giving me much time to hesitate, he leads us to the middle of the dance floor with a look on his face I absolutely hate, one that screams, you're giving in to me.

I can't help but notice all the dirty looks I receive from the women around me as I follow Tathan. I have to admit it. He's one gorgeous man, and it's no surprise he has women all over him.

My problem is I'm notthatgirl. I don't melt over men anymore. I have a hard shell, and nothing's cracking it. At least not this dude. Who the hell am I kidding? If this guy wanted to crack my shell, I'd spread out like a fried egg cooking over hot flames just waiting for him to bust my yoke.

Tathan suddenly stops in the middle of the dance floor turning around to face me and pulls me close with both hands on my hips. The motion has my breath spiking because he smells so good, and it's doing nothing for my celibacy mission.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

And that stare he gives me is doing nothing for it either. Keep this up, and I'm going to stumble in my resolve.

Like he's going in for the kill, he raises his hand to touch the side of my face. "Don't take those beautiful eyes off mine," he orders me, and then he begins to move to the music, a gentle sway to his body.

Hell, imagine what he could do in bed.

Naturally, a rap song had to come on to make matters worse. "Shake" by Ying Yang Twins.

His eyes pause on me, visually measuring the distance between us. Leaning down, he pulls me flush against his body—wrapping my arms around his neck. I sink, right into his warm embrace.

It's been so long since I've felt a man's arms around me and, oh, is it nice. Like Christmas morning nice, exciting and comforting all at the same time. There's just something about him that draws me in. Maybe it's his unnervingly warm gaze and the somewhat ruggedness the beard gives him.

Briefly—as I try to stay composed—I forget what's happening and enjoy myself, feel his warmth and the way his body moves with mine. He smells so good, strong arms, breath panting on my neck as I grind into him, and I never let my eyes leave his.

His body is strong everywhere my hands have the pleasure of roaming. I'm lost in his features, and those gorgeous eyes capture me.

Caught up in the moment, I decide then to show him I did in fact lie a little. I can dance. In another life, I think I was a professional dancer. Even Jade agrees I've got talent and she's seen the best of the best in her game.

"Stop thinking so much," Tathan whispers in my ear, sensing my mind is elsewhere. "Dancing is supposed to make you feel sexy."

Oh, I'll show you just how sexy I can be, buddy.

Turning, I shove my ass into him.

When my backside comes in contact with his crotch, he lets out a very audible gasp and clutches me tighter to him without an inch of space between us.

It's apparent right then what I do to him. It's pressing into my ass. Part of me wants to grin, the other part wants to cringe because I can't for the life of me understand why I'm doing this. We continue to dance like this for the rest of the five-minute song.

When it's over, he roughly turns me around and whispers a throaty "Thanks" in my ear and lets go of me.

I don't look at him. Hello, I was just grinding my ass on his erection for a few minutes, and I'm kind of embarrassed to say my panties are a tad damp. I decide it's time to get away from him before I do something I'm going to regret. Coming here was a bad idea, and I need a more thought-out plan with actual steps or a checklist for Christ's sake before I'm around Tathan again.

Only, before I can get away from him, his hands are on mine, and he's pulling me back toward him. "Don't leave." When I pull away, he shakes his head, seeming disappointed. "Have a beer with me."

“N-no,” I stutter out, not sure how to deal with someone like him. Especially since I’m beginning to see he’s nothing like I thought he was. “I need to go home.”

He’s frowning at my denial and doesn’t say anything. I automatically shift my eyes to his, wanting to see his reaction to my words.

He tips his head, eyes on the bar and then back to mine. “Why? Needing to get home isn’t an excuse. Either you don’t want to, or you’re just avoiding me.”

When I stare at him, I understand there’s more to this guy than him being a manwhore, but I don’t want to see that.

There are certain types of guys out there. The ones you know are just looking for a good time and will take it when it’s there, no matter what the repercussions might be.

Then there are the ones who want to have a good time, but have morals. From what I can tell, Tathan is the latter, the one with morals. He has honest eyes, ones that can’t hold lies within them.

“I don’t. . . want to.” I start to walk away when a hand reaches out for me.

“Why not?”

“Because. You’re not the kind of guy I need to get wrapped up with.” I stare at the floor, anywhere but his eyes, because the idea of being wrapped up with him physically is exactly where I want to be.

As our hands part, my body denied his warmth, I don’t look back. I can’t. If I do, I’ll run back into his arms and beg him to find the nearest bathroom stall with me.

Completely oblivious to anyone around them, Zane and Casey are dancing. They

won't even notice me leaving.

I sneak one last look at Tathan. He's standing by the bar with Aldon, confusion plastered on his face, but there's something more. Let down. Damn it. He's too pretty for that face, but I'm too flawed to change it.

Once inside my car, the same song we just danced to is playing on my car radio.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

Great. Now I have to hate this song.

With an exaggerated flip of my hand, I turn it off and make the drive back to my apartment in complete silence, though my mind is far from silent. I'm replaying every detail of that dance and why it was important to stay far away from Tathan.

Once again, I walk to my apartment barefoot; the three-inch heels were a bad idea. When I open the door, Oliver is there waiting for his walk.

Reaching for his leash, he wiggles to the point his tail touches his ears. "Come on, boy." He's eager and jumping all over me, sharp claws scratching at my bare legs.

There's one bad thing about having a puppy. Well, there are a few, but the one at the top of my list: they require maintenance and walking at all hours of the night. And for a girl like me—one scared of the dark—this is not easy. These are the times when I wish he was a cat so I could get him to use a litter box. Not knowing much of anything about raising a dog on my own, I actually tried to get him to use a litter box. It was a disaster. He ate the litter like it was dog food and then promptly threw it all back up and spent the next three hours in the vet ER as I thought I poisoned him.

Outside, he paces the same patch of lawn he usually pees on, as if he's trying to find the only spot he hasn't peed on yet this week. It's then I'm looking around at my surroundings and wishing I would have brought something to defend myself with should I be attacked. It's not like Oliver could protect me. He's barely ten pounds and licks people to death.

Fear pricks my skin, as it usually does when I'm outside at night. Within a minute, I

break out in a cold sweat. I don't know what it is that freaks me out. Maybe too many horror movies? "Come on, Oliver! Will you just pee already?"

Oliver looks up at me, sad I yelled at him. Poor baby. He didn't deserve that.

I kneel to his level. "Look, Mommy is really sorry, but you need to pee, buddy. It's late, and I'm barely wearing anything."

Phoenix isn't exactly the safest city, and when I'm out here this late at night, well, I get scared.

"Hey, baby!" A man whistles from behind. "Nice dog."

Yeah right. Like he's looking at my dog with this dress on.

Oliver growls as the man passes by, his fur all riled up and standing on end. He doesn't like men. At all.

The man gets past us and whistles. "I wasn't talking about the dog, honey."

Yeah, you're so obvious.

"Eat a dick, asshole." The nerve of some people. Picking up Oliver, I rush to my apartment.

The entire way upstairs, Oliver barks at nothing, like he's protecting me by making so much noise.

"You should have peed." I set Oliver down once we get up the stairs and he wiggles like I'm rewarding him, because I spoke to him.

It's amazing that no matter what I say, he wiggles.

At the end of the hall, Tathan's unlocking his door. The sound of my wiggly, still barking dog, slides his attention my way.

Like a scene out of Dirty Dancing, he turns and looks over at me, leaning into his door frame holding his keys in the palm of his hand. His black shirt is unbuttoned a little more from what it was at the club, cheeks slightly flushed from the alcohol in him and I must say, he has me staring at him once again.

They shouldn't make them as pretty as him.

Tathan glances at Oliver and then slides his stare to mine again. "I didn't get to thank you before you rushed out, but thanks for the dance."

Smiling to myself, I don't say anything to him as I unlock my own door, my hands shaking in the process, remembering in detail the way his breath felt against my skin.

That's when I hear the faint sounds of water and look back.

I shit you not, Oliver is peeing on Tathan's doormat, and then runs back to his mommy.

Should I reward him?

Tathan squints down at the doormat and then at me again, and says nothing.

I get my door open, Oliver trots in, completely satisfied with himself.

What the hell do I say? Should I apologize?

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

When I don't say anything, Tathan gives me a big forced grin, steps over the puddle and inside his apartment and closes the door. Not a single word.

Shit. He's pissed.

Inside my apartment, Oliver is sitting on the couch watching me, probably wondering if he's going to get yelled at or given a treat.

I rub his head. "You shouldn't have done that."

He has no idea what I'm saying. By his wiggles, once again he thinks I'm rewarding him, and I'm not sure I'm not rewarding him.

Sitting next to him, my phone buzzes so I glance at it in my lap. It's a message from Casey, and then another from Zane, but I don't read any of them. They're used to me ignoring their messages. Instead, I cuddle with Oliver and think of ways to make this plan of mine work. You know, the one where I need to make Tathan miserable and not dance with him. Or look at him. Or talk to him.

And now I need to buy him a new doormat. I'm too nice of a person not to.

"I could just give him one of those pee-mats I set down for you when I'm at work," I say to Oliver, considering doing just that. "Just in case you feel the need to pee on his doorstep again."

I chuckle at myself, thinking I'm funny. Oliver doesn't say anything, but cocks his head with his left ear flopped back. I reach over straightening out his ear. "I'm funny,

right?”

He barks as if to say, “Yes, Mommy, you are.”

What’s not funny is that I’m here with my dog, talking to him all about my problems.

Everyone wonders why I am this way. And by everyone, I’m talking about Casey and Zane. They know what my deal is, but they wish I’d give someone else a chance instead of letting one guy ruin it all.

Everyone has a deal. A reason as to why they are the way they are.

Mine?

Colton Enning.

I briefly told you about him. We started dating my junior year of high school. Everything was great. We were both on the swim team and had that passion for swimming that drew us together. And if anyone could pull off the speedo look, it was certainly Colton. We even went to college together, both on scholarships for swimming.

And then—just three months into my freshman year at Arizona State—my dad was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. I had no other family, my mother died when I was just a baby, so I dropped out of school to help him.

Colton and I started drifting apart almost immediately. It was just a year into my dad’s treatment when they found out the cancer had spread throughout his body and his brain. I knew it was the end. I could see it in his eyes. He wanted to give up.

Needing comfort one afternoon, I went to campus to see Colton.

Distant girlfriend, college boyfriend needing his own comfort. . . . You can pretty much guess the scene I was met with.

Walked in on him getting a blow job from his roommate's girlfriend. While he begged and pleaded and told me, "Babe, it's not what it looked like," it's kind of hard to deny it when your dick's in another woman's mouth. My final assessment? He's a douchebag, and I deserved better. Weeks later, I found out he'd been cheating on me for well over a year.

My dad made it another six months before he passed away.

After that, I swore off men entirely. As far as I was concerned, I didn't need the lying bastards in my life.

Sure, I had a few one-night stands—one absolutely amazing on Halloween last year—and the others not so much. Now I was just trying to stay away from the ones I knew would break my heart. Relationships just weren't my thing anymore.

Casey always tells me, "Don't let Colton spoil it all," but he ultimately did. He really did. The saying "one bad apple ruins the whole bunch" sort of mentality. I loved him more than anything at the time, and when I needed him, he wasn't there for me and did the inconceivable.

Certainly, that wasn't going to be easy for me to move on from. It's been two years and I still can't.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

The next morning, I get up super early to work out, swing by Target and get a doormat for Tathan, and then replace it.

It's finally Friday, and while I'm excited for the weekend, caffeine needs to happen before I can even think about getting through the day. I know I said I spend most of my day getting coffee orders, but I need it myself, only I'm not about to drink the crap I serve the assholes at work.

My usual stop on the way to work is a small café in Scottsdale that serves the most amazing, creamy mochas you'll ever taste in your life. There's always a line out the door, and their chocolate croissants are easily a pastry I will stab you for. Which is why I work out every morning because there's like a thousand calories in it. Not really, but I'm sure it's pretty close to that.

Giggles and sighs catch my attention at the counter in front of me once I make it through the outside line and finally in the building.

When I peek around the crowd, I see the cashier is paying way too much attention to her current customer, and she just slipped him her number written on the outside of his coffee cup.

How tacky can you be? What's wrong with women these days? They throw themselves at men and expect them to have respect for them. How? They see the way you act and figure they can get away with that too.

"Seriously, some people need to get to work. This isn't eHarmony, speed it up, assholes," I say, loud enough for her and her current eye candy to hear me.

As Zane would say, she's clearly missing the olive in her martini judging by the way she keeps tossing her platinum blonde hair around.

If she keeps that shit up, her brain will fall out with all the whipping she's doing. And then she won't be able to make my coffee, and that will really piss me off.

The man at the counter turns to face me—he definitely heard what I said. That's when I see his profile, and I smile to myself. Of all the fucking luck. Can you guess who it is?

You're probably right. But if not, it's Tathan standing there in all his morning glory with his next harem girl drooling over his appearance. Goddamn, but he looks good first thing in the morning. All bright-eyed and cheery, but still pulling off the manly ruggedness. His smile widens when he notices me, and suddenly, he's the only one in the building I can make eye contact with, his presence captivating.

I'm smiling, not only because he is, but also because I interrupted his love connection with the barista, and it makes me extremely happy to know I broke it up. Sadistic I know.

Tathan gives me a once-over, a thorough glance up and down my body, and I suddenly feel very self-conscious, even though I am far from that. I know I have a great body because I work damn hard for it—despite the mocha and chocolate croissants—and I'm not the type of girl who gets self-conscious. If you don't like my booty and size C tits, fuck off. I didn't ask for your opinion, did I?

His jaw tightens, and he turns back to the barista and whispers in her ear. Apparently not hearing what she wants, she shoots me a dirty look and turns around to write something down. What the fuck did I do to her? See, this is the problem with chicks. They're so fucking moody and catty. Just because he looked at me, she suddenly hates me and will more than likely not warm my damn croissant to the perfect

temperature like I like it.

With his own cup of coffee in hand, Tathan walks past me, but stops as his shoulder bumps into mine softly. With a gentle breath that blows warmth over my cheek, he leans in, his lips dangerously close to my ear. I draw in a deep breath that sounds like a wind tunnel.

Do I flinch back like I should? No, hell no, my damn knees are weak. I stand there, jelly legs and all, like a fucking idiot waiting in front of the lion who's stalking his prey.

“See you at work, Amalie,” he says, eyes twinkling as he walks away.

Momentarily I'm stricken by his good looks again. Stricken stupid apparently because I have absolutely nothing smartass to say to him.

What's happening to me?

Should I call in sick? I need time to think.

After being pushed from the lady behind me, I finally awake from my daydream—the one of us being zipped in a sleeping bag together in the farthest reaches of the Antarctic with nothing but the warmth of our bodies keeping us alive. It's a great dream.

At the counter, I whisper, “Tall mocha and a chocolate croissant warmed.”

The girl, remember. . . the one Tathan was flirting with? She barely even acknowledges me. She does, however, get my mocha and croissant and slides it across the counter. “Here you go.”

I hand her a ten-dollar bill.

She shakes her head. “Tathan took care of it.”

Tathan took care of it? I shift my weight from one foot to the other, still holding out my money. “He did what?”

She looks at me like I’m that dumb. “He bought your coffee, ma’am.” She motions for me to move out of the way. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to help this customer behind you.”

He bought my coffee. Damn it. I’m trying to hate him, and here he is being nice and friendly to me.

“Well, thank you.” I give the ten dollars to the man behind me. “Your coffee’s on me, dude.”

Pay it forward, right?

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

He smiles, thanks me, but hands it to the woman with three kids behind him. Apparently, there's some humanity left in this world.

I check my phone once I walk into my office building, which just happens to be around the corner from the café. I can't walk and look at my phone at the same time, so I stop. I even go so far as to stand against the wall, so I don't trip. One embarrassing display of road rash and I'll never text and walk at the same time ever again.

There are sixty messages. Sixty! They're all from Casey and Zane wondering who I was dancing with last night and where the hell I disappeared to. I avoided them like the monkeys in *Outbreak*, disease infested little shits they are, and I'm amazed my phone can even hold that many messages. The thing about my friends, they gossip and insist on being in everyone's business.

I don't answer any of their messages because it's better to explain in person.

At my desk, I notice Tathan is there, smirking as he drinks his coffee, smugly. "Mornin'," he says, winking.

There's something undeniably sexy about the way he says mornin', like him cutting the word short makes it sexual somehow.

"Goodmorning," I reply with a smile and for a moment, just a small fraction of a moment, I glance over his appearance. I never got past his eyes in the coffee shop. I usually never do.

It's Friday. Fridays he wears jeans and usually a button-down shirt he rolls the sleeves up on. The top few buttons are undone, and a little chest hair is peeking out. Fucking sexy as sin. I want to walk up to him, straddle him in his chair and rip the buttons of his shirt open one by one and then lick his chest. Every inch of it.

And then he speaks, and I remember why I need to hate him.

"Like what you see, honey?"

Yes.

No.

This is why I can't stand him and need to stay away from guys like him. He can't actually have a conversation with anyone that's not filled with innuendo or lewdness that revolves around him and his amazingly fuckable body.

"No, I don't." Reaching forward, I turn on my computer. "Every time you talk, I want to throw up."

"You seemed very willing while we were dancing," he notes with a laugh under his breath, undeterred by my harshness. "Come to lunch with me today."

Here we go. He's relentless. The thing that gets me is why he's so hell-bent on me going out with him. That right there warrants all kinds of red flags for me. No one is that determined, and if they are, there's an ulterior reason as to why.

"No, I think I'm coming down with the flu," I tell him, slurping my coffee, trying to annoy him. It doesn't work. He smirks despite my slurping. "But thanks for the coffee."

I couldn't not thank him. It'd be rude, right?

"Like I said. . ." He pauses and grins. ". . .you'll give—"

He doesn't finish his sentence. A box of rubber bands sitting on my desk prohibits this.

Shuts the cocky hottie right up.

Rubbing his temple, he smiles, "I like it rough."

I bet you do, asshole. I don't say that because I know it will only encourage him.

I open my e-mail and leave him rubbing his face. There's one from Casey reminding me of the Arizona Bridal Show this weekend, yet again.

She's hoping to catch a glimpse of Elliott Warren, the famous photographer who just so happens to be from Phoenix and is also attending this wedding expo. From what I've heard about this Elliott guy, he photographs everything, but specializes in weddings, capturing the most amazing moments of every event he photographs.

Before you go thinking I'm stalking a photographer, I'm only repeating what I've heard endlessly for the last few months since Casey got engaged. It's only everything she talks about. Almost everyone around town has photographs by him. Hell, even some photos inside Madsen Construction are from this dude and sport the familiar signature logo he has.

Normally I would want nothing to do with attending a wedding expo because, let's face it, me getting married or even planning a wedding is pretty far off.

Unfortunately, I have a weak spot for Casey. She's been my girl for years, held my

hand when I cried over Colton, helped me set fire to his car and was right there with me with a shoulder to cry on when my dad died.

For those reasons, I'll be there for her too.

Zane shows up twenty minutes late for work, and he's dressed better than I am and watching Tathan drink his coffee. It's like watching art.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

“If you don’t fuck him soon. . . I’m going to,” Zane tells me and winks at Tathan, who shakes his head with a smirk of his own and types away on his keyboard.

Zane and Tathan together, that’s an image I don’t want. An image I do want is one of Tathan’s fingers as they glide over his keyboard effortlessly. I can imagine it being my body, more importantly, my clit. Despite Zane talking to me, I watch Tathan’s fingers, wondering what those fingers can do for me, long slender and. . .shit. . . focus.

With her usual yogurt in hand, Casey approaches, examining Zane, then me, and holds out her hand for the publication on company insurance she needed to have printed for our next staff meeting.

I turn toward her, handing her the copies. “Here’s the penetration you asked for—” I realize quickly that came out wrong when I see Tathan’s shoulders shaking with laughter, and Zane’s eyes widen in amusement. “Publication. . . here’s the publication you asked for!” I say to Casey, who is just as amused by my pornographic word vomit as Tathan is based on the sudden burst of laughter.

If I had enough office supplies on my desk, I would have thrown shit at all of them.

Casey rubs my back. “You really need to get laid.”

No shit.

“I can help with that.” Tathan nods like he’s eager.

Zane giggles, his cheeks flushing. “I bet you can, big guy.”

Oh boy.

Tathan laughs, again, the ringing of his phone preventing him from answering him. He picks it up, winking at Zane.

Every day. It’s like this every damn day lately.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

It's nearing ten, and I'm supposed to be scheduling a meeting for Paul with Connor Development, but instead, I'm watching Tathan eat an apple, wishing my pussy was that apple.

I have to physically turn my head from him, and even that doesn't help right away. I have to force myself to pay attention to the call I'm on.

The conference call ends, and I'm starving, so I purchase M&M's from the vending machine on the second floor. Back at my desk, I empty the entire bag, count them and then organize them by color before I eat them. I'll admit I'm a little OCD when it comes to colors and chocolate.

My lunch break goes by too fast, and I'm then forced to figure out how to pass the time for the rest of the day since Paul left for a meeting downtown. It's not like he's been around much the last six months, and I'm very efficient at my job, so it leaves for a lot of downtime in the afternoons.

My entertainment?

Craigslist.

It's my way of getting back at Tathan for all his teasing. I post an ad on there for a handyman looking for extra work. I address the title as: Construction Worker looking for Handy Work.

In the description for work, I add: Will accept trades for payments, known to work without my shirt.

Then I put Tathan's desk phone as the contact number and nearly burst out laughing thinking of his face when he gets that first call.

It's not the first time I've posted an ad on Craigslist for him. Clearly. Remember the car ad last night? Two weeks ago, I posted an ad on there for a construction worker looking for a cleaning lady. It's amazing the response you get when you add the word construction worker. That time I gave them Tathan's address and sat at my door with a bowl of popcorn and gummy bears watching the congregation of ladies file through.

Tathan wasn't amused.

I was.

He made the mistake of answering the door in his usual attire, no shirt. By the tenth woman, he'd added a sweater, and a North Face winter jacket even though it was ninety degrees out.

Forty-one minutes and sixteen seconds after posting my newest ad, Tathan picks up his phone that has been ringing non-stop.

"Madsen Construction," he answers, his eyes on his computer screen, seeming annoyed.

"Who?" Confusion marks his eyes. "Um, no. . . I didn't post an ad. . . . Who is this?" He pauses, shaking his head. "Zane, it's me Tathan."

Tathan peeks around his computer and smirks. He's a quick fucker. He catches on fairly soon I'm the one who posted it.

I almost wet my pants trying to stifle the laughter that's begging to erupt. Zane saw the ad on Craigslist without me even letting him in on my plan. That boy has a fetish

for construction workers swinging their hammers. This is why he works for Madsen Construction.

With a black bag over his shoulder, Tathan leaves the office after an hour of smirking and winking at every X-chromosome that walks by.

He stops by my desk, like he always does before he leaves. “Dinner tonight?”

“Not a chance,” I say without looking up. Despite my response, he lingers. I continue to pretend to type something and accidentally send an e-mail to Casey with just a shitload of letters jumbled together.

“Come on, Amalie, I just want to have a meal with you.” I can feel him staring at me. “And I think you owe me one after your dog peed at my door.”

“I replaced your doormat. And you don’t want a meal. . . you want to make me the meal and throw me in the Bucket of Sluts.” I spin in my chair to face him, getting a little dizzy in the process. “I’m not bucket material.” I click my pen obsessively to keep my hands busy.

If they weren’t busy, I’d probably be unbuttoning his jeans or fanning myself with a manila folder as I envision myself unbuttoning his jeans with my teeth.

Tathan sighs as his one hand adjusts his bag, the other on the cubicle partition. “You’re right. I do want you, but not in my bucket. I don’t even know what that means.” He chuckles when he says bucket. So do I because the way he says it is funny. The thought isn’t lost on me that we have something in common—we think the word bucket is funny which makes me think we have similar personalities and we’re probably fairly compatible.

“See. . . you like me,” he points out when I laugh with him. “I don’t know why you try

to avoid me.”

“I have to work. What do you even do here?” I don’t think Tathan does anything at work. He sits at his desk, watches me, and leaves around noon most days. Sometimes he’s in Paul’s office, and sometimes he’s working on the computer. Not often.

“Please go to dinner with me.”

“No.”

Paul comes around the corner, having returned from his meeting and hands Tathan a note.

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“Okay.” Tathan nods after reading it and turns to leave, he pauses to adjust his bag and stares at me. “Are you sure?”

No. “I’m sure.”

I watch him disappear down the hall. Actually, I watch his ass in those jeans until Paul clears his throat.

I snap my eyes to his. “What do you want?” I ask, forgetting who I’m talking to.

He laughs, the same laugh all his sons have. The kind that makes me smile, warm and toasty, “snowy winter day with hot chocolate in front of the fireplace” kind of warm and toasty. Not that I’ve ever seen snow. I live in Arizona and have my entire life.

“You know, Amalie.” He pauses, twisting around to walk back to his office. “I like you.”

