



# Lesbian CEO

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** What happens when you start to fall for the CEO who's driving you crazy?

Jessica Mortimer knows that her ex-girlfriend destroyed her life, but that's fine.

She'll destroy her company.

Everyone thinks Jessica has moved on after the embarrassment of their ruined engagement, but she hasn't. Is that petty? Maybe, but "petty" has gotten Jessica to where she is today: the head of her own, multi-million dollar tech company.

Toni Ventris lost everything: her parents, her girlfriend, and now her uncle. She's been in mourning for as long as she can remember, but she's slowly finding her way back. She knows she screwed things up with Jessica, but she isn't sure how to repair the damage – or if that's even a possibility.

When their worlds collide, Jessica has to make a hard choice. Is she going to be the villain she's always wanted to be? Or is there a chance she can still find a happy ending with Toni?

**Total Pages (Source):** 54

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:10 pm*

Prologue

Jessica

She's perfect.

And tonight is the night.

The candles are ready: the ring is in my pocket. My heart is racing as I pull out the ring one last time. I just need one more look. Yes, it's great. It's silver with rubies covering the band. Her favorite gem is just what she needs. The two of us are about to embark on the most beautiful adventure anyone could possibly hope to embark on.

Marriage.

We've been together long enough for me to know that this is right. It feels right. Everything about tonight is going to go perfectly. I've planned for it.

Now, I glance up at the mirror in front of me.

"The last two years have been the best of my life," I say to myself, pretending I'm talking to Toni. I smile. I'm not pretending to be happy right now. In fact, I'm tearing up a little bit. She's everything I've ever wanted.

No, she's more.

She's a goddess and I'm unworthy.

She's my queen and I want to spend the rest of my days worshipping her if she'll only let me.

There's no doubt in my mind that she's going to say yes. There's really nothing else she could say. Toni and I adore each other. We've been basically inseparable since we first got together two years ago. We spend every night together. Yes, we're both busy businesswomen by day, but after work ends, we put our cell phones down on the kitchen counter and we lose ourselves in each other.

The sex is great, our conversation is unbeatable, and our chemistry is off-the-charts.

There's nothing I won't do for her.

A few moments later, I finish practicing my speech. I don't get nervous speaking in public, but I'm nervous talking to her. I'm doing a big thing, I remind myself. I'm asking her to marry me. That's huge. That's everything.

What if she doesn't say yes?

There's just the slightest hint of discomfort and unease as I think about the potential that things might not go my way, but I don't think I really have anything to worry about.

Have we been fighting a little bit lately?

Well, yes. That's normal, though. Everyone fights sometimes.

Besides, she's been stressed with work and anxious about her dad. He was recently diagnosed with cancer. Stage four. The doctors don't think there's much that they can do, so Toni has been spending as much time as possible with him. I want to go with her to the hospital, want to be with her. She won't let me, though.

For some reason, Toni isn't out to her family.

This is another point of contention.

But it's fine.

It's totally, completely fine. The two of us are going to get through all of this because we love each other more than anything. We adore each other. Need each other.

My phone rings. I swipe my finger against the screen and smile when Ashley starts talking right away. My boss-turned-friend is just as excited about tonight as I am – maybe more so. Ashley knows exactly how hard it can be to find love, and she's always been supportive of my relationship with Toni. Well, the parts that she knows about, anyway. I try not to gush about my girlfriend at work. Sometimes it just slips out, though. Sometimes I can't help how excited I get about her.

“Are you ready? What are you wearing?”

“For a rich-ass lady, you still like to gossip and preen like a high school cheerleader.” I laugh, knowing that Ashley can handle the dig. Besides, we both love romantic gossip as much as the next person.

“I'll have you know that I was an excellent cheerleader,” she tells me. “But I still want to know what you're wearing.”

“Something nice.”

## Page 2

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“The suit?”

“Yeah,” I smile. The suit. It’s one I’ve been wanting for a while. I’ve never felt super comfortable in dresses or skirts, and Ashley was the one that suggested I finally just invest in some good suits. This is the first one I purchased. I had it tailored to fit me perfectly, and I have to admit that it was a great decision. I feel good in it. I feel alive.

I feel like me for the first time in ages.