“Yeah, people keep saying that to me today.” I face my computer and flick the monitor. “Must be my winning personality.”

Tathan doesn’t show back up the rest of the day; this makes me happy and sad. I have no idea what my plan was and why I need to hate him. My problem is I kinda like the guy.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

Tathan's shiny Lexus is in the parking lot at our apartment building when I get off work, the silver paint gleaming in the setting sun, parked next to Casey's car.

Casey usually stays the night with me on Fridays since Bryan works the night shift on the weekends.

I'm inside the lobby with its air-conditioning blasting my face. I check my mailbox, and sure enough, he's taken my mail, again. I want to remind him stealing someone's mail is a federal offense, but I'm sure to a guy like him that wouldn't matter. I'd call the cops, but he'd probably wink, and the officer would let it go. Or my luck a female officer would show up, and he'd invite her in.

Instead, I ask the receptionist who usually ignores me. "Excuse me, Ms., can you tell me how someone could get into my mailbox?" I hold my keys up, dangling them in the air. "My mail is missing nearly every day, and my neighbor takes it."

Ripping out her earbud, the girl behind the counter stares at me like I'm speaking a language she doesn't understand. "What?"

I frown, knowing I'm not getting anywhere with this gum-popping twit. "Never mind."

Making my way upstairs, I pound my fist on Tathan's door and almost die when he opens it. He's still wearing the jeans from earlier only the shirt is gone. It's everything I can do to, one, not run my fingertips over the muscles popping out, and two, not stare, but when he turns his back, I do wipe the drool from the corner of my mouth and follow him inside.

“Where’s my mail?”

He gives a small grin, rubbing the back of his left hand down the side of his jaw.

“Where’s that dog of yours?”

“Haven’t freed him yet.”

“I set your mail over there.” He points to his dining room table.

Okay, so he’s making me get it myself. Probably so he can trap me inside and tie me up. Not that I’m against that sort of thing. I’d probably let him tie me up at this point. Sadly.

I’m not sure what to expect when I step foot in the apartment as I’ve never been inside before. We’ve lived next door to each other for months now, and this is my first adventure inside.

Not gonna lie, I half expected to see whips and chains around the room or maybe an X-rated room like Jade as well as a box of porn on the counter, but no such luck.

He’s actually normal.

Lining the walls of the entryway are family photos of him and his brothers. Even some of Aldon and him when they were younger. The more I look around, the harder it is to remember why I hate him.

Earlier today, I googled the symptoms of Chlamydia in a female so I could repeat them to myself whenever I have a lapse in judgment, like now. I try to repeat them, but I can’t seem to recall even one of the symptoms.

Casually, I glance around the apartment, which is exactly the same layout as mine,

but still seems different. His furnishings are modern, with cool spa-like colors on the walls. It's somewhat relaxing with the framed black-and-white photos everywhere.

Immediately, I recognize the style of them. They have the same markings as the ones in the office at work, the same ones in the coffee shop, and the same ones in the foyer of our apartment complex.

The photographer Casey's trying to land. This Elliott Warren is literally everywhere I look.

Though I have no reason to be annoyed with this Elliott guy, I'm annoyed at how everyone worships his photography. Nobody is that good at taking pictures that the whole city has to treat him like he's the Paris Hilton of the photography world.

I'll admit hating this guy has more to do with the fact that everyone loved my ex-boyfriend in high school. Everyone. Even my dad thought he was the greatest. And look how that turned out. It was awful. He was lying, deceitful and a bastard.

"Not you too," I groan. "Everyone is obsessed with Elliott Warren. I mean Christ, you'd think the guy was a member of the Beatles or some shit."

Tathan smirks and looks up at me with a contemplative expression. "Hmm. . . well, he's good at what he does. Don't you think?"

"Pft. . ." I wave my hand around. "Overrated if you ask me."

He lets out a laugh that's somewhere between a laugh and a sigh, or a cough, can't be sure, but it surprises me and makes me smile. It's adorable and has me wanting to stay and banter longer, but I must go for the sake of my will. If I stay longer, he may weaken me.

“He has Chlamydia,” I repeat this several times as I walk toward the door, but unfortunately, I say it out loud.

“Who has Chlamydia?” He smiles, looking at his phone and then at me as if he can’t quite figure me out.

Believe me, dude, I can’t even figure myself out these days.

I ignore him. “I better go before Casey decides to sign me up for eHarmony.” I motion to the door.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

She has a key to my apartment and I know damn well she's trying to marry me off. Since she got engaged, it's become her mission to find me a guy to marry, like she wants me to suffer with her.

"Night, Amalie."

God, why do you have to talk so sexily?

"Yeah, you too." I smile, trying to be nice for once.

As much as I don't want to admit it, I look forward to getting my mail every night from him. I don't even ask how he gets inside my locking mailbox to get it. Pathetic, I know. I've only just begun this plan, and I'm already falling for my manwhore neighbor/cubicle partner from hell. It's like I'm a glutton for punishment, or worse, like I'm trying to become the president of his Crush Brigade. God, help me.

As I expect, when I make my way inside my apartment, Casey has my laptop open and is creeping on my Facebook page.

I knew I should have logged out last night. Shaking my head, I walk toward the living room to put my mail on my counter, never bothering to look at it.

Oliver practically attacks me as soon as I'm through the door. All body wiggles and snorts and trying to get me to pet him.

Casey twists her head, grinning, which makes me nervous because whenever she acts like this, it's because she's done something she shouldn't have. Like signing me up

for eHarmony or Match.com. She's done it four times, and every time I've deleted the profile she created for me.

As I step closer, the nerves creep over me. My page is up on Facebook, and she's looking at the notifications in the upper right corner of the screen.

I'm going to kill her. That's it. No need for her to get married because she will be dead. "Did you—?" I look at the notification she's focused on.

Tathan Madsen has accepted your friend request.

What.

The.

Fuck.

She can't be serious.

"Say what?"

"I didn't mean to." Casey's eyes widen, scanning my apartment and never landing on my face. "I went to click on his name, and it pressed the button to friend him."

Bull. Shit. She's trying to defend herself with a lie. I know this because Casey can't lie. If she does, she won't look at you. And look at her now, eyes roaming.

"Casey Ann McDaniel!" Stomping over to her, I slap her shoulder. "What have you done?"

She pushes a glass of wine she poured for me in my direction, knowing this would be

my reaction. “I’m sorry?”

“Casey.” I moan, throwing myself on the couch and flopping my arms over my face. “The friend button isn’t anywhere near his name. That wasn’t an accident, and now he’s going to think I like him.”

She makes a snorting noise. “Because you do.”

I don’t answer her because I’m too busy thinking about how to fix this. That certainly explains the grin when I was over there.

Goddamn it. That’s just fucking great. Now he’s gonna think I like him. There goes any plan I had to make him miserable. I can’t do that if we’re Facebook friends. “How do you cancel that?”

“Can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” I jab my finger offensively at the screen. “Unfriend him.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “You like him, admit it. There’s no harm in being Facebook friends with him and look at his page, the dude’s deep.”

Deep? Not likely.

“I do not like him.” As much as I don’t want to, my eyes drift to the screen and his profile page plastered with photographs of sunrises. Son of a sucker. “I hate. . . him.” Christ, that was damn near painful to say.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

As always, Casey sees through my lies and rolls her eyes. “Sure you do.”

Screw her and her logical points.

As I contemplate my next move, I drink a glass of wine with Oliver on my lap. But as hard as I try to avoid the screen, I crack and stalk Tathan’s Facebook page and all his pictures once Casey is asleep and not there to watch me drool over my neighbor.

He has a ton of photos. The man is a photo whore. Tons of selfies of him and his brothers and sunset pictures from all over the world. Not kidding, there’s one from Egypt. Fucking Egypt.

I do notice he has photographed sunsets from a hill in Phoenix I recognize as Camelback Mountain. I hike it all the time.

Scanning through each one, it’s clear he’s a family man, passionate, and has one special spot, just like me where he goes, and nothing else matters, but his thoughts.

Damn it. I knew it. He’s a nice guy.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

Saturday morning, I'm staring at my iPad drinking my coffee and waiting for Casey to get out of my bathroom. I have to work this morning, and then we're heading to the bridal expo, but it's nice with the warm sun coming in through my window and the fresh aroma of black coffee, puppy on my lap. . . . Makes me want to sit here all day.

Just as I'm contemplating ways I might be able to fake a sickness and not do a damn thing today, someone knocks at my door.

Oliver's ears perk up, a soft growl emitting from his tiny body. "Shhhh." I pat his head softly, trying to calm the crazy little bugger. "No need to get all worked up."

Leaving Oliver on the couch, I open the door and come face-to-face with Tathan once again. The moment I see his face, his photographs flash in my head and that damn friend request. Goddamn you, Casey.

I want to shut the door in his face, but I can't. I simply stand there and stare like a freaking idiot.

It's his appearance I can't shake—dressed in black slacks with a matching black button-down long-sleeved shirt. Of course, the top few buttons are undone, and my eyes are drawn there. There's no denying how sexy this man is, unfortunately.

Hello, Johnny Cash.

I have half a mind to lean forward and smell him. I bet he smells amazing. Not doing this comes from my impeccable restraint against him. There's just something about a

man who looksthatgood I can't quite resist.

Tathan grins, looking over my dress. "You look hot." He licks his lips, leaning into the doorframe, his hands in his pockets. "Who's the lucky guy?"

He always ruins it by talking. "What do you want?"

"You."

I roll my eyes taking a step back. "Funny."

"I try to be."

I start to close the door in his face, but his foot stops me. "You forgot this." He hands me my power bill I must have dropped last night in his apartment.

I meet his eyes, and I regret it simply for the fact that they draw me in with their tenderness. "You know. . ." I clear my throat when I realize how scratchy my voice sounds. "I'm fully capable of retrieving my own mail. How do you even get it? My mailbox locks."

"I have connections. And how else would I annoy you?" he asks, leaning closer to me, as if he's waiting for me to invite him in. I don't because Casey is in there and she will make it awkward by saying something in front of him.

"You look good. Where are you heading?" His eyes rake down my body again. "I thought you had to work today?"

"I do have to work," I tell him, avoiding where I'm going after work.

"Ah, come on," he whispers, "give me something."

Don't talk like that. Don't alter your voice to a whisper around me because it weakens my hatred for you.

"Give you what?"

"You never answered my question." Without any shame, he looks at my tits.

"My eyes are up here, dude. What question?"

He nods at my dress, and I remember he asked who the lucky guy was.

I choke on my own spit, which by the way, is embarrassing when you do it in front of Tathan. "No one."

What's even more embarrassing than choking on your own spit is biting your tongue in the process in front of quite possibly the hottest male on the face of the planet.

"Okay, so if there's no one, then why is it that you keep saying no?"

I want to shove him against the wall and kiss him so badly. His lips remind me of pillows, so soft and I bet they're warm, too.

Folding my arms over my chest, I try not to stare at him. "Because I don't want to go out with you."

"Why?"

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I snort. “Because I don’t.”

“But you have no actual reason. . . just that you don’t? Is it that you don’t find me attractive?”

He knows that isn’t it. By the look on his face, he definitely knows. “Why should I go out with you, Tathan? Give me one good reason.”

“Because I’m a nice guy.”

Okay, well that’s a good one. I know damn well he’s a nice guy.

“A nice guy who steals my mail. It’s a federal offense, you know that, right?”

He smiles. It’s bright and wide; our bantering causes those cute dimples of perfection he has. “You gonna call the cops on me?”

“I might.”

“So you won’t go out with me, and you’re going to have me arrested. Hmmm. . .” He laughs. “You humping anyone then?”

Humping? Did he really just say that?

“Are you a thirteen-year-old boy?” It’s everything in my power not to laugh. “Who says humping?”

You do, Amalie. You said it last week to Zane.

I start to close my door, but he stops me; his foot wedges between the door and the frame. “Wait, are you going to answer my question?”

“No.” I push against the door. “Move your foot.”

He does as I say, surprisingly, and I can’t wipe the damn grin off my face even if I try. “No, you’re not going to answer, orno, you’re not humping anyone?”

“Bye, Tathan,” I say, and smile to myself once it’s closed.

I hear him groan, banging his head against my door.

Thrilled I’m finally getting to him, I lean my back into the door. Casey comes around the corner and puts on her shoes, one hand on my shoulder balancing herself, the other slipping on her heels. “Who was that?”

“No one.” I don’t look at her and reach for my own shoes.

She looks over my shoulder at the door. “There was testosterone in here. I can smell it.”

“No, there wasn’t.” I grab my keys off the counter. “I’m running late for work. Pick me up at noon.”

Casey is easily distracted—just like Zane—so by me reaching for my keys on the counter, she is on to the next topic.

The wedding.

Which helps me out tremendously because it's less explaining that I have to do about the testosterone that was at my door.

Casey and Zane are beyond excited about the wedding expo.

Really, I can't blame them, it's exciting. Weddings are meant to be. So with all the anticipation, I agree to just about anything on the way out the door. I do this so she won't ask about Tathan.

I even agree to brunch with her tomorrow to go over the bridal shower next weekend, and I hate brunch. I don't like the idea of a meal not having a designated title like breakfast or lunch. I don't like anything that's in between. Like gray. I hate that color because why can't it just decide if it's black or white?

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Work is boring. Saturday's usually are. We're never busy, but I do get a lot done with the meeting minutes I was behind on because Tathan's not there so I'm not constantly staring at him. It's amazing what you can get done when you're not drooling over man candy.

Casey picks me up at noon, and we head into downtown Phoenix. Zane meets us at the hotel where the expo is being held, already inside and checking out dresses.

Inside the expo center, we lose each other at some point, probably because I camped out at the wedding cakes sampling them. Who better to sample the cakes, but the girl who loves cake?

An hour later, I feel like my gut might explode and Casey finds me. It's for the better. I probably would have eaten cake pops until my stomach did in fact explode just so I had a reason to leave.

Casey. . . she's excited because she's found exactly who she was looking for, Mr. Elliott Warren himself. From the many women passing by, I heard he was in attendance but really had no desire to actually meet the narcissistic asshole.

As you know, Casey has been searching for a photographer since she and Bryan got engaged on Christmas, but hasn't had any luck. Mostly because she only wanted Elliott Warren. This meant she had a very specific mission today.

Word on the street is this dude is pretty much unattainable unless you know someone who can get in touch with him. It's like he's a damn mob boss. I half expect the guy to have bodyguards surrounding him.

“Amalie,” Casey’s voice shrieks, too excited. “You have to come meet him. He’s freaking hot too!”

She thinks everyone is hot, but I know exactly who she’s talking about.

“Doubt that.” I don’t know about you, but I don’t exactly think of photographers as being hot, but I guess I don’t know any either. I’m not even entirely sure how Casey knows he’s hot, considering there are throngs of women around him and I’m only seeing bits and pieces of his body.

How can one guy be that damn special?

“He winked at me, Amalie. At me!” she says, pointing to herself. She looks so happy I don’t want to let her down, so I agree, against my better judgment and act excited.

“I’ll come meet the famous Elliott Warren,” I say, giving up because Casey’s relentless at times.

Grabbing another bite of the chocolate truffle cake and a bottle of water, I’m dragged away to the photographer area of the expo.

“Look, there he is.” Casey points to my left.

As soon as she points, I choke on the drink of water I just took. You wouldn’t believe it, or maybe you saw this coming all along, but standing there changing lenses while women drool over his every move is Tathan.

My Tathan.

With my mouth open gawking at him, he takes that exact moment to look up from his camera to meet my horrified stare. And then gives me a once over and winks.

Naturally, this would be his reaction. Jerk.

I'm half tempted to run over there and punch him in the face or kiss him—one of the two is a good option.

Shifting my weight from one foot to another, like I have to pee, I glare my best “you must die” stare. And again, as if he knows he's been caught, he smiles, practically laughing and motions with his finger for me to come over.

It's everything I can do right then not to flip him off and mouth, “Fuck you,” at him.

“Have you met him before?” Casey asks, confused by his gesture. She looks closer, squinting at him. “Wait a second, I know that beard.”

“Are you blind?” I growl, angry he didn't tell me this when I was expressing my hate for his work yesterday. “That's Tathan Madsen!”

“As in the Tathan who lives next door to you? Tathan that we work with? Like Paul's son? How did I not know this before?” she asks, awestruck eyes. “Wait. . . so that would mean that Tathan is Elliott Warren?”

“If it wasn't for your math skills, I would think you were like nine years old,” I tell her, shaking my head in disbelief.

A light finally goes off and her eyes gloss over with excitement. “Oh my God. . . maybe he'll take my photos!”

She pushes me forward. “You should go over there. It looks like he wants to talk to you.”

She just wants me to ask him to take her photos.

“Of course he does,” I snap, walking away. “I’m busy.”

“With what?”

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“Tasting cakes.” I find the cake table again and shove a piece of chocolate mousse cake in my mouth. “We have to find the perfect chocolate cake.” I can’t think straight. My mind is a scrambled mess. How could I have not known who he was?

Casey follows me. “I thought most wedding cakes are white?”

“Does it matter?”

“Are you mad at him?” Casey tries to take the cake away from me so she can sample it.

I hand her a plate. “Yes, I’m mad.” German chocolate crumbs fly out of my mouth and onto Casey’s plate. Her eyes squint at the crumbs when I speak, not sure if she should be disgusted or listening to me. “I chastised his photography skills in front of him, making me look like an asshole, and he didn’t even have the decency to tell me that he was Elliott Warren or Tathan. He’s living a double life. Like Spiderman or Batman.”

“Maybe he was embarrassed after that,” she suggests. “You can be intimidating at times, Amalie.”

“Like when?”

“Like now. . . .” She sets down the plate. “Just go say hello. Maybe he has a reason for not telling you.”

Of course he does.

Maybe he does. . . I was kind of rude, wasn't I?

I'm still angry though. He should have said something.

Casey looks like she's about to defend him again, but I hold up my hand, stopping her. "Whatever. He should have said something."

Wanting to change the subject away from me because I'm about to have a heart attack with how hard my heart is pounding, I eat. I continue keeping busy with the cake samples and the most delicious invention in the world. Cake pops.

I'm not sure who invented them, but they are pure genius. What's better than cake on a stick that you can take anywhere and not get your hands dirty? And they are just so damn cute. They come in all sorts of flavors and colors with the most adorable decorations on the outside. A little slice of heaven. . . in a ball. . . on a stick. Sheer perfection.

DESPITE MY EARLY tantrum, the cake has a calming effect on me, and I sneak away later, of course, to watch Tathan in the seclusion of the crowd where I can properly stalk him without him knowing.

I never would have expected this, but Tathan is amazing when he photographs.

Four couples dressed in wedding attire surround him, each one in their own pose as he captures various shots of them dancing. His brooding eyes concentrate on his work, his lips somewhat pouty with concentration, examining every shot after he takes them.

As I watch him, all I can think about is him taking pictures of me preferably while I'm in his bed. Lighting low, me dressed erotically, him wearing absolutely nothing. Then him setting down the camera and seductively stripping away all my clothes.

Imagine the possibilities and the outcome of that situation.

After Tathan finishes, the women continue to flirt with him, but I see that when he's taking photographs, he's in a different mindset, ignoring their advances with a polite smile.

Before Casey can catch me—or worse, Zane—drooling over Tathan, or Elliott. . . or whatever, I sneak away and find Casey paying for a dress she decided on. Pale white and wide eyes, she looks as though she's about ready to throw up.

“Dude, I can't believe I spent five grand on a motherfucking dress.” She stares at the dress in her hand carefully holding it up in fear it may touch the ground. “It's making me sick.”

I hand her a cake pop from the stash in my purse. Believe it or not, they wrapped them up for me in cute little bags with ribbon.

“I can.” I eat the one in my hand in one bite. “And you'll only wear it once.”

“Screw that.” She eats the cake pop, mindful not to get it on the plastic covering the dress by leaning forward. “I'm going to wear this damn thing once a month. Expect me to show up at work wearing it.”

The entertaining part about that is Casey would totally do something like that.

As Casey and I are walking around looking for Zane, Tathan is walking toward us with his camera in hand looking both worn-out and curious as to what my reaction will be.

I want to run the other way, but there are people everywhere, and there's nowhere to go but toward him. Especially when Casey refuses to let me run away.

As he approaches, I watch his every move, the bright white lighting of the room making him stand out in his all-black attire.

God, he's fucking beautiful, so dark and handsome.

And then he speaks.

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“Are you trying to avoid me, Amalie?” he whispers in my ear as he leans into my shoulder, his warmth undeniably inviting.

Drawing back, he waits for my answer.

Zane chooses then to find us, confusion all over his face as he has no idea what happened earlier.

“Yes.” I want to wipe that smirk off his fucking face. And then lick it. “You’re making it difficult.”

Tathan puts his hand on his chest, gasping. “I’m hurt.”

Damn it. I’m fighting back a smile. “Yeah, right. I doubt that.”

He leans closer so his lips are touching my ear. Zane looks like he’s going to have a heart attack as Tathan does this. Casey too.

“I don’t see your date with you.” Tathan’s voice is extra raspy. It makes me shiver with excitement. . . or anticipation, maybe, you know, at this point I’m not even sure what the emotions I have are anymore when it comes to him. I know I don’t like it.

“Why didn’t you tell me your real name?” I take a step back. “Or what is your real name?”

He shifts, almost uncomfortably, if you could possibly make someone like him uncomfortable. “You seemed so appalled by Elliott I thought I could continue to be

Tathan.” In probably the most adorable gesture a man like him can make, he scrunches his nose. “You seem to like him better.”

I jab my finger in his chest. “Well, the cat’s out of the bag, isn’t it?”

He smirks. Just fucking smirks. Like him forgetting to tell me who he actually is, is funny to him.

“Whatisyour name?”

He holds out his hand. “Tathan Elliott Madsen.”

I don’t shake it. Nope. Not happening. I actually fold my arms over my chest. “Why do you go by Elliott Warren?”

“Because it’s easier, and Warren is my mother’s maiden name. It’s kind of a tribute to her.” He shrugs, and I feel like a complete asshole. His voice is softer when he speaks, as if he’s trying to maintain some privacy in the thick crowd. “No one knows me as Tathan in photography. Outside of it, I live a normal life. It’s like a pen name.”

Damn it, that makes perfect sense. “Okay, fine. But why do you sit next to me at work then if you’re a photographer?Clearly, you don’t need the money.”

He seems nervous for the first time since I met him, probably because Zane and Casey are staring at us and have been watching this entire interaction. “Paul hired me as a contractor. I photograph the homes for the company. Then I do the editing and posting of them at the office.”

“So you only come into the office for editing? Couldn’t you do that at home?”

He glances at Casey, Zane, and then me again, so many emotions cross his face that I

can't even process which one scares me more. They all do. Every single one of them.

But the biggest shocker of all comes with his words, "And because of you. . . ." He cringes, after the words pass his lips, like he's afraid of my reaction.

You've heard of fight or flight. . . right? I only know flight these days.

I turn and run away.

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I ran out of the expo with Casey. Right out of there, stopped by the store for some ice cream and then back to my apartment.

By the time we get inside, Oliver is cowered in the corner, and I realize why fairly quickly. He's peed on the kitchen floor. Again.

Some think—like Zane—that because Oliver is a dog, he shouldn't annoy me. It happens to every couple, even in a dog/human relationship. Live with anyone for longer than a few days, and you're bound to get annoyed with one another. Dogs are no exception.

“Come on.” I motion for Casey to get off the couch where she's staring at her dress in her hand. “I have to walk Oliver, and I'm not doing it alone.”

Gently, she hangs her dress up in the coat closet next to the door. “Let's go in the hot tub.”

“Fine, but we have to bring Oliver.”

We both change into our swimsuits. As I'm putting Oliver's leash on him, Casey reaches for her cell phone.

I eye it offensively, and she feels the need to explain. “In case Bryan calls me.”

I'm not buying that, are you?

“Uh-huh.”

Her eyes drift to my body as I wrap the towel around my chest. “Damn girl. Swimming does your body good.”

Pushing her hands away, I reach for her towel and throw it at her. “Grab that bottle of wine.”

Outside, Casey smiles at Tathan’s door when we pass by it. I know she’s dying to go inside and beg him to take her wedding photos now that she knows exactly who he is.

“Stay off your phone,” I warn her, opening the gate to the pool and hot tub.

Inside the courtyard, she guards her phone and I know she’s on Facebook because I can see the blue login screen as it lights her face in the night.

“I’m texting Bryan.”

“You are not.”

“I am.” She shows me her screen of a selfie she just took of herself in her bikini and sent to him.

“You guys are sick.”

All in all, I’m happy for them. Jealous, yes. But happy.

“You know what makes me mad?” Casey asks, once we’re in the hot tub and Oliver is lying beside us on our towels.

“What, Casey?” I twist to the side to fill my wine glass and Casey’s.

“Over the last three months, I’ve sent Elliott Warren like a million messages.” She

takes her phone and turns on some music for us. “Not once has he replied. I mean, it’s kinda rude when you think about it. I have a bone to pick with him.”

“He’s an asshole.” I bring the wine glass to my lips.

“Or just that famous,” Casey adds, playing with the wet strands of her hair as I hand her wine to her. “I bet he has someone who checks his messages for him. I bet he has a maid too.”

“I don’t understand him.” I face her, holding my wine in one hand. “He’s so confusing. And damn it, he lied to me.”

“Technically, he didn’t lie to you,” she points out, picking up her cell phone beside her, careful not to let it drop in the water. “You never asked him if he was Elliott Warren. He just didn’t tell you he was a famous photographer.”

“Whatever. He’s my neighbor. You would think I would know something like that. I didn’t even put two and two together when I saw the framed photos in his apartment.”

“Like I said.” She sets her phone down, turning it over, so the screen doesn’t get wet. “You’re intimidating.”

I get defensive. “What are you going to do when you’re married? You can’t stay here every Friday and Saturday night.” I slump down in the water until the bubbles hit my chin and tickle my nose.

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“I’ll still be with you. Bryan is on the night shift until his residency ends,” Casey tells me, as if I should have known this. Which I did. “You know I can’t stay alone at night by myself.”

A year ago, Casey was at home alone when a man broke into their apartment about six miles from here. She was unharmed, and the guy freaked out and left when he realized Casey was home, but still, it was an invasion, and she never stayed there alone anymore.

I can’t blame her because I would be the exact same way. The idea of someone coming into your home, unwelcomed with malicious intent, is just plain scary.

“Yes, I know,” I finally admit. “Maybe you can pay half my rent then since you’re staying here.” I’m joking, but Casey looks appalled.

“No.”

“That’s mean. You should at least offer since you’re here so often.”

She rolls her eyes. “You don’t make Oliver pay half the rent.”

Oliver’s ears perk up at the mention of his name, but he doesn’t move from his position on my towel. “He’s a puppy.”

Casey starts laughing, covering her mouth with her hand. “I still can’t believe Zane named his puppy Prada.”

“I can. Remember the goldfish he had last year and he named it Gucci?”

“How could I forget? He cried when it died.”

He really did.

Casey and I are down there about ten minutes, talking about the bachelorette party when I see Tathan walking toward the gate with a towel in hand and his swim shorts on.

I glare at Casey. “You tagged us in the hot tub, didn’t you?”

She nods, smiling so wide her eyes squint.

Setting my wine down, I splash water in her face. “You’re an asshole.”

Casey says nothing more as Tathan approaches. “Hello, ladies.”

I want to drown myself. And then have him resuscitate me back to life.

“I’m getting married in two weeks,” Casey announces, trying to get her foot in the door when Tathan emerges himself waist deep in the water next to me.

Tathan nods, smiling politely at her, but says nothing to her directly.

I suppose in a sense he’s polite, but there’s a certain amount of shyness present when he’s around a group of people. It’s almost like he’s a completely different person, guarded and unsure.

“Are you excited?” he asks Casey, making an attempt at conversation when I don’t say anything to him.

“I am.” And that sends Casey into a conversation I’m not sure Tathan is prepared for. “We met when we were fifteen, and I can’t wait to finally be married to him. He’s in the middle of his internship at Deer Valley Hospital where’s he’s going to be a surgeon.”

Tathan nods to everything she’s saying as she goes into detail about the proposal and everything she has left to do.

He knows exactly what she’s getting at when she says, “I’m still searching for a photographer.”

A good amount of silence follows that statement, and he smiles, understanding what she’s waiting for.

Only it doesn’t come.

He says nothing to her, but smiles and takes a drink of his beer he brought down with him.

Maybe he’s playing hard to get, I might never know, but I laugh despite what happens.

Oliver, who’s beside me licking my wine glass knocks it over when Casey’s phone starts ringing.

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She picks it up and answers, Tathan's eyes shift to mine so I look over at Oliver and pet his ears. Immediately he's trying to drink my wine. Damn dog is an alcoholic already.

"Buddy, no." I tap his nose to keep him from drinking the spilled wine.

"It's Bryan." Casey grabs his leash and holds the phone away from her ear for a second. "I'll take him up with me."

"I'll come with you." I go to get out, but she waves me off and gives me that look like don't be rude.

"You stay."

I do, but I don't like it.

Well, I don't want to like it.

Truth is, I want to be around Tathan, I just don't want to admit it to myself.

"Tell me the truth." He looks at me once Casey's gone. "Did Casey tag me down here and that's why you came down?"

"I wouldn't know." His tone seems off when he replies, but I can tell he's not lying. Honest eyes never lie. "Didn't look."

"Why did you come down here then?"

He shrugs. “Long day.”

“I bet.”

He seems hesitant to look at me, his eyes on the palm trees swaying in the gentle breeze. “I never meant for that to be a lie. Just didn’t think it mattered.”

“I guess it didn’t,” I say, knowing it doesn’t. If he wants to go by a different name for the sake of maintaining privacy, that’s up to him.

The only reason I was mad was because I was caught off guard by it. At least I’m telling myself that tonight. It’s also the wine in my hand telling me that.

For now, I’m going to try not to stare at him, let the warmth of the hot tub calm my Tathan/Elliott frazzled nerves, and do my best to not dream about hot tub sex with him sitting this close.

He moves closer to me to the point where I can feel his breath on my shoulder.

Leaning in, he whispers in my ear. “Don’t be mad, please.”

I turn my head, ready to say something, but he’s so close that I could kiss him. I want to. He’s beautiful and tempting and it’d be so easy.

Just lean in.

I’m about to when I finally gather my senses. “I gotta go.”

I jump up out of the water, reaching for my towel and run away for the second time today.

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I never saw this coming. Did you? I bet you did, didn't you?

And you know, I had a feeling Tathan had some secrets. Just one look at the dude and it's certain he has them. No man who looks like him is single without a reason for being single.

“How could I have been so blind? I mean. . . how could I havenotseen this coming?”

I'm asking all these questions to Oliver, who has a small drop of paint on his back.

It's Sunday morning and I'm painting my kitchen. I like to paint to distract myself. My apartment has so many different colors in it now you'd think I was a paint store.

My thoughts must have been on Tathan because I went with a chocolate color for my kitchen. Consequently, this makes me think of his eyes.

Most people don't paint apartments, but I do. Yeah, I'll change it back, but I like to be at home and painting makes me feel at home.

After my second coat, I'm getting into my music selection and starting to shake my ass a little. Okay, I'm not gonna lie. I'm shaking my ass like I'm auditioning for a music video, which reminds me of the dance with Tathan at the Red Revolver.

Once the song's finished, I'm panting, out of breath and clutching my side. “Damn, Oliver, I really need to do more cardio.”

And then there's a clapping sound.

Turning quickly—though I don't want to—I'm met with Tathan standing there, no shirt, watching in just a pair of worn khaki shorts sporting that same damn smirk.

I hate him. His Sunday morning looks are just as good as the other six days of the week.

Why does he have to be so hot? And he's half-naked again to tease me.

Does he ever walk around fully clothed?

Doubtful with that body. I would probably walk around naked as well if my stomach looked like that.

“Don't stop on my account, Amalie,” he says with an amused smirk, his twinkling eyes focused on my ass as he motions for me to continue.

Oliver looks up at him and growls at Tathan, but doesn't move. It's apparent Tathan's not worth the effort to him at the moment.

“What do you want and how did you get in here?” I growl, sounding a little like Oliver. I admit, I'm a little embarrassed at the show I gave him and still peeved that he didn't tell me he's Elliott Warren.

He shrugs once, seemingly not deterred by the harshness and hands me a paper. “Sunday paper. Wasn't sure if you're the kind of girl who looks through sales ads.”

He knows I'm not. This is his way to annoy me or get me to like him. Probably a little of both at this point.

“I'm capable of retrieving my own paper, thank you.” I'm only bitter because I feel so damn exposed here. I was just shaking my ass shamelessly not knowing I had an

audience.

I want your mouth on me.

Shit. Stop!

He nods, his right hand running over his jaw. "You keep telling me that."

I love your hands. I want them on my body.

"But yet you never listen."

"I know." He's smirking again. "It gives me an excuse to talk to you." He leans up against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "You could continue." He motions with his hands. "I was enjoying myself."

"I'm sure you were, buddy. I don't do private dances," I tell him. "And you are going to need to wash off that paint before it sticks to you."

His brow furrows. "What paint?"

"The paint on your arm." I try not to laugh.

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He looks at me, confused again. At this point, I have to sigh and roll my eyes. Then it dawns on him, finally, that he's leaning against a wet wall.

He chuckles as he stares at his arm and then walks toward the door.

"Happy showering," I tell him with a huge smirk because I'm already envisioning water beading on that tight hot body of his. Then I can towel dry him. . . shit. . . stop!

"Thanks to your little show there, it will be happy showering," he taunts over his shoulder. "Thanks."

"No problem. Enjoy your time."

As I expect, he stops before he reaches the door and tilts his head to the side as he grins, like I told him he won the lottery.

Oliver, not liking his proximity, growls again.

He glances down at my dog and then to me. "Care to assist me?"

"Nope," I say quickly, and I'm actually surprised I said it so quickly because it's not at all what I'm thinking.

Mentally I'm already standing beside him with water beading on every hard surface of his body.

I can't help but smile again once he leaves. Thinking of Tathan—thinking of me—in

the shower doing things that have nothing whatsoever to do with bathing makes me smile.

Oliver looks up at me like I'm crazy, which I am, but refuse to admit it out loud to anyone, even if it is a puppy.

“Shut up, Oliver.” He looks up at me but doesn't say anything, because, you know, he's a dog. “Stop judging me.”

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Monday mornings are never my favorite day of the week at work. I don't think anyone wakes up on a Monday ready to start the week with enthusiasm. Well, I take that back.

My dad had this nurse from hospice who came once a week to check on him, coincidentally on Mondays, and I've never in my entire twenty-three years seen someone with more enthusiasm to be alive on a Monday. Maybe it was because of her line of work, or maybe she was just a happy woman. Come to think of it, her name was Joy. I shit you not. It was fucking Joy.

Anyways, Joy used to pop off with all kinds of happy lines when she'd come over and see my dad. I usually never listened to her because hello, my dad was dying. I didn't find humor in anything during that time of my life. I do remember the line, "Cherish the good things in life as they're blessings from angels."

Joy may have been full of shit, but every Monday, that freaking line hits me when I wake up.

Cherish the good things in life as they're blessings from angels.

My Monday begins with an offsite meeting, only I volunteered to stay at the office, as did Zane. Hello, wouldn't you? Boss and every demanding asshole who works under him are out of the office, yep. Sign me up for phone duty.

Naturally, Zane and I get nothing done. We're sitting at my desk looking through the latest issue of *Brides*, which Elliott Warren is on the cover of.

The photograph is of him, wearing all black again, with his head bowed looking down at his camera that's carried in his palm, the other hand in the pocket of his black slacks.

If you didn't know it, you wouldn't think that Tathan and Elliott are the same person. The only distinguishing features that really gives it away are his eyes and the beard. Maybe that's why whenever he's photographed, his eyes are either hidden, or his head is bowed.

Sighing contently, Zane stares at Tathan's photo. "He's such a beautiful man."

"I know you know everything so what's really the deal with Tathan anyway?" I flick Tathan's picture on the cover.

"He's the most talented wedding photographer the industry has ever seen," Zane muses. "He makes more in a month than most see in a year, and when his trust fund kicks in at thirty. . . let's just say, he wouldn't need to take photographs for a living."

"So, he's a manwhore, a very rich manwhore." I knew that already. I've named the sluts in his bucket.

"I wouldn't say that exactly," Zane says, flipping through the magazine, staring at his picture again. "That's your perception of him, but I don't think it's honestly the truth."

Zane's right. He's absolutely right. I have this idea of what Tathan is like, but from what I've seen, it's nowhere near accurate, and that frustrates me.

Zane continues to stare at his picture in the magazine like a fourteen-year-old girl stalking her latest crush.

"Where'd all the money come from and why does he go by Elliott Warren." I know

what Tathan told me, but I can't help wondering if Zane knows anything else.

His brow furrows for a second, and then he looks back at the magazine. "Ever heard of Warren-Madsen Engineering?"

"Who hasn't? They're the largest engineering company in the Southwest. We're partnered with them on a lot of jobs."

He looks at me like I'm a complete idiot, which I am because I hadn't figured this out sooner. "Well, there you have it." He nods, as if I should automatically understand.

"Wait." It finally dawns on me. "You mean to tell me he owns Warren-Madsen Engineering as well?" I ask, confused. "Why is he a photographer then?"

I haven't been this confused since the first time I saw a penis. It looked nothing like what I expected. And then it grew and was all veiny looking. Not something a girl wants to see as a teenager.

"No, he doesn't own it. Well, actually he does, but he's partners with his brothers."

"So how do they own the company?"

Zane groans and closes the magazine. "How do you not know this? And when he started here in January, how did you not know he was also Elliott Warren the photographer?" he asks, surprised I don't know the story behind this. I guess I didn't think there was a story behind him. Just a manwhore with a gorgeous body and a cool car.

"I'm not a gossip queen like you," I point out. "I actually do my job." Zane knows everything about everyone in the city. "And Casey didn't know either."

“Oh, please.” He waves his arm in front of me. “I’m just perceptive and I’ve worked here for two years.” He pushes the magazine aside finally. “All right, so Warren-Madsen Engineering was owned by Tathan’s birth parents, Jason Madsen and Keri Warren. They started the company right out of college and married a few years later. About twelve years ago they were shot to death during a car-jacking on Indian School Road. Being their godparents, Paul and Deanna adopted them after the accident.”

It takes me an entire minute to process what he said. Thousands, okay, not thousands, but so many emotions run through me it’s hard to process any of them let alone words. Finally, when I do speak, my words are crackly as I hold back tears. “Dude, really? That’s like Batman. . . or that movie Ghost?”

Zane rolls his eyes. “No, it’s not. Shut up and listen.” He pauses and pulls up the article on Google and points to it. I start reading it as he continues. “After they died, they left everything to Tathan and his older brothers. James took over running the day-to-day operations of the firm, but when Tathan was old enough to work, he decided to continue with his passion, photography. Rumor has it that they have trust funds set up that mature when they turn thirty. That’s how James bought the restaurant.”

“What does Kelly do?”

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Zane rolled his eyes. “He’s supposed to run Warren-Madsen Engineering, but Paul does mostly, which was why you hadn’t met him until a week ago. He’s a busy man.”

“How old is Tathan?”

“He turns twenty-six in August. Kelly is twenty-nine and James is thirty-three.”

I’m impressed with how much Zane knows.

“If you knew Tathan was Elliott Warren, how come you didn’t tell me before?”

“It really wasn’t my place to say. He likes to keep his cover.” He shrugs. “Everyone around here knows. Why do you think these sluts around here are so obsessed with him? He’s famous.”

“But Casey didn’t know either.”

“She doesn’t pay attention to that sort of thing.”

He’s right. She doesn’t. For the last year, she didn’t know Bryan had brought home a cat. She thought she’d been feeding a stray all this time.

I turn my attention to the article, and I don’t realize I’m crying until Zane hands me a tissue. The article is so detailed on Jason and Keri’s endless love for one another. They met when they were eight years old for crying out loud. Eight! Goddamn you, Joy. Where’s the blessing in their happiness coming to a bloody end?

The article describes a fairy-tale love that you wouldn't think even existed, ever and it's no wonder Tathan is the way he is.

Just when you think someone's life is perfect, you see it's not.

The guy who makes me insane at work now has a tragic story. I feel so bad for Tathan. I want to comfort him, which scares me because I had a plan. The plan went to shit. I need a plan that doesn't include having sympathy for a guy like Tathan Madsen, and I'm not sure a plan like that exists anymore.

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I need time to relax. After work and walking Oliver, I head down to the hot tub around eight and take a bottle of wine with me.

I'm down there all of ten minutes when Tathan shows up wearing his black-and-white swim shorts, a towel hung over his shoulder and two beers in his hand.

I swear, I can't get a moment alone anymore. Though after today and that article, I'm strangely okay with him coming down here.

He says nothing as he gets in across from me. I shamelessly watch his every move and the way his defined body flexes as he sits down.

Casually and relaxed, he opens his beer next and then tips it up to me. "Thirsty?"

I raise my wine glass an inch and smile.

I notice his phone in his hand. He swipes his finger over the screen, and then sets it down beside his towel as music from The Eagles begins filtering softly through it. Oh, look at him setting the mood. Clever.

"Where's your dog?" he asks, keeping his knowing smirk at bay.

"Sleeping on my kitchen floor." Not looking at him, I stare at the hills and the way they're glowing from the city lights, breathing in slowly and steadily. I love his choice of music. "He's lazy. Must be all this wedding planning wearing him out." I think I'm funny, but I'm not sure. Wanting reassurance, I peek up at Tathan to see the corners of his mouth slightly quirked.

“How’s the wedding planning going?”

I don’t answer right away. Instead, I take a sip of my wine. “Good. The wedding’s next weekend.”

His brow raises. “Big plans for the bachelorette party?”

Of course he wants to know what we have planned.

“Not really.” I’m not sure what he’s getting at, but Casey gets asked this a lot. Everyone assumes we’d go to Vegas, though we’re not. She’s not much of a Vegas girl, and neither am I.

“So,” he begins with a smile, never making eye contact with me, “I hear Casey has been trying to get me to do her photos for her wedding?”

I say nothing because I know exactly where this is going, and I don’t like it. “Hotel California” starts playing and I smile. This song and this scene make me smile, only for a moment though and I’m back to reality.

Tathan smiles too, and his eyes give away a little side I hadn’t seen before. Just a glimpse into him as a person, and it’s nothing like I think it is.

Then he speaks.

“I might be inclined to say yes, if you will go out with me.” His voice is softer than I expect it to be. Shy even.

“Why would you want that?” I’m not mean when I say that, but I suppose in some sense, the remark is mean, insensitive, perhaps demeaning. “I wouldn’t be going because I like you. It’s just a bribe.”

“All I need is one date to show you the person I am is not the person you think I am.”

I laugh at his bluntness. “Are you always so confident?”

“I can be, sure.” He looks at me after taking a drink of his beer. It’s a quick glance before his eyes shift to the bottle in his hand resting on the concrete ledge. “Or maybe I just see you and know that all you’re really looking for is a friend. Not a boyfriend. You’re looking for a best friend. Someone you can trust.”

I hate him.

“Stop talking.” I’m about to cry, and I think he knows it. How could someone peg me so perfectly in one sentence?

Tathan could.

I’m about to tell him no, again, when I think about Casey and how much it means to her that she has Tathan take her photos.

“I have one rule.”

“Okay. . . .” He waits patiently, a smile tugging at his lips.

Deep down this one rule—no matter what it is—means nothing to him. I know that before I say it. There is something about Tathan. Even if you hate him, even when you don’t know him, there’s an easiness to him you can’t ignore. A comfort.

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So, for my one rule, I protect myself. I have to.

“You only get one date. No more.No matter what.”

He looks at me like I’m joking, but quickly agrees despite the apprehensive expression. “Deal.” He holds out his hand, which I don’t take.

I stand there for a moment drying off and slip my flip-flops on. “Let me get this straight. . . one date, and you’ll take Casey’s photos?” He nods, getting out of the hot tub too. “And then you’ll leave me alone?” He nods again, and I have to add, for the sake of him staring at me and making me nervous, “Because we know damn wellyouandIwon’t work.”

“That sounds about right,” he says, lifting the towel in his hands to wipe the water from his face, but there’s some amusement behind his words, like he’s about ready to make a joke.

I wipe my hand on the towel, because it’s sweaty, and reach for his. “Deal,” I say, finally shaking his hand.

He holds it tighter when I let go. “Oh, and Amalie?”

“Yeah?”

He pulls me closer, our chests touching. “You’re wrong.”

I breathe out, long and exaggerated. “About what?”

“About us not working.” And then he lets go of me and walks ahead, leaving me standing there, unable to argue with him.

I suck because I have feelings for him and I know it. Shitty emotional feelings. And he knows it, too.

Without another word, Tathan walks me to my door and see’s Oliver waiting for me, growling at him. “Why does your dog hate me?”

“He doesn’t like men.”

“But he doesn’t growl at Zane.”

“He’s not trying to get into my panties and Oliver feels he’s of the female species so there’s no challenge from him.” I pick up Oliver so he won’t attack Tathan. “He protects me from men.”

“Protects you from me?”

I watch his face as I reply, every single reaction, but he gives me little to go on, brown eyes searching mine. “Yes,” I answer. “He knows you’re trouble.”

“I’m not trouble.” He blinks. “My brother Kelly, he’s trouble. I’m the nice guy who’s taking your best friend’s photos for free, in exchange for a date with a girl I can’t stop thinking about.” He smiles as he backs away toward his own door. “Night.”

“Night.” Oh God, that came out like a sigh, didn’t it?

Shit.

I close the door and sink down to sit on the floor, covering my heated face with my

hands.

Oliver finds me and jumps on my lap. I hold him up so our faces are inline. “What did I just agree to?”

He wiggles.

I can't believe I agreed to this for Casey. She owes me big time now.

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Everyone needs time to themselves.

Everyone. And me. . . I definitely need something to take my mind off everything.

I try to think about when I'm the happiest, and my mind holds clarity. That time always occurs for me when I'm swimming.

Drawing in a deep breath, I stand at the edge of the tile, the water gleaming below my feet, the morning sun so clear and calm.

Just as the sun peeks over Camelback Mountain is my favorite time of the day to do laps. It's when that sun first hits the water and gives it that sparkle.

I stare at it for a while, admiring the way there's not a wave in sight, just clear glasslike water. I stretch my arms and legs, inhale deeply and then dive down feeling immediately weightless.

There's something surreal about swimming laps, the physicality of it alone wakes up parts of your body you didn't know existed.

The sense of weightlessness as you push and push your body to go faster, dig deeper, virtually glide through the water like a streamlined torpedo. It helps me escape to another world where the only sounds are my own for that solitary hour of almost horizontally free-falling through another dimension.

I don't want this feeling to end, but I know that it has to and then the drudgery of my day begins. It's like this every morning. Just me in my own water-filled world, all

alone, free of responsibilities, but I'm always forced to return to the land of the living, the land of bills and responsibilities and a dead-end job that I need to do something about. For now, I'm sinking effortlessly down into my aqueous world and will relish the feeling of the next sixty minutes.

I live for this sensation. It's the only strength I know these days and makes me feel confident, even if it is only long enough to give me the serenity to forget the past. Only I can't.

My mind is constantly on Tathan and the fact that I'm looking forward to seeing him today.

Breathless, I emerge from the water, drying myself off with my towel. Why is he invading my thoughts like this?

Oh, probably because I agreed to go on a date with him.

What was I thinking?

"You weren't," I tell myself, heading back upstairs.

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“What’s the harm in one date with him?” Zane asks, leaning into my desk. He’s dressed and smells better than me this morning. Pressed black slacks, crisp gray dress shirt, and tie, clean shaven. . . what is it about men that they can do very little and look amazing?

Women. . . we have to use the right kind of face cream, concealers to hide the bags under our eyes. . . and don’t get me started on the eye makeup. It’s all so much work, which is why I do the bare minimum. Mascara. That’s it. If I wear foundation and all that junk, I feel like my skin is suffocating.

Sorry, I got sidetracked. Back to the dilemma. Me dating Tathan on a bribe. “I’ll tell you what’s wrong with that one date,” I say after shoving a donut in my mouth. It’s a good fucking thing I still swim five days a week, or I’d be huge by now after the sugar I’ve consumed the last two weeks. Remember the cake pops? All. Gone. Every single one of the delicious bastards. “If I go on one date, he’s going to want more.”

“That’s why you made the rule,” Zane points out, staring at his cell phone in his hand.

Clipping a stack of building permits together, I shrug. “I’m going to tell him I can’t do it.”

That’s the last thing Casey wants to hear. “The fuck you are!”

Yeah, she’s at my desk too. They’re hovering and bothering me. It’s no wonder I can’t get my job done efficiently these days.

Tathan and I made the deal last night. Thankfully, and sadly, Tuesday morning he's not in the office, so I find myself giving Zane and Casey all the details as they huddle around my cubicle.

"Amalie." Casey shakes her head in disapproval, her hands on my shoulders. "What's the harm with going on a simple date with him? You haven't been out on an actual date since Colton. Think of what you're doing to your vagina. She has needs too." Leave it to Casey to bring my vagina into the conversation.

"That's not true. I was with a guy on Halloween and one awkward date after that with a guy who does the maintenance on my apartment."

Casey points her index finger in my face. "Halloween doesn't count if you can't remember what the guy looked like and Maintenance Mark was a tool."

She has a very good point. He used his tool and then I haven't heard from him since. Bastard.

Zane looks up from his phone. "Girl, you haven't been out on a date in how long?"

"You shut up, penis boy!" Picking up my stapler, I roll my eyes, annoyed we're even having this conversation. "My vagina is none of your concern."

Casey lets out a breath and takes my stapler from my hand. Probably so I won't hit Zane with it. "Amalie, seriously, he wants to go out with you. Go out with him."

"No, he doesn't. He just wants to add me to his bucket." I know I'm being difficult. I do, but it's still not easy to accept that someone would want to date me. When you've been burned before, it's hard to put your hand on the stove again.

"No, he does not." Casey's starting to get frustrated. "He wants you for you! Why

can't you see that?"

"What bucket?" Zane asks, wide, excited eyes at the mention of a bucket, and I do not want to know what he's thinking.

"I'm not special or anything, and I will not join the harem of women he has. He only wants a date because you want him to take pictures at your wedding. So really, it's your fault, Casey."

"It's not my fault!" Before I can even comprehend what's happening, Casey slaps my coffee out of my hand as I take a drink, splashing it all over Zane and the floor. There go his pretty clothes. "Your motherfucking ass is going on a date with him for me. I need him. If he's dealing, you're going to make a damn deal with him!"

"Casey!" we both yell at her, appalled she basically threw my coffee on poor Zane.

She sighs, sitting back in her chair, a sly smile tugging at her full lips. "You don't know how long I've wanted to do that to you," she says. "Sorry, Zane, you were in the line of fire," she adds.

Grabbing a handful of napkins from my desk drawer, Zane shrugs like nothing happened. This may also be because some guy walked past and caught his attention.

As I get up to walk away, Casey grabs my hand. I look back at her. "Tathan likes you, okay. Just think about it before you take back the offer. And I'm dying to have him take my pictures. I want perfection for this day. Something to last me a lifetime. He can do that."

Goddamn you, Casey. Way to make me feel like a complete asshole for not wanting to go on a date with him.

As I'm cleaning coffee splatters off my shirt in the bathroom, I think about what she said. I know she's right. I can't trust men, especially after Colton. I can't. I want to trust Tathan because I see that sensitivity in his eyes, I really do, but he has a reputation, or one I'm labeling him with. I refuse to be another one of his conquests.

When I return to my desk, Casey and Zane are, of course, still discussing my personal life in detail.

"I think she needs to give him a chance. He's sweet."

"I agree, but who am I kidding? I would date him if he was interested," Zane says, and I'm not surprised by this. Zane has always had a thing for Tathan. "If they get married, her name would be Amalie Madsen! How cute is that?"

And then they laugh, like the thought is hysterical to them. They know I'm sitting here, but they continue to talk as if I'm not even present.

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“Did you see the way he was watching her at the expo? Or the way he watches her at work?”

“I know, right,” Casey gasps. “He was watching her like she was one of his newborn cubs.”

“I’ll be his cub if she won’t.” Zane grins. “He can lick me clean.”

Okay, am I the only one disturbed by that image?

“I think they are cute together,” Casey says. “Imagine how adorable their babies would be.”

Babies? What the fuck? And why am I imagining them now?

“I’m sitting right here.” I wave my hands in front of them, but they continue to talk like I’m not even there as they plan out my life for me.

“What I wouldn’t give to have a man stare at me like that,” Zane adds.

Oh, believe me, I know that stare. It’s like he’s worshiping you with just his eyes.

Casey shrugs, eyes distant. “She’s in denial.”

“I. Can. Hear. You. Assholes!” I say, loud enough for the entire office to hear.

Tell me why I hang out with these two?

“Chil-lax, muff.” Zane pats my head.

I slap him on the shoulder. “Don’t call me muff. I’m not okay with that. And go back to your desk.”

The mailman stops by and gives me an armful of mail and says something to me, but none of us can focus on what he’s saying. He’s got his pants so far up his waist it looks as though he’s trying to create a onesie.

Zane turns to us with a look of horror. “What’s with the moose knuckle on that guy? It looks like a fanny pack split in two.”

I watch the mailman walk away for a moment before I give my explanation. “His tequila is missing its lime is what’s wrong with him.”

Zane loves it when I come up with little sayings like that because he spends a good portion of his day thinking of new ones to tell me.

Luckily for me, Paul comes into the office around nine, and I’m able to get away from Casey and Zane to attend a meeting with him.

Work is crazy and thankfully passes in a blur. Tathan never does show up, and I’m both sad and relieved.

I’m late getting home after I have dinner with Zane and two of Casey’s cousins to discuss the bridal shower on Saturday morning, followed by the bachelorette party that night.

When I climb the stairs to my apartment, Tathan is walking in with his black camera bag on his shoulder, smirking. “Isn’t it a little late to be out, Amalie?” he asks, his eyes glowing like he’s undressing me. He probably is.

I shrug but don't answer. I'm too exhausted to speak.

He leans up against the wall beside my door as I'm fumbling with my keys. "Wanna go to the hot tub again?"

He leaned. Just him leaning snaps something inside me, and all I can think about are those soft pouting, biteable lips. I don't want to admit it, but I missed him today.

Something I can't explain takes over, and I'm overcome by his presence. Controlled by the lack of sex, I act on impulse. At least that's what I think it is because what else could explain what I do next? Certainly not sanity.

I grab his shirt, yanking him to me and capture his lips with my own. He's shocked, his eyes seem to glow in the darkness of the hallway, but he quickly gains control of the situation and closes them. His hands move around my back and he pulls me flush with his body, pushing us against my door. My hands snake up to where I've imagined them being since I met him, up to his chest, feeling every inch, and eventually settle in his mess of thick dark hair.

Everything about it is right. His touch, his smell, he could very well be the death of me. I know this now.

Parting my lips, he takes full advantage, his tongue caressing my own. It's nice. It's really fucking nice. It's extremely passionate, and when he eventually pulls away, I'm left breathless and weak, a puddle in the bottom of his bucket.

I suck his bottom lip between my teeth, biting down softly and pulling him into me. He willingly comes forward, his kiss growing just as eager as mine. With my back against my door, his lips brushing mine, easing me into it, but there's no easy in my mind.

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There's something so familiar about his kiss I can't place. His lips press against mine more firmly, and then his tongue slips into my mouth. He tastes so good, a sweet mixture of mint gum and strangely, watermelon. Or maybe it's me that tastes like watermelon from the drinks I had earlier.

One of Tathan's hands slides around my neck, and then the other, holding me against him

This kiss. It sets fire to what he's sparked, and I've gone a little crazy. My hands fist his hair. I want to touch him all night.

And you know what's so disarming? I've never had a kiss that's so. . . intense. When I look up at him, he's as breathless as I am—which makes me feel better, but I blush when I meet his gaze. Embarrassed for throwing myself at him, I look away. Christ, my cheeks are so freaking hot.

“So, it's a deal. . . hot tub?” he asks, smirking, still holding on to me, my tongue dances behind my lips, savoring the taste of him on me.

Him and his fucking deals. Searching his eyes, I find that teasing smile has returned.

Deal?

I'm not sure I like that word anymore. I'm not sure I know how to deal.

“No. I already gave you one deal.” I hope I didn't make a terrible mistake.

Untangling myself, I finally pull away.

Probably a little confused, Tathan runs his hand over the back of his neck and sighs before I close the door and leave him standing in the hall.

Was it a mistake? Am I being a dick to him?

Hello! You kissed Tathan, and you made a fucking deal with him to go on a date! That was a mistake.

At my feet, Oliver looks up at me curiously. He's probably wondering what the hell is wrong with me. I slide down my door, and he crawls on my lap. Again.

"Mommy is so weak!"

Speaking of weak, someone has a weak bladder, and I'm sitting in pee.

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After walking Oliver, I'm in bed that night cuddling with him and eating Cheerios.

I kissed Tathan. In the hall.

What was I thinking?

I wasn't. Again. Now he's going to expect kissing and maybe even more on that date in a few weeks. I need to set some ground rules for that date, and myself.

But still. . . we kissed. Romantic-movie style. Speaking of romantic. . . I'm staring at the cover of Brides. You know, the one Tathan's on the cover of. I stole it from Zane unbeknownst to him. The more I read into him, I realize there's absolutely no way someone like him would ever want to be in a relationship with me. Dude's freaking famous.

Relationship?

What happened to one date?

Eventually, I get up from my bed and reach for my laptop to check Facebook. I'm only on there a few minutes and watching a silly cat video my Aunt Kim posted when a private message pops up in the right corner from Tathan.

Tathan: Are you awake?

What the heck? How'd he find me on here? Oh, right. Facebook friends, thanks to Casey.

Me:I'm on here, aren't I?

Despite my answer, I'm giddy he messaged me. Tathan Madsen private messaged me! I want to punch myself at how excited I am. You'd think I was just asked to prom. Who am I right now?

Me:Did you need something?

Tathan:Yes.

Me:Well?

Tathan:Hot tub?

Me:I already said no.

Tathan:Why?

Me:I'm busy.

Tathan:Really? Doing what? Sitting in bed with your dog?

Me:That's none of your business.

Tathan:Amalie, I'm not that bad of a guy.

Me:You aren't?

Tathan:No. I'm not, and you kissed me. I liked that kiss. I want more kissing. And I enjoy your company.

Of course he added that last part. I don't answer, and he replies again.

Tathan:Let's talk about our date. You said yes. No take backs.

Me:Not until you take Casey's photos. Then I'll give you the date.

Tathan:Why?

Me:You need to hold up your end of the deal first.

Tathan:I don't break deals. What about you? What if I take the photos and you never give me that date?

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Me: You know where I live, so there's that. I'm sure you'd stalk me until I held up my end of said deal.

Tathan: True.

I don't like replying through messages, so I type out:

Me: This is ridiculous. Meet me at the hot tub in ten minutes. I have to walk Oliver.

Tathan: Deal.

Of course he agrees instantly.

It's a bad idea, and I know it, but I go anyway. I blame that kiss.

We meet outside my door five minutes later, and I try not to look, but I do. He has his towel over his shoulder revealing his tight body.

Not me. I wrap my towel tightly around my body. Tathan looks down at Oliver. "Is your dog going to bite me?"

"Nah, he's not a biter. Just likes to growl and pee."

Watching him as we walk, his head is lowered, concentrating on the ground, his lips parted slightly, and it draws me in. "So he's like most men marking their territory?"

I raise an eyebrow at him as we walk toward the hot tub, Oliver growling at him the

entire way as he walks behind us, mainly focused on Tathan. “Do you pee on my doorstep?”

I’m teasing, but he goes with it.

“No, just around the apartment complex. I’m very much like a lion patrolling my territory.” He smiles and holds open the gate for me. “I like to mark the neighborhood. That way they don’t even come close to the building.”

I laugh, a full-on laugh where I cover my mouth as it’s so loud. He’s funny, and I never realized that before now. “Your territory?”

He winks. “One could be optimistic, right?”

“If one was that confident.”

Confidently, he drops his towel to the ground. “One is.”

Goddamn. I give an audible sigh—which he notices—and sink down in the water across from him. I’ve never seen a man as pretty as him. Never.

“No one is entirely that confident,” I point out. “You have to have a weakness.”

“I do.” He smiles. “I can’t whistle.”

“See, I was hoping for something weird. Like a third nipple.”

Laughing, he glances down at his bare chest in the water. “Nothing like that. Sorry.”

Nope. Nothing but a perfect body I want to lick every inch of.

“It’s okay. I was hoping to feel normal around you instead of completely inadequate.”

His brow pulls together. “You shouldn’t feel that at all.”

“I do.” I watch the water for a long moment and the way the water bubbles around my knees I’ve pulled up to my chest. If I’m being honest, I’m afraid if I let my legs down, I’ll spread them and coax him between them.

It’s when Tathan opens his second beer he brought down with him, he opens up. “I always wanted to play music,” he admits, trying to make me feel better about my body I assume. “But I can’t. I’m horrible at it.”

“Like sing?”

“Yeah, but I can’t sing. At all.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

He's playing a little Elvis on his phone, which I love so I tell him to sing along. "Try."

He does and within a minute, I know he's not lying.

I can't stop the fit of giggles that emerge from my lips. "Oh yeah, stick to photography, buddy."

"See." He leans over and sets his beer on the edge of the hot tub near his towel. "I have faults."

"Did you go to college for photography?" I want to change the subject, and I think he appreciates it.

He nods. "I actually went to Columbia because my parents both went there and then started my business while going to school. I took photos for the local papers and things like that to get my name out there. Then one of the girls in my class was getting married and wanted me to take her photos for the wedding. Turns out her parents were like super famous, had some fairly high-profile friends there, and it was just sort of the right exposure at the time."

"Has photography always been your passion?"

"Yeah." Pausing, his eyes drop from mine like he might be insecure sharing like this, but when they meet mine again, it's anything but insecure. He's confident and sure of everything he's saying. "I can't remember a time when I didn't want to take photos. I used to have this little plastic camera when I was a kid. It didn't take actual photos,

but I thought it did and would go around taking photographs of everything, especially my mom 'cause she'd always pose for me. She was so beautiful that I wished there was a film in it so I could have captured her smile and the way she'd watch me. She'd sit there for hours just letting me pretend I was some famous photographer."

His mom? He's talking about his mother!

Clearing his throat, about the time I'm ready to cry, he says, "I've seen you out here in the mornings swimming." He gives a nod to the pool behind us. "You look like it's something you really enjoy."

He's getting at something, and I think I know what that it is. I know he's seen me out here doing laps. He works out on Tuesday and Thursdays in the morning, and the gym overlooks the pool. If there is one thing that takes my mind off life in general, it's swimming.

"You're good," he goes on to say. "Have you swam for a while?"

"Yeah, since I was like two I think." I smile, but it's fake and he knows it because I'm about to give him some truth, a piece of my life he knows nothing about. "Had a scholarship for it to Arizona State, but my dad had cancer, and I needed to take care of him."

"I'm sorry. Did he. . .?" He's not saying the last part, like it hurts to ask the question but he's curious.

I nod. "Yeah, two years ago."

"I'm really sorry." Tathan's eyes are distant, as though he's remembering his own tragic loss which I'm sure, hurts as much today as it did then. If there is one thing I know about losing someone, it's that it never gets easier. Sure, with time it's not on

your mind as much, but the pain is always there just below the surface, waiting for the next moment to remind you.

Maybe he didn't want to be sad. I'm not sure, and I blame myself for bringing it up, but Tathan groans and covers his hands with his face.

"What?" I ask, looking around like something is suddenly wrong. "Are you okay?"

His hands slowly drop from his face and drop back into the water as he peeks over at me. "I'm fucking dying sitting next to you in that bikini."

I roll my eyes, of course he's not sad; he's horny. I give his shoulder a shove. "Suck it up."

"I'd like to suck on something else." Tipping his head to the side, his eyes drop to my chest.

"Oh my God," I stand, laughing, and he sighs, looking sad and excited because he now has a full view of my body. "You're such a boy."

He grabs my hand, pulling me back down into the water next to him. "Don't go. I'll be good. Promise. Well, I know I can be good to you, if you'll let me." The grin returns.

"You aren't helping your case, ya know."

He's lying, he's not going to be good, but I stay because of the dimples he gives me when he smiles.

Only I sit far away from him.

I kept my distance and before long we've been out here over an hour, and I'm feeling lightheaded. "I need to get out."

He nods, reaching for his towel. "I'll walk you up."

Somewhere during our time in the hot tub, his mood changed. He doesn't say much as we part, just a "Night," offered in passing and he's behind his door again.

Maybe he was thinking about our kiss, and maybe he wasn't. Either way, I'm not exactly sure what to make of this situation.

Had I upset him? And why do I care? I'm supposed to be avoiding him and now here I am worried I've offended him. See, this is why I needed to keep my distance from him. I'm getting emotionally attached to hot tubbing him.

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

Wednesday morning, I'm rushing to get to work on time with the windows down in my car trying to dry my hair. I went for a swim this morning, spent a little longer than needed in the shower and it made me ten minutes late for work.

Tathan isn't at work again and well. . . it's starting to get boring. I strangely miss our bantering.

I tell Zane and Casey everything that happened last night in the hot tub, and before that when I kissed him. No surprise, but they meet at my desk every morning and wait for me to tell them what happened the night before.

Casey tells me Tathan called her last night and arranged to take their prewedding photos on Friday afternoon before Bryan has to go to work, and then they discussed their wedding photos. They're apparently meeting for dinner tonight to talk about what they're looking for.

Part of me wishes I was going.

Stop that.

On the way home, I can't stop thinking about him, which frustrates me. Oliver starts whining as soon as I'm home, so I know I need to take him out before he pees on the floor.

I do, and when I come back, Tathan is outside his apartment.

Figures. I think he has spy equipment in there.

“Hot tub tonight?” he asks, leaning again against my door.

Fuck, he smells amazing.

“Are you trying to make this a habit or something?” I’m also distracted because he’s leaning again.

“I’ll take anything you’ll give me. You don’t realize what you do to me. . .,” he starts to say and leans into me instead of the wall, his body flush with mine pressed against my door. “I’m at the point where I don’t care. I’ll beg if I have to, just to see you in a bikini again.” The warmth of his body radiates against mine, and the erratic beating of his heart presses on my chest. His breathing is low and deep.

I would like to think his heart is beating like this because he’s around me or maybe he has a heart defect, but I’m inclined to think the latter.

His admission somewhat weakens me.

“If this is because of that kiss. . . that was a mistake. A momentary lapse in judgment,” I tell him, pushing away, well, trying to, but he does have me pinned pretty well.

If only I was pinned under him on his bed.

“I’ll bring some wine.” He’s into bribery now. “That’s what you like, right?”

He’s convincing, isn’t he?

“Don’t get greedy. You’ve had two nights in the hot tub with me. That could be classified as our date.”

“No way.” He shakes his head, as if the idea is absurd to him. “I said adatelike with clothes on and candles. All that shit.”

“No more hot tubs then.” I push against his shoulder. “You’re going to turn me into a bucket girl.”

His jaw clenches. “What the hell makes you think I have a bucket of women?”

“I’ve seen you. I know your type.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

His brow raises as if he knows he might just have to shake me to get me to understand this. “I don’t have any girls, and kissing is good. I like kissing. . .you. . .,” he says, leaning into me, his lips inches from mine, scratch that, centimeters from mine. “I could use another kiss.”

Ah crap, I really am screwed.

I’m screwed because I press my lips to his once again. It takes a moment before I realize what I’ve done and push back.

“You have to stop kissing me,” I tell him and move away, opening my door just as Oliver starts to growl.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

He laughs, backing away, his eyes on Oliver. “Uh. . .youkissed me.”

“No, I didn’t.Youkissedme.” I unlock my door, trying to keep Oliver from attacking Tathan.

Tathan’s persuasive brown eyes lock on mine. “Let’s just go to the hot tub.”

“Jesus.” I pick up Oliver and hold him tightly as he struggles to get loose. “What’s with you and this damn hot tub? You that sore?”

“I like to soak.” He smiles so wide I see his dimples. It’s adorable.

“Uh-huh.”

“So?”

“No. . . .” I look down and use my puppy as an excuse. “I have to feed Oliver.”

“I’ll wait,” he tells me, placing his foot in the doorframe, and then winks.

“Fine. . . don’t expect kissing though. And you have to wait outside.”

“No kissing.” He smirks and looks down at Oliver. “And I’ll wait out here, because you don’t trust me.”

I step inside my apartment, and Tathan watches Oliver as he backs up. “What’s wrong with your dog?”

“He doesn’t like you.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Yet, you don’t listen.” My words mean more than this dog, and he knows it.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:55 am*

Here we are again. Third night in the hot tub, starry night, wine, and Elvis Presley playing on his phone through a pair of portable speakers he brought with him. It's perfect, really, and I wouldn't want to spend my night any other way. I'm certainly not telling Tathan, though.

"I'm really curious. . ." He relaxes against the side of the hot tub, his arms spread out revealing the muscles in his defined arms. I want to scoot over close to him and have him wrap them around me. "What makes you think I date those women at work?"

"You're constantly with them."

"Well." He pauses, taking a drink of his beer, before he continues. "Then others must think I'm with you."

"How so?"

"This is our third time in this hot tub in the last three days."

He moves closer to me so our legs touch under the water. "And it's certainly not easy to sit here with you and keep my hands to myself."

"Why do you then, you know, keep your hands to yourself?"

Really, Amalie? Shut up! Stop provoking him.

He stares at me, I stare back—waiting, watching, daring each other to move.

“You want me to touch you?”

“Maybe.”

What? You’re a fucking idiot. Shut up and stop drinking wine. Go back to your apartment.

His touch beneath the water startles me, midthigh and strong, the other one moving to my face. “Like this?”

No. Higher. Between my legs.

Breathless, I think I say, “Maybe.” When what I meant to say was “YES!”

Tathan’s wet hand on my face wraps around my neck and pulls me forward. I kiss him. I don’t even wait for him to do it. Our lips part and he slides the hand on my thigh around my waist, pressing me flush against his chest.

The kiss starts out slowly, building, and then I’m straddling him in the hot tub, my hands fisting his wet hair, and his hands are pushing my hips down on him, and his erection. So fucking nice. Like perfect. Warmth spreads through my body when his mouth begins assaulting my neck with frantic kisses.

“Sorry to interrupt,” a woman’s voice says behind us. We were so caught up we didn’t even notice someone had come in.

I’ve never met this girl, but I’ve seen her around. I’m certain she’s friends with Jade and lives on the first floor. I don’t like her. Don’t know her, but the way she’s eyeing Tathan validates that I don’t like her at all.

“Oh, hey, Elliott,” she says, acknowledging him and ignoring me like I’m not even

there. Apparently, I'm invisible.

Elliott? She knows him as Elliott?

I move from his lap to sit beside him. In a motion I appreciate right then, his arm wraps around me and then he acknowledges the woman. "Hey, Becca."

Oh, look. That's not a "pleased" tone. That's a, "bitch, be gone," tone.

I watch her body as she dips down in the water like she's trying to be exotic about it. Though she has a decent body, when I look over at Tathan, he's not even looking at her.

Hmmm. Interesting.

"So. . ." she gives him a smile, "about those pictures. . . ."

I don't know why those words bother me, but they do. The jealousy starts to rise, leaving me confused.

"I told you, Becca, I'm very busy." Tathan's voice is sharp, like he's tired of telling her this. "I don't have time, and I'm booked out for a year."

Becca considers this. "But you're here now. We could just go back to my apartment and do them there—"

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“I’m busy.” Tathan stands and grabs my hand and my wine bottle. “We’re busy.”

When we get to my door, he hands me the bottle of wine he carried up, and I still haven’t said a word about what I just witnessed. “I see you.”

I have no idea what that means, so I ask, “What does that mean?”

He turns to walk away, intending to leave me with those words. My eyes are focused on him. There’s something sexy about the way he walks over to his door and then turns to look over his shoulder at me. “I think you know.”

Ugh! He’s so frustrating!

Remember when I said just when you think someone’s life is perfect, you see the flaws. Tathan knows everyone has them. He knows me without even trying.

And the way he left that girl hanging, for me, shows me he’s a good guy and knows I’m breaking down.

## Page 50

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Thursday morning, I notice Tathan's car is not in the parking lot.

I'm both comforted and conflicted by this. Last night after the hot tub, and that Becca chick, and after he said, "I see you," I couldn't sleep wondering what it meant.

When I set my purse on my desk, I notice Paul is in his office, which is rare these days. Most of the time I only see him once a week.

"Good Morning, Amalie. What's your afternoon look like today?" Paul asks as I pass his office. This is bizarre because he never asks me this. He's a laid-back boss and usually, as long as I'm busy, he's never in my business.

"Nothing really." I step toward his door, pausing just before I enter. "What's up?"

Besides the fact that your son is probably the hottest male figure on the planet and I want to grind with him like Pretty Ricky says. And we sit in a hot tub every night drinking wine so I can stare at his half-naked body without shame.

Don't tell Paul any of that.

"Do you need me to do something?"

"No. Just checking what your day looks like," he says, and picks up his phone, motioning for me to close the door.

Well, that was weird.

I disregard his strange behavior and continue walking to my cubicle, irritated I overslept and couldn't get coffee this morning. Not only did I not make it to do some laps, but you do not want to know me when I haven't had coffee. It's like a cocaine addiction for me, but cheaper and legal. If I hadn't stayed up until nearly two stalking Tathan's Facebook page, I wouldn't have overslept.

As I sit down at my desk, I see a sticky note on my computer with handwriting I've never seen before, but I have an idea as to who's it might be. I examine the handwriting for a moment before Zane comes bouncing in with a box of paperwork we need to go through from the Bank of America project.

"Hello, beautiful," he says, throwing himself into my chair beside my desk. "Oh, who's that from?" He rips the note from my hand, giving me a paper cut.

"How should I know, asshole?" I suck on my bleeding finger and then gag because the taste of blood is repulsive to me. "I just got here, and I'm no handwriting specialist."

I know I'm being rude, but hello, no coffee yet. Zane knows he can't expect so much from me.

"Wow, chillax, muff." He pats my hair. Zane takes the note and reads it aloud. "Meet me for lunch?" He laughs and gives me a smile. "I know who that is."

"Who?"

I don't know why I ask this because I'm 93 percent sure who it's from.

"Elliott Warren. . . or do you call him Tathan?" His smile is so wide it's scary. "Which does he prefer?"

“Jesus Christ, what’s wrong with you? Give me that.” I rip the note from his hands. “We have work to do.” I push him off my desk because he is practically lying on it as if he owns the goddamn thing. “Get up, you whore. This isn’t your bed.”

“Fine.” He huffs and sits down with the box of paperwork on his lap. “Let’s get this over with.”

We’re almost finished when my desk phone rings. Both Zane and I look over at it like it’s a bomb or something, because honestly, no one has my number so why would anyone call me. I don’t even know the number myself. The only phone I ever answer is for Paul.

Zane lunges for the phone, and before I can stop the little shit, he’s answering it for me. “Amalie Davis’s desk, how can I help you?” He’s cheerful, and I’m sure he’s hoping it’s some construction worker he can ask out. It wouldn’t be the first time.

He makes me sick that he can be this nice at eight in the morning. I need at least until ten and several coffees before I can resemble the living, and even then you’re asking a lot of me.

I throw myself into my enormous swivel chair and stare out at the city through the large glass windows behind my cubicle.

Zane giggles, which always sounds weird coming from a twenty-five-year-old man, but he does it. “Oh, yes, she’s right here.” Before I can run away, he pushes the phone to my ear and whispers, “Be nice to him.”

Him? Him who?

“This is Amalie.” I attempt to be professional, but I’m annoyed because I know who it is. Who else would Zane tell me to be nice to?

“Did you get my note?” I’m not sure whether I should smile or growl at him.

“How did you get this number?” I demand.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

“I work there.” Tathan laughs. “It’s pretty easy to find it.”

“What do you want?” Even I’m surprised by my tone, and I feel the need to apologize. “I’m sorry, was that harsh?”

“I’m sorta terrified.”

“I haven’t had my coffee yet,” I apologize, and then wonder why I do.

“Look up,” he orders, amusement evident in his tone now.

I look up to see Zane standing there just a foot from me with an iced mocha in his hand, chocolate croissant in the other, with a big fucking grin. I didn’t even notice he left, let alone he reappeared with coffee and food. Two coffees.

I hold my hand over the phone. “Where did that come from?” I ask Zane.

I can hear Tathan chuckling in the background.

“I wouldn’t want you to terrify any more people this morning,” Tathan adds with a laugh. “I’m only looking out for their safety.”

“What do you want?”

He takes a deep breath, and then he hits me with it. “I want you to meet me for lunch.”

“I don’t have time,” I lie. I do have time, but I’m afraid if I do go to lunch with him, it will end in my attacking his beautiful face again and succumbing myself to a life in the bucket. “And I told you, no date until after the wedding. Stop pushing your luck.”

“I think you have time. Paul told me you have nothing planned this afternoon.”

Why, that backstabbing asshole.

“I’m going to file a restraining order against you.”

“That sounds like fun.” His raspy tone makes me weak, and I giggle before I can stop myself.

Breathing heavy, I cover my mouth. “Will you stop it?”

“It’s technically not a date,” he defends. “It’s lunch.”

“That’s a date. My answer is still no.”

I hang up on him because he’s persuasive and the longer I talk to him, the more I want to give in.

As soon as I slam the phone down, Zane rambles about how dreamy Tathan is, and I don’t know whether to gag or agree, especially when he starts talking about doing a reverse cowgirl on him. Not an image I wanted to think about, unless I’m doing the reverse cowgirl with Tathan. Why do I even know the names of these positions?

Oh yeah, your neighbor is a stripper.

I think about the reverse cowgirl and the deep-sea diver position with Tathan and me for a good hour.

Zane has actual work to do today, so he stands, taking his coffee with him. “He’s such a nice guy.”

“Yeah, sure he is.”

The problem is, he is a nice guy.

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Sweet Cheeks comes into the office around nine, gloating about her night. I think she's talking about Tathan, but that couldn't be, I was with him, in the hot tub.

Now I'm confused.

Zane walks by and hands Paul a folder.

"Zane!" I whisper and chuck my pen at him so he'll turn and look. He's watching the UPS guy outside and clearly not paying attention to me.

"Who is she talking about?" I whisper harshly when he stops at my desk.

Zane doesn't look my direction for long—there's another UPS guy outside now, and his attention is fully diverted. Not only is he shamelessly gawking at the men on the street, but he's dancing around with one headphone in, the other hanging down as I'm sure he's listening to a Britney Spears song.

"Zane?" I yell, causing the entire office to prairie dog and look over at me. Thankfully, Zane gets the point and pulls his headphones off.

"What's up, muff?"

I take my ruler out of my desk drawer and slap his forehead. "Don't call me muff. It's weird coming from you."

"Ow." He rubs his forehead that's turning red. "What do you want?"

“What’s Sweet Cheeks saying over there?”

“Who’s Sweet Cheeks?” he asks, scratching the side of his head.

“Uh. . .her. . .” I point to the tall blonde standing by the coffee bar. “I don’t know her name.”

“Oh. . . that’s Lucy.” He puts his earbuds back in and shakes his ass at me, starting to walk away. I tackle him—inappropriate office etiquette, but I could give a flying fuck about any of that.

“Is there a problem, Amalie?” Paul asks when he steps out of his office and sees Zane and me on the floor, wrestling.

“Uh, yeah, actually there is.” I get off Zane and point my finger toward him, straightening out my dress with the other one. “Did you tell Tathan I was free this afternoon?”

I’m going to get myself fired.

“Come into my office.” He turns to Zane who’s on the floor still. “Zane, buddy, get off the floor.”

Zane trips me when I stand up. Turning to glare, I give him an inappropriate gesture to cement this clusterfuck of a day before walking into Paul’s office.

I walk in and sit in the chair next to the door, ready for some answers. “Spill the beans.”

“What do you want to know?” He takes a seat behind his desk, and the smirk on his face tells me right then he told Tathan I was free and might have possibly been telling

him other details.

“What’s with your son? Why is he all up in my business all the time? Doesn’t he get enough play in the office that he doesn’t need to ask me out?”

He shakes his head. “Tathan doesn’t get play around here if that’s what you’re implying. Far from it. . . but that’s something you need to talk to him about, not me. Give him a chance. He really likes you.”

“So everyone keeps saying.” I’m being sarcastic, and he knows it. “Why me? When he can have any woman he wants, why me?”

“Amalie, you know the type of person he is. He sees things in people they don’t even see in themselves.” Paul has a point. I have to learn to overlook the why of why he wants me in his life and focus on the moment, focus on Tathan and forget about the fact throngs of women are clamoring to have him worship their bodies with the camera. Yep, not going to go there at all.

“Did you know that he’s twenty-six and has only had two girlfriends his entire life? Both were long-term too.”

I want to ask if they’ve found their dead bodies or something, because why else would someone break up with Tathan Madsen unless they were deceased? It just doesn’t make any sense to me, but yet here I am, refusing to believe he’s any more than a guy collecting girls in a bucket.

I know I’ve had a misconception about Tathan. I never really expected him to be that good guy. I didn’t want him to be. I was counting on him being a manwhore.

“So what happened to those girls?” I finally ask, relaxing in the chair.

“Ask him.” Paul folds his arms over his chest. “He’ll tell you. He’s the most honest person I’ve ever met.”

“Okay.” I nod, though I have no intention of actually asking him. “Why is it that he’s so fucking drawn to me?”

“Again, Amalie.” He leans forward to get his point across. “Askhim.”

Growing frustrated with his cryptic answers, I stand and intend on going back to my desk. Only he stops me before I get to the door. “I haven’t seen him this happy in a long time. Give him a chance.”

Ugh. Just ugh.

Between Zane singing “Womanizer” on repeat and Sweet Cheeks not knowing a goddamn thing about filing paperwork, my morning sucks and I get nothing accomplished. On more than one occasion, I had to tell her that “N” came after “M,” not the other way around.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Despite me wanting to avoid Tathan, I'm strangely determined to get some answers out of him now after talking to Paul. Between what happened today, and then last night when he said, "I see you," I'm confused.

Most of the time, well those last three times we've been in the hot tub, it's been him with the prying questions or just us sitting in silence listening to Elvis Presley.

I wasn't sure he'd come down there, after all, I hung up on him today and refused to go to lunch with him, but I was only down there ten minutes, and here he came. Beer in hand.

When he opens his beer, I waste no time in hurling into my questions. "When were you adopted? And what did you mean when you said, I see you?"

He looks at me for a long moment before answering as he takes his time opening his beer. "I was adopted when I was eleven. And I see you because you're giving in to me, even if you don't want to. I see you because I'm a good guy and you know it. You see it. Even if you chose to ignore it."

Okay, well he has me pegged exactly. "So Paul is your adopted dad?" I'm avoiding everything else he just said.

"He's my uncle. He's my dad's younger brother."

"Oh."

He switches playlists on his phone to the Eagles. I smile as I never would have taken

him for a guy who appreciates the classics.

“You don’t want to go on a date with me, do you?” he finally asks, never looking at me.

I won’t lie to him. “No, not really.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know, just please, go out with me on one date.”

“Okay.”

He considers that and then adds, “I don’t have a bucket of sluts, as you call them.”

“What do you have then?”

“Nothing. I don’t sleep around like you think I do.”

Deep down I know this. Paul also told me. “You don’t?”

“No, I don’t.” I watch his lips intently as he takes a drink of his beer.

Fuck. I want to be that bottle. It gives a whole new meaning to a tall drink of water.

“What about Sweet Cheeks, Lizard Lips, Chatty Chubby. . . .”

He groans. “Stop already.” Leaning forward, his hand rubs along his sharp defined jaw. “I didn’t sleep with any of them, Aldon did.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me suggestively. “I introduced them.”

“Who?”

“Aldon Hernandez.”

“The pro-football player?” I’m acting like I don’t know.

“Yeah.” He gives me a smile like he knows I know exactly who Aldon is. If you’ve lived in Arizona for longer than a few months, you know who Aldon Hernandez is.

“He’s my best friend. We grew up together.”

“Why do you hook them up with Aldon?”

He shrugs. “Once they find out we’re friends, they want to meet him. I guess it just goes there automatically.”

That’s sad, and I’m never asking to meet Aldon. Not that I have any desire to, especially considering Aldon is handsome, but he’s not Tathan.

“All right, so why do they hang all over you at work?”

“They know I take photos.” Tathan leans back, spreading out his arms on the ledge. It makes him look inviting. I could just sneak over there and curl up next to him. “I took photos for Lizard Lips, as you call her. Her name is Jessica by the way. Her sister got married last month.”

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“And the rest of them, you take their photos?” I deduce, feeling like a dumbass.  
“That’s why they sweet-talk you.”

He nods. “You’re perceptive. . . though I’d wished you’d figured that out a while ago.”

“A while ago?”

“The first time I asked you out.”

“And that was?” Something seems off with the way he says first time.

“Four months ago when I met you at Madsen Construction’s Halloween party.” He winks.

Are you fucking kidding me?

I can feel my heart beating in my ears, blood rushing to my cheeks.

Well. Fuck me—actually, he might have already—I was pretty drunk that night.

“What’s your name?”

I claw at him, biting my lip and holding the bottle of gin close to my side.

“Catwoman. What’s your name?”

He holds out his hand, brown eyes traveling over my body. “Batman, and we’re

meant to be.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m Batman and you’re Catwoman. Meant to be if you ask me.”

Shit. Motherfucker.

Tathan says nothing more when his cell phone rings, snapping out of my flashback. It must be something he needs to take, because he shakes his head and then stands. A small smile tugs at his lips before he says, “Night, Amalie.”

I nod, then wait for him to be completely out of sight before I leave.

When I get back inside my apartment, Oliver is jumping all over, but I’m on a mission. I need to ask Jade what happened. Besides Tathan, she’s the only one who knows what went on that night.

If I actually had sex with him and didn’t remember, how much of an asshole do I look like?

## Page 55

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Jade is practicing her new routine for her dance to Lollipop. I don't even know Jade's last name or even if Jade is her real name, but she's great to talk to and makes killer nachos.

I'm lying on the floor, watching her rehearse. She has mad moves, and I'm captivated. Even Oliver is entertained by it and watches her intently. It's way past his bedtime, but he's mesmerized.

"You don't remember?" she finally asks, a little winded. I'd been discussing the recent turn of events with her and waiting for her to reply. "That sucks."

"I wasn't exactly in my 'right mind' that night." I roll over on her wooden floor, propping myself up on my elbows.

"Well, from what I remember, you left shortly before I left with the football player. What was his name?"

I gasp. "You left with Aldon?"

"Not really the point here. You left with that Batman guy." Her eyes widen that she remembers—Jade doesn't remember shit. Last week I had to remind her which apartment was hers when she tried to unlock my door and started throwing a hissy fit when her key wouldn't work.

"Do you remember what he looked like?"

"Not really, but Aldon said something about it being his best friend." Then she tips

her head. “He had brown eyes. I remember that.”

Holy shit! I did sleep with him.

With Oliver in tow, I run out of Jade’s apartment and into my own. I remember bits and pieces of that night. I practically raped poor Batman in the hallway. The only reason we made it in my apartment was because he stopped us and pushed me inside.

Too bad I don’t remember if it was good or not. Who am I kidding? It was probably fantastic.

When you think about it, I’m the whore, not him! I raped Batman!

“What do I do now?” I ask, looking down at Oliver.

He doesn’t answer me as he’s now fast asleep on my lap.

I smell like chlorine, so I take a shower before bed. When I’m out of the shower, I hear a commotion outside my door, so I open it. There is no one there, but when I look down to get Oliver back inside, fresh off a midnight nap, there’s a single red rose with a note attached to it.

Tathan isn’t in the hall, which throws me a wicked curveball of amazement. Oliver takes off with the rose and leaves me standing at the door with the note in my hand.

“I am a whore,” I tell Oliver, who sits next to me against the door, eating his rose.

He doesn’t answer me.

Why do I find the fact that Tathan wrote me a note so incredibly endearing and heartfelt? I hate to even say those words associated with Tathan in the same sentence,

but I do.

Damn him and his note. It's my breaking point, because how can I throw office supplies at a man who writes notes and gives me roses?

It's two in the morning on Friday, but I call in the Crisis Campers, Casey and Zane. Though this is essentially a bad idea, I need someone to talk to who answers back.

We sneak over to the gas station across the street for ice cream, and return to my apartment just a few minutes later. I'm getting a piggyback ride from Zane through the lobby of my apartment complex. I'd convinced him my feet hurt from pole dancing with Jade and he needed to carry me.

"You fucked him?" Zane asks, snickering. "You lucky bitch, muff!"

I bite his ear. "Can you not act like a twelve-year-old for like five minutes? This is serious."

"Not likely. Hey, look." He points to a vending machine. "Do you have a dollar? And I'm staying up all night for you. Don't bite me."

Reaching into the pocket of my shorts, I retrieve a dollar and hand it to him over his shoulder. He takes the dollar where he inserts it into the machine as I lay my head on his back. He gets his peanut M&M's and starts walking toward the elevators.

"I don't see what the big deal is. So muff got some action and doesn't remember. . ." He shrugs. "What's the problem?"

Casey catches up with us after getting her own bag of M&M's. "The problem is—" She opens her bag and pops two green ones in her mouth. "—she doesn't want him toknowthat she doesn't remember. Is that right?"

I nod. "Can you nosy nellies focus? What am I going to do? He wrote a note?"

## Page 56

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Zane sets me down in front of my door so I can unlock it.

“Go out with him!” they both scream.

With the sound, Tathan’s door opens. It’s like two in the morning so his hair is all messy and he’s wearing just a pair of shorts.

I want to attack him. Which is not good for me.

“What’s going on out here?” he asks, rubbing his beautiful eyes. His hair is all over the place, sticking up on one side as he lazily rubs his stomach. My eyes automatically dip south, and I think that’s by design. He wants my eyes down there.

All three of us are gawking at him, me more so, actually scratch that. . . I’d say Zane is giving him the biggest once-over, judging by the fact that he now has drool dripping from the corner of his mouth.

“Oh, hey, Amalie.” Tathan smirks and steps outside his apartment.

Zane and Casey push me forward and into him.

I, in turn, push Tathan inside his apartment and follow him. I’m sure Casey and Zane are on the other side of the door, listening.

We stare at each other for a few moments before he smiles. “Did you get my note?”

“Yes. Oliver liked the rose.”

His hand rises, and he scratches the back of his head, his eyes closing slowly and then reopening like he's trying to stay awake. "I guess that's a good thing then?"

I want to shake him and scream in his face, why are you so adorable?

"Oh, yes, flowers are good for his diet," I tell him and lean back against the wall of his living room. I feel safe in here, and it makes me want to run away. "Keeps him regular and happy."

His eyes are on the floor, but then he looks up at me and asks what I know he wants to know. "You didn't know it was me that night, did you?"

"No," I answer truthfully, and he nods once, his eyes sad. "I barely remember that night."

Way to go. You made Tathan sad, you jerk.

"But it happened."

"Spill the details then," I tell him eventually, not wanting to waste any more time.

"What do you want to know?" He shifts his stance, crossing his arms over his chest, and yawns.

"We left together that night?"

"Yes." He gives a nod. "I asked you out. You said no, but took me back to your apartment where you attacked me."

"I'm sure." He senses the sarcasm and gives a chuckle. "So when you moved in, you knew then?"

“Yes. . . but let me finish. You kicked me out after we had sex that night.” Tathan continues and takes a step toward me. “I didn’t see you again until I started with Madsen Construction. Imagine my surprise when I saw that you sat right next to me.”

“I’m sure.” My sarcasm is even thicker. “Now, why do you come into the office? Clearly, you don’t need to.”

“I told you. Because I get to see you every day that way.” His tongue darts out and licks his lower lip, shrugging. “You’re sexy.”

I ignore the sexy remark. “Why me?” I ask, watching the way he’s watching me. It makes me nervous. “You could have anyone.”

“I don’t want just anyone.”

“Okay.” I consider what Paul said and everything he’s been telling me. “So you’re not a manwhore.”

“Have you ever seen a girl at my apartment?” I shake my head, because I haven’t. “I haven’t slept with anyone since you.”

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“Really?” I draw out. “That’s hard to believe.” I give a little nod to his body.

Tathan chuckles and leans to one side. “It’s the truth.”

You probably know this, but watching him lean is like watching porn. I fan myself. I can’t handle the leaning.

His eyes twinkle when he speaks. “I’ve had two girlfriends in my life and never—up until you—have I ever slept with someone outside of being in a relationship with them.”

Sigh. Just fucking sigh.

“I’m not interested in sleeping around. Sure if I wanted to, it’s available, but I wasn’t raised that way. When I’m with a woman, she’s gonna know that it’s just me and her.”

I don’t say anything. I’m not sure I can after this week and everything I’ve been schooled on.

“I want you.” He takes a step closer, and another until he’s backed me up against his door. “Why can’t you give me a chance?”

Nothing comes out. I guess in some ways, I’m not protesting it.

“When I’m with a woman, I’m only with her, and she’s going to know exactly who she belongs to, every single inch of her. I don’t share.”

Panties feel free to melt now.

His stare, so serious and relaxed, searches mine, waiting to see my reaction. I close my eyes, unable to reply, and his hands move to my face.

“Do you believe me now?” He asks so quietly I almost can’t hear it. I hear him swallow, and when he pulls me closer, his heart is pounding in his chest, or maybe it’s mine, but I think it’s both of ours, one drowning out the other, but neither able to determine who’s is beating the loudest.

“Yes.”

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I didn't see Tathan on Friday.

He wasn't at work, and I knew he had to take Casey's photos tonight, and I'm kind of jealous I'm not there to watch him work.

Instead, I spend the night in my apartment and watching movies with Oliver.

Saturday, I spend the entire day with Casey and Zane preparing for the wedding, but mostly the bridal shower.

When I finally get back to my apartment, Tathan is unlocking his door, camera bag on his shoulder.

I envision what he must have looked like today while shooting. Those bright eyes taking on that brooding essence they have when he's concentrating and the way he selectively chooses the angles that give him the images he's seeking. So sexy.

God, he's seriously starting to get to me.

By the time I walk over to him, he's leaning into the wall waiting for me, relaxed and content as he watches me approach. . . unlike me who's fidgeting with everything from my hair to my dress, to the strap of my purse.

He gives me that adorable smile, eyes twinkling as he looks at the sundress I wore today. "Hey." His eyes drift south. "I'm disappointed I didn't see you all day."

He's flirting.

“You missed out.” I poke his chest when I get closer.

“Is that so?” His eyebrow arches in question, and then he groans as if this is devastating news to him.

“Yep.” My shoulder presses into the wall as I wait to see what he’s going to do next. It’s like I’m giving him an opportunity here, which I am.

“Hot tub?” he suggests, leaning into my wall, his eyes still wandering.

I groan, giving in. Like he had to ask. “Meet me down there in twenty minutes.”

He winks. “Deal.”

“WHAT HAPPENED WITH you and Colton?”

“How’d you know about Colton?”

“Casey. . . .” He’s amused and takes a drink of his beer. He’s on his third one now, and I’m on my second glass of wine as we sit under the stars. “She gave me your life story yesterday when I was doing the engagement photos.”

She sucks.

“Colton cheated on me with his roommate’s girlfriend after my dad got sick. I caught them in bed of all places doing the nasty, the horizontal mambo, bumpin’ uglies. . . .” Tathan starts laughing at this point, his shoulders shaking. “Boinking. . . banging. . . I could go on for days with this one.”

It’s apparent I spend entirely too much time on Urban Dictionary and have had maybe too many glasses of wine.

He laughs. “Did you kick his ass?”

“I threw a firecracker into the bed with them,” I tell him proudly. “I aimed at the goods, but missed. Either way, he went out with a bang.”

He looks terrified but amused. “Remind me to never get on your bad side.”

“You were on my bad side. . . but I used office supplies against you instead of fire. I was almost arrested for the firecracker incident too, so I’ve laid off the explosives.”

“For throwing a firecracker?” He can’t help but laugh again, shaking his head.

“I may or may not have set his car on fire too.” I point at him. “No one had any proof!” I decide it’s time to change the conversation to him. “Do you miss your parents?”

His head slumps, and he nods. I instantly feel horrible about asking that. I just blurted it out without thinking.

Nice timing.

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Of course, he misses his parents, fuckface! What kind of horrible monster are you to bring this up?

“It doesn’t get any easier. Paul and Elle have been great though.”

“How do your brothers deal with it?”

“Better than me. . . .” His voice trails off into a whisper. “They were older. Maybe it was easier for them.”

“I don’t think it’d be easy for anyone.”

I pay attention to the song playing on his phone and smile.

I love listening to Elvis Presley for many reasons, most of which have to do with my dad. He used to play all his records when I was a kid, so the love was pretty much forced on me. Although I did come to appreciate his songs and the meaning they held.

This one in particular, “Pieces of My Life,” was one of his favorites. I never knew much about my mother, but from what I gathered, her and Dad had some problems. Problems he regretted and weighed heavily on him since there wasn’t anything he could do to fix the situation. She was gone, and once they’re gone, there’s nothing you can do.

“Elvis was amazing, and I was apparently born in the wrong decade,” I note, sinking down in the water.

“I think we both were.” He moves slightly, shifting and reaching for another beer. I take that moment to refill my wine and stare up at the sky full of stars. It’s so peaceful out here and the way the warmth of the night feels on my skin, this feels almost like heaven.

“Were you close with your dad?”

“Yeah.” I smile at the memories of him. “My mom died when I was just three months old. She was hit by a car when she was running one morning.” My voice fades when my gaze drifts and finds Tathan.

He sits back against the concrete, his brow furrowed in what seems like pain. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t remember anything about her. My dad said I looked just like her and the photographs I’ve seen we could be twins.” I shrug. “But my dad raised me all by himself. He never dated anyone that I can remember. It was just us. When I went away to college, I came home every weekend to check on him and then he got sick. It was out of the blue too. Just, hey, I have stage IV lung cancer.”

It takes Tathan a moment before he speaks, deciding on his words. “It’s never easy. Doesn’t matter if you watch them die over months, or it just happens in one day. They’re gone.”

He knows exactly how I feel and I know that right then, I am exactly where I want to be and with who I want to be with at this exact moment.

Tathan just gets me. We have such similar life experiences, well, not the “he’s rich” one, and “I’m not” one. But the love of our family and the tragedies we’ve both suffered run so parallel. I’ve never felt a connection like this with anyone, especially not Colton. Tathan looks so inviting, wet, bare chest, arms spread open and relaxed. I

want to curl up in his embrace and snuggle him.

I scoot toward Tathan, wanting to see what hot tub kissing is like when a noise draws our attention toward the gate and I realize I forgot my Saturday night buddy was coming over. Casey.

Fuck. Just fuck.

She shuts the gate behind her, tosses her towel aside and does a cannonball into the hot tub, drenching both Tathan and me.

He looks a little shocked with water beading down his face. “I think she drank that entire bottle.”

Sure enough, she’s holding an empty bottle of wine that she sets down on the edge of the concrete and shakes the one beside me, seeing it’s still half full. “Let’s party!”

When I scoot away from Tathan, Casey notices our proximity and smiles, drifting to the side of the hot tub to sit on the edge. “Was I interrupting?”

Tathan smiles but doesn’t say anything because I practically shout, “No!” before he can get a word in.

“If by interrupting you mean was I hoping to cop a hot tub feel, then yes, you were most definitely interrupting,” Tathan states, with that smile and those dimples.

Thank God for the hot tub because my cheeks were already red, so my embarrassment is masked by the heat.

Fucking Casey has impeccable timing.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Sunday, the morning of the bridal shower, should have been about Casey, but she wants to talk about Tathan and go over the seating chart one last time. It's all shit we could have done last night instead of drinking wine in the hot tub with Tathan and listening to TLC.

Priorities. We have them.

"My Aunt Carol needs two seats," Casey says through giggles as we sit at the kitchen table in her mom's house. It's where the bridal shower will take place in about three hours. "And Bryan's Uncle Tom needs to be next to the bathroom. Has some kind of bladder problem."

"That sounds fun." I set my mocha down and point to the left of the seating chart. "Put them there."

She's just making small talk because what Casey really wants to talk about is Tathan and what's going on between us. After that, she's going to want to talk about her bachelorette party at the Red Revolver tonight.

Thankfully, Casey is not a Vegas kind of girl. And Bryan hates gambling. He plans on hitting the strip clubs around Phoenix.

Good for him I say. Get your lap dance.

Casey feels the same way. "He can do blow off a hooker's ass for all I care as long as he shows up for that wedding."

I laugh because it's something she would say. Though I could never see Bryan doing that.

“So,”—and here it comes—“have you. . .?”

Casey thinks I had sex with Tathan last night when she went to bed. She thinks this because of the way he was looking at me last night in the hot tub.

I didn't. Sure, we kissed again, but no sex. Just a little Elvis and wine this past week.

“We sat up until two in the morning listening to Elvis and sang completely out of tune.”

Casey grins. “Some would call that dating.”

“No, it's called. . . well, I don't know, but I'm not dating him.”

“Uh-huh.” She's giving me a look. One I don't want. So I push her. “Shut up. We made a deal. One date. One rule.”

“And what's that one rule?”

“He can only have one date. No matter what.”

“For the last week, you've been sitting in a hot tub with him every night. If you're not dating him, you're hot tubbing him.”

Zane chooses then to walk over. “What's hot tubbing him?”

He actually looks excited. As if this is something he should know.

I do have to admit, our behavior begged the question are we dating?

In my mind, no, we're not.

But we might be hot tubbing.

## Page 61

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## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

The bridal shower is uneventful.

Casey gets a few vibrators and lots of sexy lingerie. Most of us are excited about the bachelorette party tonight though, so the bridal shower was just like the beginning of the madness.

By the time the bachelorette party rolls around, I'm already drunk off the four peach margaritas I inhaled.

Zane goes with me to my apartment so I can change into my dress. As we're leaving, Tathan is leaving his apartment too. Funny how we always meet this way.

"So. . . big party tonight, huh?" he asks.

"Yeah." I give a nod down the hall, motioning for Zane to walk ahead of me, to give us some privacy. He's somewhat reluctant, until I kick him in the ass. "Heading out to the Red Revolver," I tell Tathan, moving my eyes to his.

Why did you just tell him that? He'll probably follow you now.

Tathan raises an eyebrow and takes in my dress, letting out a relaxed whistle. "Guess I'll have to expand the patrolling tonight to mark the territory."

"Yeah." I laugh, shutting my apartment door and turning to lock it behind me, only to see Zane at the end of the hall dry humping the wall. He's pretty drunk too. It's a good thing we're taking a cab to the bar. "Gotta protect the pride, huh?"

“Oh, for sure.”

I smile and start to walk away when he grabs my hand and pulls me back. “Can I get just one kiss?”

He’s asking for kisses now?

He shifts closer, his body brushing the length of mine. Fighting a shiver at his proximity, he brings his thumb up to stroke my lower lip and then his lips are on mine, soft, tender, sweet, yet there’s some control there too.

Have you ever had a kiss that gives you a feeling like you know exactly where it would head if you let it? Not all kisses lead to sex. That’s not at all what I’m getting at here.

I’m talking about the ones that lead to those shitty emotional feelings. Those kisses.

They suck.

What surprises me is the way his body firmly aligns with mine and gives me a little hint of the possessiveness I know he has.

We explode right then in probably the hottest kiss ever.EVER. Picking me up, he slams me back against my door with his lips frantic on mine, rubbing, twisting, pulling, gasping, you name it, we’re doing it right here in the hallway. The scorch of his tongue, his hands, I should just open my door and let him in because that’s where this is going. Between his tongue filling me, the way his teeth scrape against my lips, it’s all so much more than I was expecting from him at this moment.

When he eases back, needing to breathe, he throws me off by cupping my cheek with his right hand and then kisses my forehead like what you read about in some kind of

fairy-tale romance.

I gasp when he lets me down. He chuckles and moves his mouth to my neck, over my jaw, and then pulls away like he's steadying me for a moment, trying to figure me out.

“Enjoy your evening,” he says, his body hovering intimately over mine, and he let's go of me completely and then turns to walk down the hall ahead of me.

He sucks.

Because now the entire night I'm going to be thinking of that kiss and him. If I have to guess, it was definitely by design.

When Tathan passes by Zane—who I conveniently forgot witnessed all that—Zane makes a clawing motion and gives a loud “MEEE-OWWW” at him, only to have Tathan wink at him.

When I approach, Zane grins. “Jesus, muff.” He throws his arm around me. “That guy is wet-dream-worthy.”

Don't I know it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

The Red Revolver is packed.

I can barely move as the loud bass thumps through my veins. I've had too much to drink, as has everyone else in the club. Casey's to my left with a guy she doesn't know grinding against her ass and two more in front of her.

I can feel a guy behind me, his hands on my hips, low and tight as he moves to the beat with me. I don't know him, probably won't ask for his name and when this song is done, we part our ways. It's how nights like this go, and he and I both know it. I'm not taking him home, though. Judging by the way he moves, he wants me to, and he'd probably be fairly decent in bed.

Halfway through the song, I turn to face him. He's hot, tall, built similar to Tathan, but he's certainly not Tathan because he doesn't make my skin flush and my heart race when I see him.

When I stare up at this guy, I can't see what color his eyes are, though I know for a fact they're not the brown I've been dreaming about.

The guy smiles down at me, his hands slipping lower on my hips pushing me into his. To my left, there's movement and Casey squeals with what seems like delight.

Turning, I face her, hoping she's okay and those dudes groping her haven't crossed the line.

I'm met with someone staring at me and then the hands that were occupying my waist fall away, as if he knows he's lost this chance for a happy ending tonight.

The man before me smiles.

I poke his chest exaggeratedly. “What are you doing here?”

“Protecting the pride.”

Right about then, a song I absolutely love comes on. “Blurred Lines.”

I reach for Tathan—more than likely the seven rum and Cokes I’ve had provoking me to do so—but that kiss and all the others he’s given me lately runs wild through my body, and lines truly are blurred. They’re fucking nonexistent right now.

The dance floor floods with people, and we’re smashed together. My arms lock around his neck, his fall to my hips, fisting the fabric of my dress between his hands.

Our bodies curve to one another, grinding to the beat, our breathing hot and heavy.

We say absolutely nothing. No words need to be said. Our bodies are saying enough.

Thinking of the kiss in the hall, I want his mouth on me, so I move my hands to his cheeks and pull his lips to mine. His beard scrapes my chin, but this kiss stops time.

He gasps, as though he can’t get enough, his tongue darting inside my mouth immediately.

Gliding his fingertips over my ass, he pushes his hips into mine, still moving to the beat.

He’s hard.

I’m wet.

Oh, the possibilities.

Adrenaline rushes through my veins, gives me courage so I hike one leg up around his waist. I'm not sure what I'm doing here, but we both start panting, hands frantic. We're in a club and my friends see what we are doing and start making catcalls. The raucous shout of laughter brings us back to reality.

Goose bumps overwhelm me at the touches, but then they're gone just as quickly because he pulls away. I can see the hunger in his dark eyes. No way did he want that to end, and pulling away seems to have caused him actual pain. His left hand rises and runs over the back of his neck seeming conflicted.

"Please don't drive home like this," he says, backing up again. He's going to leave. I can see it in his eyes. "Take a cab."

"Or you could take me home." I wait to see what he'll say next, knowing if we're alone tonight, the deal's off and we're fucking.

Amalie! Don't!

"No." He shakes his head and leans in to whisper in my ear over the music. "Been there, done that. You're going to be sober the next time I fuck you."

He's confident, isn't he?

"Who says there'll be a next time?" My lips move against his ear.

He smiles against my cheek. "All I need is one date. You should know that by now."

"Cocky much?"

“Oh, I’m going to show you cocky, and you will remember. . .” I swallow as he continues, his breath blowing over my ear in the most provocative way. “. . . it this time.”

Panties melt again.

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Weddings are beautiful.

I suppose all weddings are, but Casey and Bryan's wedding is breathtaking. I'd like to say I had a hand in creating it, but Zane and Casey's cousins did most of the work. I suck at being a maid of honor.

As I'm standing off to the side watching Casey and Bryan stuff cake in each other's faces, Tathan to their right taking pictures, Paul comes to stand next to me with the remnants of champagne in his glass.

"You look beautiful."

I turn to look at him, smoothing out my lavender dress and fixing the one curl that keeps falling out of my artfully pinned up dark hair. "Thank you."

I should have been mad at Paul. In a roundabout way, he set Tathan and me up.

He looks at Tathan and gives a tip of his head toward him. "Thank you for giving him a chance."

I snort. "It's only one date."

He smiles and takes the last drink of his champagne. "Sure it is."

He sees right through me and continues with his train of thought. "Every relationship starts with only one date, ya know."

I look up at him, not knowing how to respond. I've spent so many years protecting my heart and my head from the emotional trauma that relationships gone badly can cause, that I'm not entirely sure how to change the way I'm hardwired to be around men.

I think he's going to walk away, but he stays. He carefully watches Bryan and Casey, and the way Tathan is capturing every moment for them to relive years from now. "His parents had something very special. They'd known each other since they were babies, but Jason had a plan for his life. They didn't marry until they were out of college and had their careers going, but it never stopped their friendship before that. It was what was most important to him. To her. They really were best friends."

"Tathan and I certainly haven't started out that way, Paul. He's annoyed me more over the past few months than any other person I know." I look up at him as I casually sip my champagne, aware I'm lying through my teeth.

Paul steals a glance at the happy couple before returning his gaze to me. "But just think about why he would devote so much attention to you. Hell, even move in across from you if not for the fact that there is more to him wanting more with you. Tathan's a keeper. He's devoted, loyal, and has a passion for anything he sets his mind to. Look at how passionate he is about what he's doing. That same passion he will feel toward anyone who will hold his heart as well."

Damn, if I wasn't second-guessing myself on this whole Tathan thing, and why someone as wealthy as Tathan would move into my apartment building, Paul's ringing endorsement is definitely causing me to trust his intentions now.

## Page 65

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

It's easy to see where Tathan's passion lies. Photography.

It's in the simple aspects of it too.

When the bride says I do.

When the groom lifts her veil.

When they kiss for the first time as husband and wife.

It's all moments he captures for them, as a little memory in time they will have forever.

"Dance with me?" Tathan sets his camera down when "Dare to Believe" by Boyce Avenue comes on. A very well-placed song and a very well-placed question, just when I'm daring to believe he might be someone I can take a chance on.

"Just don't sing," I tease, taking his hand.

He smiles, his hands wrapping around my waist gently, holding me to his chest.

I smile back up at him, hooking my hands around his shoulders.

"You know," he begins as we gently sway, and he turns his gaze down to me. "I held up my end of the deal."

"And so I owe you that date now," I finish.

Tathan nods. “You made a deal.”

“Yes, I did.” As we dance, I can’t help but watch my best friend and how happy she is. It seems all her life she’s waited for this day where she could call Bryan her husband.

I stare at Casey, nearly in tears. “She’s absolutely beautiful.”

Tathan leans down and presses his lips to my temple. “You are too.”

My eyes continue to watch them, happy and content as Casey smiles at me nearly in tears.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

Tears collect along the rims of my eyes, and I give her a wink and lay my head on Tathan’s chest.

“No, thank you, Casey,” I return, knowing she can read my lips. If it wasn’t for her, I’d probably be at home with Oliver eating Cheerios. Instead, I’m daring to believe this deal just may be a good one.

When the dance is over, I pull away and take a few steps back. Tathan reaches over to the table and retrieves his camera. The sun is setting behind me. Deep orange hues surround him in his black tux. I raise my hand and touch his chest, just a little feel.

“Pick me up at seven tomorrow,” I tell him and turn so I can’t see his face, literally walking off into the sunset.

Cliché, huh?

I think so, too, but it's fitting for the day. When I turn back around, about twenty feet from him, he snaps a photograph of me. Unlike him, I won't need a photograph to remember this moment. It's etched on the very fiber of my soul because I'm pretty sure I'm so far past the point of no return with Tathan. . . and it scares the ever-living hell out of me.

He doesn't look at me long and then stares at his camera, studying the image he just took, remembering the moment I assume. I wonder what he sees right then, a man so keen on capturing the true essence of a subject. Does he see me? Does he see exactly what he's done to me?

I hope he has.

## Page 66

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

I have no idea where I want to go on our date until Tathan decides for me.

He chooses an authentic Brazilian restaurant Fogo De Chao Brazilian Steak House. I've never been there, but Casey and Bryan went not too long ago and raved about it for days.

We meet in the hall at the apartments, me in my little black dress that I know he can't resist.

He's wearing dark slacks, and a gray dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The relaxed look really works for him. Did I mention he's wearing a black tie?

I want to be tied up with it. I want it bound around my wrists while he worships my body before him. Is that too much to ask?

I didn't think so.

The restaurant is in Scottsdale across town, and it doesn't take too long to get there. It is, however, the first time I've ever been in his car. It's sleek with black leather that smells amazing.

By his car, how he furnishes his home, and the way he dresses, it is abundantly clear Tathan likes nice things. I don't blame him on that one. Nice things are, well, nice, and he works hard to afford them.

He pulls up to the door, the lights dancing across the hood of his shiny car. A man dressed in a black suit reaches for the handle of my door, another for his, and we're

both escorted from the car.

Tathan hands the man closer to him the keys and then reaches for my hand.

I take it, being polite. “You’re trying your best, aren’t you?”

“One needs to be confident around you, and it’s my job to protect the pride, right?”

I stifle a laugh.

As we walk inside, we’re greeted by the host. “How may I help you?”

“Reservations for Madsen,” Tathan says, leaning into her. There’s something I’ve never noticed about him which I find endearing. When he talks to you, he leans in, as if you have his full attention. He doesn’t do this to flirt. It’s his way of letting you know he cares.

They seat us near the window. White tablecloths cover the round table for two, and the place settings are already beautifully arranged. It reminds me of Casey’s wedding last night.

“Have you ever been here?” I ask, taking in my surroundings.

He nods. “Yeah, Paul brought my brothers and me here a couple months ago. We all have dinner about once a month.”

“How long have you done that?”

“Since my parents died.” I hate the sad eyes that drift my way. “It was Paul’s way of continuing my dad’s tradition.”

“Your dad took you to dinner once a month?”

He nods again and looks over at the waiter as they deliver a bottle of wine to the table. He thanks them and then turns back to me. “It was something he started when we were little. Kind of like a boys’ night, I guess.”

I sigh.

It’s quite the event they have planned for this type of dining experience. First you get your salad, which is pretty much a meal in itself with fresh vegetables, imported cheese and sides to choose from. Then when you’re finished with your salad, you turn over this coin on your table to green.

Gaucha chefs wearing light blue shirts with red ties come to your table with fire roasted meats and slice you off pieces. Endless amounts too. Anything you want they pretty much have. When you’re done, you flip the coin to the red side.

I’ve never experienced anything like this, and I think Tathan can sense that.

“How’s the Picanha?” Tathan asks, taking a sip of his wine and watching me closely.

I’m impressed he can say that because I can’t. “Mmmm.” I moan around the tines.

“Don’t moan. . . .”

“Oh, but the pussy is delicious.” My hand immediately flies to my mouth, catching myself, but it’s too late. I want to die. Stab myself with this very fork.

## Page 67

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

God, really, Amalie? Fucking really? At a nice establishment like this, you decide to have word vomit.

One eyebrow cocks, and there's a glimmer of amusement in his entrancing eyes. "I bet it is," Tathan says, through laughs.

I hang my head in shame. "I meant to say Picanha. It's good."

"It is," he agrees, resting his elbows on the table and leaning in. "Say pussy again."

"No. Shut up, we're eating."

"But if you keep that up, and the moaning, I'm going to test out the sturdiness of this table. Fuck the eating. I'll eat—"

"Stop. It." I gasp at his words, though I'm not surprised by them. This boy is dirty.

He shifts in the wooden chair, smiling down at me with a light laughter and changes the subject. "I'm surprised you've never been here before. Bryan and Casey were talking about it at their engagement session."

"They go out to eat a lot." I shrug, reaching for my wine. "I don't. I have no life and have a dog."

"I really need to get on that dog's good side." Tathan laughs, remembering Oliver's hatred toward him.

“He likes roses.”

“Hmmm.” He gives me a smile, eyes twinkling so bright they make me smile. “I’ll consider that.”

## Page 68

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Throughout the evening, it's an endless supply of food to the point where I can't even look at my plate any longer.

"I need to get out of these clothes. I can't breathe." And I immediately realize my major gaffe.

"I am almost positive I can help you with that when we get back to the apartment." Tathan gives me a once-over, knowing what his words are doing to me.

"Ready?" he asks when the waiter brings back his credit card.

My pulse skips. "Yes."

He watches me as we stand, his eyes roaming over my body, letting me know exactly what he's thinking when they drift closed, and he groans in my ear as we start to walk toward the door.

"That was some amazing food." I smile when we walk outside. The heat of the night assaults my face, and for a moment, I wish it was cold so I could snuggle against him.

"Thank you."

He looks out at the hills as we wait for his car to be brought around, my arm wrapped around his. "Can I take you somewhere?"

Shrugging, I let him take my hand and lead me. "Where?"

"A place I like to take photos."

I raise an eyebrow. “Is this a trick to get me in your car so you make out with me and steam up the windows?”

“Maybe.” He smiles. It’s infectious and captivating.

“Okay.”

He takes me up to Camelback Mountain, the same place I saw in the photos on his Facebook page. By the way, I wouldn’t advise hiking to this exact location in a dress. But the view. . . . It’s breathtaking and makes me wonder how he’s still single. How could a man who looks like this, talks the way he does, and gives grand gestures as such, still be single?

So I have to ask, “How are you still single?”

Tathan Madsen is nothing like I expected he would be, and I may have said that before. But I think it needs to be said again because most won’t see it. I didn’t. The beauty within this man is hard to see by the untrained eye. He’s rare. He’s magnificent and deep. Cherished for his talent behind the lens, what you see in those eyes is an honest man.

He raises an eyebrow at me and bumps my shoulder as we stand in front of his car.

“How are you still single?”

I don’t answer because he knows why, which explains a lot right then, something I never considered. I never did find out what happened to those infamous girlfriends Tathan supposedly had. Never did I think he would have experienced what I had. The hurt, the heartache.

“Where’d you catch them?”

Sad eyes meet mine, honesty there for me. “My bed. We had been. . . engaged at the time.”

We don’t say anything more. I don’t even know what to say, or even feel. He’s surprising, but Tathan doesn’t try to make out with me or even hold me. We just watch the city lights together and stand there in complete silence. Doesn’t even cop a feel.

I find silence comforting. You’re not forcing yourself to say anything and, in turn, you’re relaxed and being yourself. That’s exactly what we are tonight.

Tathan takes my hand in his as we stand. “I want you to hold my hand.”

“Why?” I laugh, not understanding what he’s getting at.

“Because, I’d hold your hand, but if you’re holding mine, it’s because you want to.”

Do you see that girl right there?

Me. Look at me closely. If you do, you can see the very moment when my heart finally cracks open and realizes just how special this guy is.

Never two weeks ago would I have thought this could happen. I would have told you that you were crazy.

He’s staring at me, waiting for my answer, so I laugh. “But how is it because I want to, if you tell me to hold it?”

He shrugs. “I wasn’t demanding that you hold it.” I take his hand anyway and look out at the city. “I was just hoping you would.”

He smiles at me again.

## Page 69

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

At around ten, Tathan takes us back to our apartments. We walk in silence, smiling every once in a while because I think at this point he knows I'm going to invite him in. How can I not? He held my hand.

Outside my door is a basket with the words: Muff's Magic Mate, thanks to Zane.

He sucks. I refuse to acknowledge it's even there.

Tathan laughs just as I thought he would. "Zane is something else."

I keep my eyes on the wall. "You want to come in?"

I told myself I wouldn't invite him in. The Force left me long ago, but I don't want to sell out and give in on the first date. But I told him only one date, so I am most certainly giving in.

He steps forward, his eyes on the basket and then slowly, they drift my way. My gaze falls to our hands when he knots our fingers together as my back meets my door. "I'm dying to come in."

I kick the basket inside the door to face Tathan. Oliver jumps around between our feet.

When we get inside, we stare at each other.

"I don't know what I have to do to show you how I feel." He steps forward, pushing me against the wall. "I don't think you've ever had a man be there for you because he

wanted to be.”

I shake my head. I was breaking. . . fast, and he knew it. “I have to take Oliver outside.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever had a man want to be here just to be with you. I want to be. I want to be that guy. Let me be him.”

Like the amazing moments he captures that tell a story all on their own, he has a way with words that can break every emotional tie you’ve been holding onto and wrap you in this sense of serenity and warmth.

I only nod, and he closes the distance between us, pressing his lips to mine. It’s tender at first, matching his words, and then the desire roots itself in our movements. One hand secures my face to his. We continue for a moment before I decide what I want. Him. In my bed. Now.

Only Oliver has other ideas and pees on Tathan’s foot.

I know what Oliver is thinking. “Get your face off my mommy, you sadistic son of a bitch!”

Tathan senses the wetness right away and pulls back to look down at Oliver, glaring. Any other man probably would have kicked the dog for something like that. Not Tathan. He isn’t happy, but he doesn’t do anything to Oliver but glare. “He hates me.”

I don’t even look; my shoulders shake with laughter. “I told you he had to pee.”

“Okay. . . .” Tathan raises his hand to touch my face. “I’m going to go shower. And I’m leaving my apartment unlocked. I hope you come over after taking care of him.”

Just invite him to your bed. You know you want to.

“Do you want to. . .” I gesture down the hall, my lips still pressed against his. “. . .take a shower here?”

I can't believe I suggested that. Actually, yes, I can.

“Are you going to kick me out again?” He raises a questioning eyebrow.

“No.”

I'm not one of those girls who need to wait to have sex. If I want it, I want it. . . and oh, do I want it.

He looks down at me, but there is a certain amount of honesty in that look. He's not hiding where he wants this to go. Where he hopes this will go.

It's very sexy, and he knows it.

With one step, he comes in line with my body, his hands on my hips, drawing me into him. I moan, and his mouth clamps down on my neck, taking a hard, sucking bite while goose bumps shiver across my skin. “I don't have any clothes here.”

He says that as if it's a problem.

“Well.” I shake my head, pulling back to look into his eyes. “You won't need clothes.”

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He groans, and I feel the hardness pressing against my stomach as he grips my ass with his firm hands. He's getting distracted.

"Tathan?"

"Yes." His lips linger on my heated skin, struggling to get closer.

"You stink."

"Got it." He laughs, his voice rough. "Shower time." Before he walks away, he whispers in my ear. "Join me?"

"No. I can't because I . . . I just can't." I wave him away and pick up Oliver. "Go shower."

I can't because I know what's going to happen in that shower. We'll get caught up in the moment, and I want him in my bed where I remember it.

So no shower.

When he disappears down the hall, I look down at Oliver as he continues to growl.

"You have to stop peeing on him, buddy."

He cocks his head at me as if I'm joking and then wiggles as if I'm rewarding him.

I don't want Oliver to see any of this, so I sneak next door and drop him off at Jade's apartment after making him go potty again. Outside this time.

“I have to work at midnight,” Jade yells back, half dressed and hanging out her apartment with Oliver in her arms.

I wave to her on my way back to mine. “I’ll be back soon.”

When I get back to my apartment, I glance down the hall to my bedroom and then the bathroom next to it.

Come on, he’s naked. I know where this night is going so what’s the harmin peeking?

Nothing at all.

When I crack the door slightly, he’s standing there in a towel, wet hair, and water dripping off him. I have to hold onto the handle when my eyes take in his half-naked body in the lighting of my bathroom. Flushed skin, muscles everywhere, dark hair, it’s breathtaking really.

Just rip the towel away.

Before I can, he grabs the handle of the door and yanks it open and then grabs my hand, pulling me into him. Slamming my bathroom door shut, he pins me against it.

“That was fast.” I look up at him, my dark hair falling on my face.

“With you waiting on me”—he reaches up and cups my cheek, his other hand brushing the hair away from my face—“I didn’t want to waste any time.”

“Fine by me.” His lips find mine, rough with an undeniable need that has me gasping into his mouth. I can feel his erection right then, and I wiggle in anticipation. I just need a small amount of friction strategically placed in just the right spot. He does too.

“Jesus Christ, Amalie.” His head drops to my shoulder, a slight tremble to his muscles when our lips part.

Groaning again, his hips press against mine harder, with more determination to show me exactly where this is going.

“Bed,” I say, frustrated. “Weneeda bed.”

Nodding, he never parts his lips from my skin as he moves us from the bathroom to my room.

We land on the bed with a thud. By what’s pressing firmly between my legs, Tathan wants this just as much, but I sense the hesitation. He pulls back and sits on his knees, leaving me lying on the bed with my legs spread. It’s unhurried as he removes my panties, his large hands lingering over every curve, leaving my skin pebbling in their wake.

He sees the flush in my cheeks, which has nothing to do with embarrassment but just that my blood pressure is rising when his breath blows out over my face. “Are you embarrassed?”

“No,” I admit.

He winks. “Good.” His left hand leaves my body and then moves to his hip and lets the towel around his waist fall away. “You’re too fuckin’ sexy for that.”

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

And then he's naked before me, and my panties are gone. How that towel made it this long is surprising.

He doesn't give me much of a chance to worship his body before he's removing my dress eagerly. And then he stops once it's off and stares at every curve.

Just when he leans in, I think he's going to say something sexy, make me scream out in pleasure just from his words.

"Where's your dog?" he whispers. Some amusement, some concern.

"With Jade."

He cocks an eyebrow and pulls back as though this is the right time to say this. "Did you know she's a stripper?"

Seriously? He's been teasing me for weeks, and now he wants to talk?

"Tathan?" The desire clenches in my stomach. I can't take this much longer.

"Yes?"

"Fuck me."

I don't have to do much else to convince him before his kiss finds my swollen lips. His tongue searches mine, giving me everything I need with just that one kiss. As crazy as it sounds.

Cradling my face in his talented hands so he can kiss me even deeper, it's all hunger and passion and whispers of need until he stops and gives me a look I know. It's want. Undeniable gasping want. The kind that lets you know you've waited too long.

He's silent as his hands push me back down on the bed, hovering over me, gazing down at what I know now he's dying to take. Lust fills his eyes before his head dips down meeting my lips and then pulls my nipple into his mouth. I jerk forward, wrapping my legs around his waist. "Oh God, Tathan!"

He growls, too focused to stop, as if that sound is what he's been dying to hear for months.

I bet it is, too. I know he's been dreaming about this for a while. It's one of those encounters where your entire body tingles with each touch because you've wanted it that bad.

"Are you sure you want this?" he asks, sucking on my ear when I wrap my legs around his waist, his hips flexing forward to where his dick is at my entrance with the slightest bit of pressure. "You have to tell me how bad you want this."

He's a tease.

His touch passes over my clit. It's a deliberate torture I can't take, and I want him inside. Fuck this rubbing shit. "We could get plastered, and I could take you unwillingly again if you prefer that. . . ." My head twists on the pillow to peer up at him just about the time he sucks in a breath at the sensations. "Either way, we're having sex."

He gives me nothing but a heated glance, a low rumble to his breath as he goes to work. Gripping my ass, he gives into one last long seductive grind into his erection that reminds me just how much I enjoyed dry humping in high school. Safe, but oh so

pleasurable.

It's clear just how much sexual tension has been building for months. It's one of those sexual encounters that will be all grunting and sticky skin as we pound into one another. Part of me was worried we would rush through this, and I didn't want that at all. I said one date, and I meant it. At the time.

Before he can do anything else, I raise my hands up to his shoulders and give a little push. He resists at first, but then knows I have something I want to do first.

He knows exactly what I have planned when he's lying where I once was. His hands go behind his head with a smile.

It's right then with the light coming in from the bathroom that I get a good look at him naked, this time my memory isn't foggy, and I know I'll remember this.

My gaze wanders over the sharp edges of his cut hips that give way to what I've been wanting to get a good look at these last few months. He's not overly huge, but he's not small either, and I can't wait to get that inside of me.

My heart races as I look up at him with my head inches from what I've so desperately wanted to ride the last six months. "You've been dreaming about this, haven't you?"

"Look at me." Our eyes meet as my lips wrap around his tip and suck. "Oh yeah, I've been dreaming about that."

"When?" It's hard to speak around him, but I do because I really want to know what exactly he's been dreaming about and if it matches my fantasies.

"Every time I look at your mouth, I think about it doing things to me." His brow arches, but when I make the move to take him all the way in, I can tell it's hard for him

to keep talking. “Why do you think I didn’t come into the office all week?”

I stop and sit up. Frustration marks his eyes that I stopped. “Seriously?”

He sits up on his elbows and peers down at me. I know he’s restraining himself from just shoving my face in his lap. “I got a taste of you. Just a little fucking taste. Two weeks ago, I got another small taste.” I suck in a breath as he continues, my palms flat against his upper thighs. “So asking what I dream about”—he shakes his head—“I’m sure you can imagine why.”

## Page 72

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Easing back down his body, he holds the base of his dick with one hand, the other resting behind his head again.

Fuck, that's hot.

Wrapping my hand around him, I bring my lips to the tip again before taking a long lick from the base to tip, leaving him gasping when I make another dawdling circle around the head.

I take it slow at first, but then before long, I'm taking him all the way in my mouth with more enthusiasm.

Tathan bucks his hips to meet my movements, his left hand moving from himself to thread in my hair, giving me a gentle coax to continue.

The noises that slip past his lips are ones I never knew I needed to hear. They will forever be engrained in my head now. It's making him feel like this, making him utter sounds of unadulterated pleasure.

Just about the time I know he probably feels my spit on his balls, he's stopping me.

With an agonized growl, he pulls me up by toward his chest. "I'm going to come if you keep that up."

"Isn't that the point?" I laugh. His arms wrap around my lower back and then move to my ass where he gives me a squeeze, then rolls us so he's pressing between the wetness of my thighs.

“No. I’m dying to get inside of you when you’ll remember it’s me.” He says, capturing my rapt attention with every word.

I’m dying too.

“Do you have protection?” I ask when I realize he’s moments away from entering me.

Tathan nods. “I’ll be right back.” He removes himself from me and walks down the hall. I sit up on my elbows and watch him head to the bathroom. His tight, strong body stands tall, the lean muscles of his stomach flexing as he walks toward me.

He crawls up my body, spreading my legs with his knees, each one of his hands beside my head.

“Jesus Christ, you’re—” I put my fingertips to his lips.

“Don’t say that. Every guy says you’re beautiful or sexy. That’s not you.”

“I was going to say wet,” he murmurs, settling between my very open and ready legs.

I laugh, tracing his lips with my fingers. “Wow. Original.”

Why the hell are we talking? We’re supposed to be fucking.

Capturing his mouth again, talking ceases, and I let out a moan that reaches pornographic levels. He’s doing the same, barely able to breathe and instead, starts grunting and nipping my skin like an animal.

His face moves from my neck, and he looks into my eyes.

He watches me and then looks at the nightstand, stalling. “Should we play some Elvis?”

“Why are you talking? What’s wrong with you?”

“Nervous?” It’s like he’s asking me. Silly.

“Are you really?”

“No. Not really, just messing with you.” There’s an entertaining shake to his head as his mouth curves into a smile when he pushes forward, his dick pressing deeply inside me. “That’s it, baby.” His voice sends my body into shivers, full-on shivers like I’m freezing, only it’s because at last, he’s inside me, and I’m going to remember this.

I want to scream out in pleasure again, but I hold back and press my mouth to his. I hang on to him anywhere I can. It’s as though we’re both struggling to gain some sort of composure, but we have none. His body trembles during the first few moments, struggling to gain rhythm maybe, but when his head buries in my neck, I know he feels it too.

Moving his lips along my jaw, with a low groan, he pulls my face to his, pressing his lips against mine for a gentle kiss that has the makings of being storybook-worthy.

Only he can’t make it be romantic. Frustration shakes him, and his tongue plunges deep into my mouth, his hips thrusting with steady force against mine, our skin slapping together.

He clenches his jaw as he bucks his hips, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “Jesus.”

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As I rock my hips into his movements, a rhythm that comes easy for us, he breathes rapidly in my hair as his hands slide up my sides and then cradle my head, drawing me into his kiss. “Fuck, Tathan, I should have given in sooner.” I breathe the words into his mouth.

He shakes his head, not caring. “It was worth it.” He says against the skin of my neck that arches to his touch. He draws back, his movements never stopping, but our kiss stops, our eyes lock, and I’m there, trapped in a gaze that harassed me for so long.

We both inhale right then because there’s something incredibly intimate about this moment I can’t shake.

You know what I hate most?

When women glorify sex as something it’s not. Saying shit like he’s a god and I’ve never had it so good or that he was hung down to his knees.

Who the fuck wants a donkey’s dick inside them?

Certainly not me. Can you imagine the damage done?

Was he a god in bed?

I wouldn’t know. It’s been so long since I’ve had sex, it’s amazing regardless.

That’s until I realize I need this to last. I can feel the change and know he’s close. It’s in the way he’s moving faster and going from kissing to just panting. In no way do I

want this to end. I want every single position I can get my body into with the sex continuing for hours.

“Make this last!” I slap his face. Yes, I just slapped Tathan across the face.

Oh shit. He didn't like being hit, did he? He gives me a stern look, his eyes falling over every inch of my face. “You sure you want that?”

My heart races, unsure. “Yes.”

Without another word, he flips me oversomy face is pressing into my mattress, and I can feel his dick sliding along the crack of my ass.

Uh, what? No way. No exit ramp entrance.

I'm just about to protest, twisting my head to the side, when I see his hand come up and slam against my headboard rocking me forward. “Be careful what you wish for.”

“No back-door action tonight, buddy.”

He says nothing. Grins, yes, but no words. He's grinding into me, so he's distracted, I'm sure.

The hand that's not on the headboard then slides over my ass and down the back of my right thigh where he wraps it behind my knee and positions mesomy ass is slightly elevated. It's not enough that he angles his hips and drives into me so hard the top of my head slams into the headboard.

I squeal with delight that he's giving me what I need. “Fuck yes. That's it!”

Piledriveme, baby. Fucking piledriveme!

I want to scream out, “Go deep or go home!” But I don’t.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” he says, as if he’s answering my unspoken words.

What? OhGod!

His hand moves from my leg, up my ass again where he gives it one quick squeeze before curving around the front of my hip and between my thighs.

Giving me his weight, just enough that I can feel the rapid beating of his heart against my shoulder blades and the way his breath feels in my ear, I know he’s loving this just as much.

“Seeing you in a bikini night after night was the death of me. All I could focus on when you’d step out and wrap that towel around your body was how badly I wanted to lick every drop of water off your skin.” His tongue darts out and licks from my shoulder over my collarbone and up the side of my neck. “So fuckin’ sexy.”

For these last few weeks, Tathan, for the most part, has been quiet and never giving me much to go on. I knew deep down he was dirty by his occasional comments, but goddamn is this hot.

His fingers slide over my clit with just the slightest pressure, enough that it gives me what I need. And then he removes his fingers and immediately replaces them with mine. “Make yourself come. I wanna see you fall apart on my dick.”

OhGod.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

I do as he says. I may not like to be told what to do, but damn, this is fucking hot, and I'm suddenly loving being told what to do.

My fingers work over me. Giving in has never been so easy with Tathan sliding in and out of my pussy at just the right speed. His dirty words whispering over my breathy moans become my breaking point.

When I start to shake, I feel the smile that lifts his cheeks pressed against my shoulder, his chest pressing more firmly into my back as my legs tense, trapped beneath his. "So sexy," he whispers in my ear. "That's it."

I'm sweating so badly that when he rises, our bodies stick together. He gets up on his knees with me still flat on my stomach and then takes both his hands to grip my ass again, moving me the way he wants. My ass bounces on him, each movement more forceful than the last until he suddenly stops and brings my hips up so I'm on my hands and knees before him.

I look back over my shoulder at him. He's certainly not done with me.

I'm not going to lie; we probably try every position. Reverse cowgirl, missionary, doggie, spooning, crisscross. I had a pillow under my ass, my ankles wrapped around my ears, all that and loving every single minute of it.

Thirty-one minutes into it, yes, thirty-one exotic minutes, I'm soaking wet from sweat, as is Tathan, my legs burn. I'm shaking, and well, I feel fucked. I've had at least three orgasms while Tathan fought off two and came a little on my stomach, twice when he scrambled to stop and couldn't.

At the thirty-two-minute mark, Tathan is panting, and I'm right there with him. I'm making some sort of similar noise, but it's more like what you'd expect from someone who was having a panic attack.

We're in the missionary position again, my hands on his ass as he pounds into me whispering dirty words. I certainly don't need much friction down there anymore, and with the way his pubic bone presses against me with his hard thrusts, it's easy.

I have to say it's the best part about the entire event. Aside from his kissing. It's that I didn't even have to try to have an orgasm.

With his head buried against my neck, certainly not speaking, his hips meet mine with erratic forceful movements.

"Shit. . . I'm sorry," he mutters, as if I'm going to be disappointed he lasted half an hour. A violent growl emits from him while his body trembles, the room echoing our desperate cries.

The entire thing intensifies as he arches his back and fists my hair into both of his hands that are cradling my face.

He has nothing to be sorry about, and I think he knows this when he feels just how easily he slides in and out of me in those last few moments. We both gasp, our bodies trembling together as his movements slow.

Tathan sighs, letting go of my hair and rolls off me, his breathing ragged. "Jesus. . . ."

"That's what I've been missing out on?" I sit up on my elbows and cock an eyebrow at him.

"Uh. . . ." He breathes heavily, watching my face, looking for any hint of satisfaction.

I don't think he understands what I was implying, so I straddle him. "I meant that in a good way, Tathan. Now how long does this beast take to get ready again?" I gesture toward his monster between my legs.

"I could go all night long." I go to climb on top again, half joking because I don't think there is any way I could go again that soon, and he stops me. "I need a minute here."

Just as we're getting ready for round two, Jade is knocking on my door. "Amalie! I gotta go to work."

"Shit." I scramble to get to the door with a sheet covering my naked body.

When I get the door open, Jade frantically sets Oliver down inside my apartment and then jets out the door as I thank her.

"No prob!"

I'm not fast enough to get to Oliver, but thankfully, he doesn't go into my room and instead camps out on the couch and closes his eyes like he's exhausted.

When I get back to my room and close the door, Tathan's waiting. "Round two?"

"Deal."

We do go all night long. Turns out the Muff Magic Mate had some entertaining items in it. Penis boy knew his muff magic.

## Page 75

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Sunday mornings are no longer spent on my couch with Oliver.

Now they're spent in bed, with Tathan, the heat of our bodies warming cool sheets.

After three weeks of him being a part of our bed, Oliver is starting to come around to the idea of another man in my life. I wouldn't go as far to say he likes Tathan, but he doesn't pee on him anymore. It's a start.

Do you remember the deal?

Tathan made me a bet he could make me fall in love with him.

You know when you agree to something, and then you think to yourself, what did I get myself into? Surely, I shouldn't have agreed to this.

It's like those time-share things where they say, hey, for only a small investment—thousands of dollars—you can stay here at our beach house anytime you want.

What they don't tell you is that every weekend you want to stay there, guess what? It's fucking booked. And then the one weekend you're allowed to stay there, a hurricane comes through, and you're stuck inside the entire time.

Sound familiar?

We've all been there, or maybe just me. But have you ever agreed to date a guy with the deal that you wouldn't fall in love with him?

That's like going to Target and saying you're only going to spend twenty bucks. I think it's nearly impossible. At least that's been my experience.

And this, my friends, dating a guy with the absolute determination not to fall in love with him is nothing like I've experienced.

"When will you be back?" I ask, intertwining our fingers together, my head on his chest, listening to his light breathing. Pathetic. I'm totally, utterly pathetic because while he made me a bet, again, hours ago, it's a done deal already.

I'm.

In.

Love.

"I come back on Thursday," Tathan tells me, his lips brushing my temple. "And then I'm taking you away for the weekend." He glances down at Oliver who's sleeping between us. He's getting a little big to be doing this, too. "Without the dog."

I laugh when Oliver growls. He certainly understands more than we give him credit for.

"What's the matter with having the dog there?"

Tathan gives me that look. The one that says, I'd be fucking you right now if it wasn't for the dog. He doesn't dare move him, been there, done that, and he has the bite mark on his arm to prove it.

"He likes you now," I point out.

“Yeah, right.” He laughs. “Last night he took my shoes and put them in the toilet.

I’d forgotten about that. Maybe they weren’t friends just yet, but they would be. Oliver’s a sucker for a good guy. Or maybe that’s just me.

When Colton fucked me over, I thought, no, I knew I’d never love again. Until Tathan Madsen pushed his way into my life and hot-tub time.

Back when my dad was sick, he said some pretty crazy things at the time. His mind had been going for a while and near the end, he finally made sense. He told me to save the best of my heart for the one who’d love me at my worst. Worst meaning broken by love. Or I assume that’s what the crazy guy meant.

I thought, at the time, he’s losing it, but now. . . now it finally makes some sense. We all need someone to show us despite our breaks, the cracks from being deceived, we’re worth loving again.

Tathan sits up, the crack of his bare ass just barely visible under the sheets. He has an adorable crack. “I should get up. If I’m going to make it to Santa Monica by tonight, I need to get on the road.”

Uneasiness settles in my chest. Suddenly, like any girl falling in love, I’m worried about him. “It’s a six-hour drive.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Maybe if you’re driving.”

“True.” I sit up with him, cradling a sleeping Oliver in my arms like a baby. “Guess it’s going to be a week in the hot tub by myself,” and I say this with such dejection, he actually laughs at me.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

He stands, still laughing, and reaches for his shorts on the end of my bed. “This deal is going to be so easy.”

I can't keep my eyes from traveling south, sliding with ease from his cut stomach to that sharp V of his hips. Lower. . . even lower. Yep. He's certainly beautiful everywhere. I swallow, snapping my eyes to his, finally. “What are you talking about?”

“You. Me. This.” He pulls his shorts on and searches the floor for his shirt. “It's going to be easy to get you to fall in love with me.”

I move Oliver's on my pillow and then stand on the other side of my bed. “You're pretty sure of yourself there, dude.”

He grins when he notices I'm wearing his shirt and steps around the end of the bed, making his way to me. “Why are you wearing my shirt?”

I shrug, trying to do that whole, “I'm cute in your clothes” look but probably failing miserably. “Because I look better in it.”

He's standing before me now, towering over me with the silly smirk he has when he knows what I'm saying is true. “I have to agree with you. Now kiss me goodbye. I need to shower.”

Wrapping my arms around his shoulders, I rise on my tippy toes to kiss him. “Wouldn't you want to stay here with me all day?”

“I would, but I’m booked out a year. I wasn’t lying when I told Becca that, and I won’t cancel.” He kisses me, long, the kind of kiss you give someone just before leaving. A reminder of your presence long after you’re gone. “You could come with me.”

It’s tempting, it is, but sadly I can’t. “I have to work.”

“Paul would—”

“Nope,” I say, cutting him off. “I got that job myself, and I’m not about to play that card. The one that says I’m fucking the boss man’s son so I should be able to come and go as I please.”

“And that’s why I . . .” He pauses, his smirk turning into a full-fledged grin. “. . . like you.”

Yeah, sure, that’s what he was going to say.

Dropping my hands from his shoulders, I push him back. “Go. Before I tie you to my bed and hold you hostage as my own personal sex slave for the week.”

He laughs, capturing my wrists in his hands and drawing me back to his chest. “Now that sounds a hell of a lot better than shooting a wedding in Santa Monica.”

“It does, but you’re a man of your word so keep it.”

The look he gives me is something similar to appreciation, and adoration. He knows I wouldn’t ask him to give up anything for me, and more importantly, he wouldn’t go back on his word. “I’ll call you when I get there?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” I watch his back muscles as he twists around, heading for

the door.

He pauses at my bedroom door. “One more thing. . . .” He turns, glancing over his shoulder.

“Yes?”

You tell me, but doesn’t he look, well, in love? It’s written all over his face and the intensity in his eyes when he stares at me. And then he surprises me and says, “No hot tubbing without me.”

I laugh. “Deal.”

I’ve never liked losing a bet. I once lost a game of poker and cried for an hour. Given, I lost a hundred bucks on that game, but I don’t know anyone who likes losing. When it comes to falling in love—and my fragile heart—I’m even more terrified.

And this is Tathan Madsen we’re talking about. It’s not like falling in love with your average hot guy. He’s famous, attractive, and easy to like. I bet you liked him back when you first met him that morning in the office, didn’t you?

My point is, now that I’m alone, in my apartment and missing him. . . I don’t know how to process what’s happening or how to tell him I’ve lost our deal.

I need Casey. I need a “how to” guide from someone who knows what’s up.

## Page 77

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

“Ineedyour help, Casey.”

There’s lots of moaning and breathing come through the line and I’m contemplating hanging up. “Why? What did you do now?”

I chew on my fingernails and then drop my hand when I taste the polish I’m chewing on. “What’s that noise?”

“We’re newlyweds. What do you think the noise is?”

I can’t say I blame her. “Can you stop for a minute?”

“No. Bryan has to work later. We’re in a hurry. I’m ovulating.”

It takes me a minute to understand exactly what she said. Ovulating. What’s that mean?

And then it hits me. “Holy shit. You’re trying to have a baby?”

Casey laughs, kind of breathless and then I hear, “Fuck, get off the phone, baby. . . .” Lots of heavy breathing follow. . . and sloppy noises, like they’re kissing.

As much as I want to hang up, I don’t. “I seriously need your help, Casey. I love him. He’s won.”

“And the problem?”

I throw my hands up in the air. “I don’t know.” That’s the problem, I don’t. I thought I knew what love was. I thought I knew how it felt and told myself I’d never feel that way again. Then Tathan pushed his way into my life, rewrote my ending, and I realized I’d torn out a few pages in hopes I’d forget that feeling.

One thing is certain. My life will never be the same again. Because of that jerk. Tathan. I’m talking about Tathan.

Casey sighs. “Amalie, there is absolutely nothing wrong with falling in love with Tathan. You’re being ridiculous. Just tell him.”

“He’s in Santa Monica shooting a wedding.”

“Tell him when he gets back.” And then the line goes dead, and I’m assuming Bryan hung up on me because I’d like to think Casey wouldn’t do such a thing in my time of need.

I GO FOR a swim that afternoon—avoiding the hot tub like I said I would—and then I take Oliver for a walk. The whole time, I can’t stop thinking about Tathan and wondering if he’s made it to Santa Barbara yet. I make a mental note that if I don’t hear from him by seven tonight, I’m calling all the hospitals from here to California and checking on him.

I’m so paranoid. I’ve always been that way.

My body jolts forward when Oliver yanks on his leash, barking at something in the distance. He’s getting big enough now I can’t pick him up when he’s being naughty, like now, when he decides to chase a lizard up the stairs.

Stumbling around, I yank on his leash. “Dude, lizards don’t taste good. Why are you chasing him?”

Just as we get to the top of the stairs, Oliver comes to an abrupt halt, and I do a tumble over the top of him and land on my back staring up at the sky.

A woman in black strappy pumps stands next to me, her legs looking like they go all the way to heaven. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I scoff, glaring at my dog I might put in a box on the side of the road later with a Free sign. I won't, but my sore ass is contemplating it. "You're a jerk, Oliver."

He doesn't listen to me. He's too busy staring at the lizard on the wall, taunting him.

The woman reaches for my hand, helping me up. I stand, brushing off my swimsuitcover-up, and then eye black strappy pumps in front of me. Mostly because do you see whose door she's standing at? The one across the hall.

Do you happen to notice she has a key in her hand?

Let's think about this for a moment, shall we? Maybe he has a really attractive maid he didn't tell me about? Long lost sister I didn't know about? Cousin? And dare I ask. . . aunt?

She looks to be around my age, and as if she's straight out of a Cosmopolitan magazine cover. Long, waist-length blonde hair that has that blown-out beachy effortless waves look, with golden skin, bright blue eyes. . . absolutely nothing like me and my dark hair, "I never dye it" pale and "I never take my clothes off" skin.

She smiles at me over her shoulder and unlocks his door.

Un.

## Page 78

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Locks.

It.

“Are you Tathan’s neighbor?”

Oliver, who’s standing next to me now, concerned for his mommy and her rapid heartbeat, I’m sure, growls at her. I yank on his leash. “You could say that.”

“Oh, well. . . .” Leaving the door open, she moves across the hall and reaches for my hand. “I’m Tathan’s fiancée. Nice to meet you. I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other soon.”

What.

The.

Fuck.

You’re thinking it too, aren’t you? I fell in love with a liar. Again.

Fuck love. Straight up, fuck you, love.

I hate you.

## Page 79

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

A pint of ice cream and pan of brownies later, I'm on the couch, curled up next to Zane crying. "I can't believe I let another man inside me."

"You're talking about your heart, right? Just so we're clear, because there are multiple meanings behind that statement."

Raising my head, I scowl at him, tears rolling down my cheeks. He brushes them aside, tenderly. "Yes, Z. I'm talking about my heart."

He laughs lightly. "I'm sure this is a misunderstanding." Pointing to my ringing phone, he gives me that look. The one that says, pick up the fucker. It's been ringing nonstop for the last hour. All calls from Tathan probably trying to explain his lying ass.

"No. He should have told me about her."

"Who? Selma? The chick in his apartment?"

I sit up. "You mean his fiancée?"

In a quick movement, Zane steals my phone and answers it. "You have some explaining to do, Mr.," Zane says, though his voice is anything but serious. Tathan says something, and then Zane nods. "Yeah, she knows now. You should have warned her. She's not happy and currently in a sugar-coma, "I hate men" tirade."

They talk.

I glare.

Sure, I'd been avoiding the calls because, in all honesty, I wasn't sure I wanted to hear his excuses. Having a fiancée is something that should come up in the friend zone, not the deal zone.

Zane pulls the phone away, holding his hand over the speaker. "He's on his way home."

"What?" I shout. "He's shooting a wedding this week. He can't come back tonight."

Zane shrugs and tells Tathan, "She looks like her head's going to explode."

I rip the phone from his hand. "Listen, asshole. It's one thing to lie to me, but I like you because you honor your responsibilities. Or liked you. Past tense. I hate you now. But if you cancel on that wedding, you're an even bigger asshole than I originally thought."

I wait, and I don't know why I do because I'd certainly convinced myself tonight I wouldn't listen to his lame excuse as to why he hadn't told me about Selma.

He sighs, heavily. "Amalie." I listen closely to his tone and imagine what he looks like. Probably sitting there, tugging at his hair, eyes tired, three, maybe four empty beers in front of him. "Fuck. . . I didn't know she was coming back to town."

He didn't know? So he acknowledges she's real? For a moment I hoped this was all some kind of sick joke. Apparently not. "Yeah, well, she did."

"I didn't—"

"I don't care," I shout, cutting him off and then press the End button, hanging up on

him. “Don’t you dare answer my phone again.”

Zane’s eyes widen, and he nods. “My bad.”

No, my bad. For believing good straight guys actually exist in life.

## Page 80

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Five days.

Five days of calls.

Five days of meeting Selma in the hallway while she lives at this apartment.

Five days of crying with Oliver in my arms.

And finally, on Saturday at four in the morning, there's a knock on my door. Actually, it's more of a pounding.

I know exactly who it is, and I don't answer it. I don't want to hear his lame excuse as to why he didn't feel the need to tell me he was engaged to be married.

“Open the goddamn door, Amalie!” Tathan shouts, slamming his hand on the door. And then I hear him talking to someone, actually yelling at someone.

Peeking through the peephole, I see him standing there, looking like hot hell, and his hand wrapped around Selma's upper arm, scowling at her.

“Why'd you fucking show up here and make her believe we're still together?”

Holding my breath until I feel like my lungs are going to burst, I stand on wobbly legs waiting for her answer.

Selma stutters, probably tired. “Jesus, Tathan. I didn't know you'd moved on so quickly.” It looks like he ripped her straight from bed, wearing his clothes.

His scowl deepens. “So quickly? We’ve been broken up for over a year. Remember? I caught you in bed with another guy.”

Selma rips her arm from his grasp. “It was an accident.”

“Whatever it was. . . it meant we were over.”

My heart leaps in my chest. It was over between them? So. . . he didn’t lie?

I rip the door open. “What do you want?”

Tathan’s eyes snap to mine, fire flaring in them. “Five days. I’ve been calling you nonstop for five fucking days.” He smacks his hand at Selma, knocking her shoulder lightly. “She is not my fiancée. She’s a lying whore who slept with my friend. In. My. Bed.”

I glare at Selma but say nothing. I want to punch her in the face. How dare she hurt him and lie to me. But then again, when my eyes meet the tired man beside her, why’d I believe her so easily and not the one who’d made me a deal to fall in love with him?

There’s a water trickling sound, like, well, pee. In shock, Selma looks down at her feet. “Oh my God! Your stupid dog peed on me.”

No one calls Oliver stupid!

“He doesn’t like women.”

“You’re a woman,” Selma points out, looking like she’s going to vomit.

“I’m his mom.”

And get this, when Oliver spots Tathan, he wiggles and rubs up against his legs. Traitor.

Reaching down to ruffle his floppy ears, Tathan smiles at him.

Selma huffs out a breath and stomps back to Tathan's apartment.

"You have five minutes to get the fuck out of there," Tathan tells her over his shoulder. With a gentle push, he shoves me back in my apartment and locks the door behind him. "We need to talk, and you're not ignoring me this time."

Defiantly, I cross my arms over my chest. "I don't have to do what you say."

"Yes, you do. You fucking drove me crazy this week. I . . ." He pauses, dropping his bags at my feet. Goddamn, angry Tathan is just . . . fuck. I have no words. But he does and continues with, "You have no idea."

"You have no idea." I can be such a brat sometimes.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

“Whatever you say.” He laughs, sarcasm lacing the sound of bitterness. With his eyes on mine, he backs me against the wall. I don’t know where Oliver disappeared to, but I’m trapped in Tathan’s steal embrace. “I love you.” He blurts it out. Just like that. No messing around. “I need you. Not to survive, but to make my life worth living. I’m not letting a misunderstanding destroy that.”

Goddamn him. “I don’t even know if I like you.” God, I’m a horrible liar.

He dips his head, catching my eyes and then let’s go of my wrists he had pinned to the wall. Framing my face, he kisses me. Just a quick one, then pulls away. “Bullshit. Yes, you do. I know you’re scared. You’re afraid of the realness of this. You’re scared you won’t be able to walk away from me.”

This motherfucker is too smart for his own good. “I uh. . . .” I can’t form words. Instead, my lips findhis, and I show him how right he actually is.

But then I pull back, just like he had. My mind twists and tumbles over everything I want to say to him. “I have some things I need to say to you. . . and it’s really important that you listen to me.”

He nods slowly, his expression completely unreadable.

Taking a deep breath, I decide not to wait any longer and spill everything I wanted to say over the past couple weeks and had forgotten in the five days of hell. “After Colton, I told myself I wouldn’t depend on a man ever again. I wouldn’t let one in. I thought I understood how love worked, too. Toreallylove someone, the way you need to, there’s a certain amount of dependence there. Dependence I wasn’t going to give

anyone because I was scared I wouldn't be able to walk away."

"Like I said."

"Let me finish," I say, slapping at him.

Tathan crosses his arms over his chest, leaning away from me and against the wall behind him. Fuck, there he goes again leaning. "Fine. Finish."

"Well," I smile. "I actually was done."

A huge weight lifts off my shoulders. Even if he rejects me now—which he won't because he said he loved me already—at least he knows how I really feel about him, even if I hadn't told him I loved him.

When I raise my eyes to his, part of me is surprised to see him smiling. But there's a certain sadness to his eyes. I remember it from before. That night he took me up to Camelback Mountain to watch the sunset and briefly mentioned being engaged at one time. That sadness, it's still there. A sadness he isn't sure he can let go of. A hole he never mended.

I never realized it, until now, with that sadness lying under the surface of his expression that we'd both been hurt by love.

"The way I love you is fucking consuming," Tathan says, laughing under his breath. He stares at me. "I probably shot the worst photographs of my life this week."

"You terrify me," I admit. "You fucking terrified me."

His arms wrap around me, drawing me into his chest. "I know," he agrees, turning his head into my hair, then sighs. Tathan breathes out a long breath in my ear. "Look at

me, Amalie,” he says, his voice cracking. I can’t though. I try, again, and still can’t. I’ll cry if I do and I cried enough this week. I don’t want to do it anymore. “Please. . . just look at me.”

Tensing and squeezing my eyes shut, I pull back and look up at him.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you by not telling you about her.” He’s speaking softly, trying to make me see. “It took me months to get her out of my head, and I still haven’t. I don’t love her, but you know as well as I do, being hurt like that doesn’t go away. That’s why I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want to go back to that time in my life, if that makes sense.” He swallows, drawing in a deep breath. “Do you know how hard it was to stay in Santa Monica this week with you ignoring me?”

I nod, as though I had expected his response, because I did. My hand moved to his jawline, sighing heavily. “I’m sorry I ignored you.”

Tathan opens his mouth several times to speak and then finally asks, “Do you trust me?”

“Should I trust you?” I ask, and he arches an eyebrow in surprise, making me look in his eyes, hating the heartache at the expression on his face. “My gut tells me I should.”

“Then tell me you love me. Tell me you want this as much as I do.” There’s an easiness about Tathan I adore. A softness I’ve never experienced before him. It’s something I missed this week, and now he’s here, his gentleness is calming.

I want to let the words fall out, so natural, so true they have depths and valleys I can barely understand. I can, however, understand three very simple ones. The ones he’s looking for.

Reluctantly, my eyes lock on his. “I love you,” I tell him, moving toward him again.

With a jerked motion, his fingers dive into my hair, and he inhales deeply. It’s everything I’d been waiting for since he left on Sunday.

Our lips part and he slides one hand around my waist, pressing me flush against his chest.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:56 am*

Tathan is all for the kissing. In fact, he practically attacks me. His tongue excitedly explores my mouth. It's the kind of kissing I feel deep in my bones like a shockwave.

Needing to breathe, we part, gasping, and stare at each other. "Jesus," he murmurs, running his nose along my jaw, attempting to catch his breath. A slight smirk touches his lips, and his eyes blaze with desire. "I missed you."

His lips find mine again, my eyes fluttering closed. I fight back a shiver, wanting to melt into him. As he fists my hair in his hands, his groans get lost against my lips.

That kiss is much like that first kiss in the hallway we shared months ago. It's promising, and then it turns into something else entirely. Impatience.

He glides his lips over mine, firm and demanding, making a groaning sound low in his throat. He tastes so goddamn good.

Our kisses slow, and our breaths give our intentions away. His hands travel over my curves, taking their time before he finds my face again, sweeping my hair from my cheeks.

His touch is heavy and deliberate, his kisses the same. "How about I show you how much I missed you. Inabed."

I giggle. "By all means, show me."

His handspalmmmy breasts hastily. "Is this okay?"

“It’s more than okay,” I moan in response, drawing myself closer, letting him know it definitely is more than okay. It’s perfect. I never want him to stop.

Hewantsthis, and Ineedthis.

His fingers tangle in my hair once again, tipping my head back to expose my skin for him, feeling my racing pulse under his tongue. His stubble scratches my tender flesh, leaving shivers in its path. I bury my face in his neck, breathing in his rich scent.

There’s no hesitation, only surrendering. Slipping my hand inside his shorts, his breath hitches against my cheek. His stance changes, his body hunching toward mine when my hand wraps around his cock.

I’m drowning in him, his scent, his kisses, his touch.

The desperation in his touch takes over, and he struggles to get closer. I need that, too.

Standing in the middle of my living room now, half-naked, it’s hard to get the right angles.

I tighten my grip on his cock. “Let’s go to my room.” I moan when his teeth drag over my breasts as he yanks my shirt down to reveal my bare skin.

We make our way to my room and to the bed where he lays me out before him. We glide together, his large hands snaking around my back, his mouth eagerly seeking out mine once again.

When his kisses ease, his hands work over me. Gently, they outline my breasts, each one, cupping them with just the right amount of force. His eyes close, his need growing stronger when his hips meet mine—just slightly—but enough.

Easing my bra aside, his hands slide lower, resting on my hips, and then hooks them around the edges of my panties. Each fingertip grazes my hip with just the slightest touch and then some pressure. He bends down, his lips brushing my right breast and then my nipple, giving me a dawdling, deliberate kiss. I love nipple kisses and the goose bumps that follow.

I watch his every move, my fingers finding their way to his hair.

Carefully, his hands travel south, skimming the length of my body. It's when his touch finds my clit that my lashes flutter.

The low gravel of his voice brings me back. "How much have you missed me?" His eyes hold mine, waiting for my answer.

"Just a little bit," I tease.

Once he has my panties off, his hands explore my thighs and then back to my hips, and then he's moving back up my body, to my lips, reclaiming what's his.

A lurch of excitement moves through me, knowing where this is heading and the idea of his eagerness for it thrills me even more. He's not in his apartment with Selma. He's here, with me. And he loves me.

His kisses are tender. . . and it's then I realize this is completely different from any other time we've been together. He's making love to me. Giving me a piece of himself.

He sits up, pulling his shorts down and then kicks them aside before returning to the bed. My hands immediately move to his cock, wanting that hardness where I so desperately need it. Between my legs.

Holding himself above me on shaking arms, Tathan's breath washes over my shoulder, my name on his lips. My lashes lower and I arch my neck, giving him more of my skin, more of me in any way.

His hips buck, gliding his fullness between my hands. My other hand grips his arm. His head bends forward so all I could see is the sharply defined edges of his shoulders.

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Between my legs, his hand finds my center and his fingers gently prod, waiting for me to look at him. “Are you ready for me?”

I stare into warm caramel eyes and nod.

“Say it.”

“I’m ready.” I lift my hips.

“No. . . that’s not what I want to hear.” He kisses me, and then draws back.

“Make love to me.”

Reaching between us, he moves my legs farther apart, watching my face the entire time. Shuddering at the long-awaited touch, I relax at the sensation of him filling me. He doesn’t use protection since I’m on birth control.

Poor Tathan. He wants to go slow, make love to me like I asked, but those first few moments after he enters me are nothing like that.

“Jesus Christ,” he moans. His head drops to my shoulder. He pushes forward, his hips shuddering as he does so. “It’s been so fucking long. So long. . . .”

“It’s only been a week.”

“I missed you,” he says, grunting with each movement. “I missed you so fucking much.” His hands curl around my shoulders, yanking me into his movements.

Caressing the length of his back, outlining the tautness of his muscles, his body tenses at my touch.

Pressure builds, goose bumps shiver across my skin, and soon my head falls back, his lips against my skin, his warm breath panting against my neck. The scorching heat of his kiss weakens me.

My fingers dig into his shoulders, my orgasm rushing through me.

And he comes with me, unable to stop himself, his body jerking with his release, his head buried in my shoulder.

“Tathan?” I breathe, kissing his neck.

“Kiss me,” he whispers, long lashes lowering, gasping for breath as his body continues to shake. “Kiss me. . . Amalie.”

I do.

Before I met Tathan, and even after, I had a weakness, a struggle inside of me to find love again and let it find me. And then Tathan came into my life and offered me his heart. He asked for my vulnerability and I surrendered willingly.

Handling me with care as my breathing relaxes, he blows a long breath out and eases his body from mine.

Exhaling deeply, Tathan slides to the side and draws me closer, wrapping his arms around my waist and bringing my face to lie on his chest. Just like the morning he left.

A smile spreads across his face. “I have another deal for you.”

I laugh. “I think. . . okay, what is it?”

“I bet I can get you to marry me.”

You knew he was going there, didn't you?

Tathan doesn't see it coming when I reach for his hand. “Vegas is a five-hour drive. If we leave now, we can be husband and wife by noon.”

He takes my hand. “That's how you deal.”

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What was I thinking?

“Vegas is a five-hour drive. If we leave now, we can be husband and wife by noon.”

Clearly, I wasn't, was I?

“Muff, if you're chickening out, I'll totally take your place.” Adjusting his tie, Zane checks himself out in the mirror beside Casey.

Oh, yeah. Why are they here? You better believe I brought my crew with me. No way could I do this without them. We even brought Oliver because I couldn't leave him with Jade again because she was having a “get together.” Don't ask. I didn't.

By the way, Oliver's the ring barrier. Let's pray he doesn't eat it because if you see the way he's eyeing the collar with the ring on it, he's contemplating chewing it off. I know my puppy.

Anyway, there we all are in a tiny dressing room that feels like it's closing in on me. I'm in a white dress that's not mine. It's Casey's and surprisingly, fits me.

My armpits are sweating so bad and in my mad rush out the door this morning, I forgot to pack my deodorant.

“What's taking so long?” Bryan asks, peeking his head inside the dressing room of the Little Vegas Chapel. “Tathan looks nervous.”

Yep. Our Elvis love affair resulted in a shotgun wedding Elvis Presley style.

Wait. Did I hear that right? Tathan's nervous?

What if he doesn't want to marry me? It's all too soon, isn't it? Who gets married after only a few months of dating? Those weddings never last, do they? The Bachelor's proof. Most of those couples break up before the damn show airs.

"Don't do this!" Casey says in between my deep panicky breaths I gulp in, grabbing my face between her palms.

"You're right. This is crazy. I don't even know him."

Her brow pulls together. She's mad at me. "That's not what I mean." She squeezes my cheeks a little more, tightening her hold on me. "I'm talk about you. Don't go to that place in your head where you think you don't deserve to be happy. You're freaking out for no reason. Tathan love you."

I shake against her hold. "Yeah, but these kind of things don't work out. I don't even know him that well. Just this morning I thought he was engaged to that chick with the long legs, now I'm going to marry him? It's dumb, right?"

"You do know him and these things do work out," she tells me confidently, like she knows for a fact it's going to work out. "With Tathan, they do. He's not Colton. He's Tathan Elliott Madsen. He's a good guy, and for some reason, he loves your crazy ass. You're going to marry him whether you want to or not. I'm making you."

She will too. Zane's beside us, the train of my dress draped over his waist, admiring himself in white. "I'm telling you, Muff. You don't marry him today, I'm going to put this dress on and give it a shot."

I'm nearing tears. What the hell is wrong with me? And then I do cry when my mind drifts to who isn't here to walk me down the aisle.

My dad.

He's never going to be able to give me away.

"I don't have my dad to walk me down the aisle!" I cry, bursting into fat, girly emotional tears. It's the kind of tears that leave you bedridden with a bottle of whip cream in one hand and Nutella in the other.

"It says here Elvis can walk you down the aisle," Zane points out, gesturing to the pamphlet they gave us. "That should work, right?"

"Or I can do it," a deep voice chimes from the doorway, peeking his head around the corner. "It'd be an honor to give you away, sweetheart."

Casey lets go of me, smiling, and turns me around to face the doorway.

Of all the people to show up here. . . it's the man I could consider a father figure lately.

Paul Madsen. The man who repeatedly steps in at the right time.

He smiles tenderly. "Tathan called me and asked if. . ." His voice fads, probably because my tears turn to me hyperventilating. Paul rushes toward me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders and pressing me to his chest. "Don't cry."

At some point, I don't know why I'm crying, just that I can't stop. But Paul does. He always knows.

Cradling my head to his chest, carefully like I'm a delicate flower, the opening notes of Elvis Presley's "I Can't Help Falling in Love" begins. It's the song we chose for me to walk down the aisle. We. As in me and Tathan.

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“I know you’re scared, Amalie,” Paul whispers. “But if anyone is going to love you for the rest of your life, it’s Tathan.”

Paul’s right. I may have only known him for a few months, but my heart’s know of him my entire life. He’s that guy I dreamed about as a little girl sweeping me off my feet. Only it’s drastically different than I envisioned, what with it being in Vegas and not a church, but it doesn’t change the guy, does it?

“He loves you,” he reminds me, drawing back. Brushing tears away with the pads of his thumb, he eyes me. Waiting. “I’d be honored to give you away, if you’d let me.”

My tears finally slow and I nod. “I’d like that.”

Behind me, Zane and Casey are crying too. Oliver just looks confused.

Bryan knocks again. “Times up. They got other weddings today.”

With a shaky breath, I fix my makeup and tuck my arm inside of Paul’s. “I’m ready.”

Winking, he leans in and brushes his lips to my temple. “You look beautiful.”

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It's easy to see where Tathan's heart lies. Me.

It's in the simple aspects of it too.

It's in the moment he sees me in white, his smile beams.

He's happy. He's not nervous. He's impatient to marry me.

I grin. Full-on grin. Only, I don't move. It's like I'm frozen in time, never wanting to lose the moment we're in.

Paul tightens his grip and steps forward, pulling me along with him. And in the blink of an eye, he gives me away and into the arms of the man who will be mine forever.

A man I essentially started dealing and betting with a few short months ago, but loved my entire life without even knowing it.

Tathan takes my hand in his, gripping it a little tighter than necessary. It makes me smile again knowing this is exactly what he wants. His masculine beauty, his lips pulled up into a smile, he's perfect in every way.

That's about the time the Elvis impersonator slash minister, breaks into song and starts belting out "All Shook Up" through the room. He's actually good, too, but it's Tathan's laughter I focus on and well, Zane's dancing and finally, Oliver peeing on the Elvis impersonator's foot. Apparently he doesn't like Elvis as much as his mommy.

The man takes it in stride, and never misses a beat to the song.

“Welcome you two,” he finally says. “Welcome to the most important day of your life. The first question I have for you is, Tathan, do you take Amalie to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have to hold, to cherish from this day forward, in sickness in health, for richer and poorer and better for worse?”

“I do,” Tathan says immediately.

I repeat the same.

We exchange rings we bought in the lobby of the Aria hotel. It seems so crazy to me, but it’s a simple choice, really. I chose him, and I mean it, damn it. Regardless of my messy girl emotions. For whatever reason, he chose me.

Elvis looks at Tathan. “Now, Tathan, I want you to think back to that very first time you knew you were in love with Amalie.” I stare at him, waiting to see the look in his eyes. It starts out slow, like he is remembering. Falling all over again. I’m not certain of anything, but I’m certain of that look on his face. A love with depth even the stars wouldn’t understand. “And I want you to say, Oh baby. . . .”

I’ll leave it there because it gets a little over the top from there on out with a very animated speech he makes us repeat. I know one thing, I’ve never laughed so hard in my entire life and thankful when he finally tells us, we can take to the makeshift dance floor where Elvis sings “Can’t Help Falling in Love” again as we dance.

And that’s when Tathan hits me with a new bet. He ducks his head to the curve of my neck. “I have another deal for you,” he whispers against my collarbone he’s kissing.

You knew he would, didn’t you?

I smile, laugh a little and shake my head. “What’s that?”

He looks at me with that strange, tender look he has from time to time, and it’s far more charming than it used to be when I tried so hard to hate him. “I bet I can knock you up tonight.”

Now I know Oliver understands more than I give him credit for, or he has a very weak bladder because he pees on Tathan’s foot.

“Maybe we wait on that particular deal until after you’ve showered,” I tease.

I don’t know what’s changed from the me inside the dressing room, to the me now wearing his ring and sporting a new last name, but I don’t fear having babies with Tathan. I think Oliver fears them, but me, I can’t wait to start a life with him now.

Wet foot in all, Tathan picks me up bridal style, fitting given the day and moment, and carries me to the doors while I small guest list of four cheers us on. “I think I’m going to start right now. All deals are off.”

And then he carries me to the room and we make a baby.

The end.

Do you believe me?

You should, but only half of that is true. He does carry me to the bed, and we do attempt to make a baby, against the wall, the door, the shower, the window. . . and finally, the bed where he lays me down gently, admiring my body.

“My wife,” he breathes against my skin, kissing his way up my thigh.

Threading my hands in his hair, I smile and tug, making him crawl up my body until we're flush against one another. "Myhusband."

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He laughs, the sound rich, then he sobers, his eyes so tender on my face. “Are we crazy for doing this?”

“Is anyone really sane? I think we’re all a little bit crazy.”

Leaning in, he kisses my lips. “My dad once told me to be a man that her heart dreams of and her mind can’t comprehend. Be a man who makes her believe any man who made her believe she was less, was completely full of shit.”

My body shakes with laughter. “Sounds to me like your dad knew what he was talking about.”

He frames my face and plants a firm, fierce kiss on my forehead. “He does.” It’s then I realize he’s talking about Paul.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve married?” He’s hovering over me, planting kisses across my chest. “I don’t particular like mornings and I don’t like anything touching me when I’m trying to sleep. Oh, and for breakfast, I love chocolate croissants.”

He kisses my ear and whispers, in my hair, “Chocolate croissants every morning. Got it.”

“No exceptions.”

“I know what I’m getting into.”

Heat rushes between my thighs. “You do?”

“You,” he says, and I realize he is in fact inside me, again. “I’m trying to make a baby.” He chuckles, lifting one of my legs to his shoulder and kissing a path down the inside of my calf.

My lips brush the shell of his ear as I slide my hands around his neck and run my fingers through his hair. “Literally a happy ending, huh?”

He laughs. “I think I’ve earned it making deals with you.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “I suppose you have.”

He lowers his face to me again, growling deep as he enters me with the words, “I love you, deal?”

“Deal.”

While my laughter fades and my husband of two hours attempts to put a baby in me, I know this much. One, he’s a keeper. Forever. And two, I have drowned my own sadness and self-doubt for years, but with Tathan, he gives me a place where I can breathe again.