She makes me feel like myself.

“I bet you look hot as hell, Jess.” I can practically hear Ashley swoon. The two of us have no romantic interest in the other, so there’s no sexual tension or chemistry there, but I appreciate her unending support. Everyone needs a friend like Ashley. We all need someone who will call us before a big date and egg us on, letting us know that no matter what happens next, it’ll be great. Life is going to be great. I have a feeling that I don’t even know just how good it can get.

“Thanks.”

“She’s so lucky.”

My heart swells.

“I’m the lucky one.”

“I won’t keep you,” Ashley says. “I just wanted to wish you good luck.”

“I don’t need it,” I tell her firmly. “Everything’s going to be perfect.”

Toni

HE’S GONE.

All of this time and I can’t believe he’s gone.

My dad. He was supposed to be the one guy I could always count on to be there for me, but he’s left me. My mother wraps her arms around his body. She doesn’t care that he’s not inside of it anymore. She hugs him, holding him, but she doesn’t cry.

Why isn’t she crying?

Tears are pouring down my cheeks as I watch my mom hug the man she loved for decades. She couldn’t have imagined things would end so soon. I know that for my parents, every day felt fresh. New. The two of them still acted like newlyweds even after all of this time, but now he’s gone.

My dad has left.

Should she really be holding his body? He’s not there anymore, but Mom doesn’t seem to notice. Time of death has been called. The monitors hooked up to him are silent, but still, my mother wraps her arms around my dad one last time.

The nurses let her.

“Mom,” I manage to whisper. “Mom, he’s gone.”

A nurse, Miranda, places a hand on my shoulder and gently shakes her head.

“Let her be,” she tells me. “This part is important.”

For Mom, I know. This is all part of the grieving process, part of letting go of everything that she’s been through in the past few days. Dad was supposed to live a long, healthy life. He wasn’t supposed to die, especially on short notice.

My head is already spinning as I think of all of the phone calls we’re going to have to make. There are going to be meetings with attorneys and employees and clients. We’re going to have to figure out who’s going to take over the company and whether to keep it or sell it. Then there’s the matter of his investments. Mom is on some of those, but not all. Dad’s got cash. Not lots of it, but normal amounts. That’s going to take a long time to go through. The biggest thing is that we can’t let anyone know until we’re ready or the media is going to have a total field day and get everyone all freaked out over Dad’s passing. He runs a hardware store we’re going to have to run or sell, and people are going to have big opinions on it.

We’re not ready for that.

We’re not ready for talk.

Time, I realize, is the one thing my mom and I need more of, yet it’s the one thing we can’t seem to reclaim. No matter how much we try to chase the elusive idea of having “enough” time, we don’t. Our wheels are spinning over and over as we try to find ways to solve problem after problem, but right now, our biggest problem is in front of us. Dad is gone and we’re hurting. We’re going to miss him. He wasn’t supposed to leave us so soon, and I wonder if I’m in shock.

My mom still isn’t crying. No one is. We all sit there in awkward silence as Mom lays across Dad’s dead body, unmoving. She seems completely unaware of the fact that the rest of us are here: me, the nurses, the hospice care lady. There was a doctor in here earlier who declared that yes, my father has passed. He left, though, and now

it's just our little group. Mom never moves.

Then we realize that Mom still isn't moving.



## Page 3

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She's gone, too.

Jessica

THE RESTAURANT IS PERFECT.

The flowers are on the table, the candles are lit, and the bottle of wine is open.

The only thing that's missing from this perfect night is the perfect girl.

I wait anxiously, looking up every time someone walks through the doors, but happy couple after happy couple come inside.

Never her.

Never Toni.

Anxious, I look down at my phone, but there are no messages from her. There's not a single missed call. We planned tonight for weeks. Well, I did, at least. Something must have come up. Something important. Toni never runs late.

I give her a call, but it goes straight to voicemail. It doesn't even ring more than once. It's like she rejected the call, sending me to voicemail.

My stomach twists.

In the history of us dating, Toni has never rejected my call. If she can't answer, she

lets it ring and go to voicemail or she picks up and promises to call me back later.

I send her a text, hoping I'm not coming on too strong, but also wondering where the hell my girlfriend is. Instead of feeling excited about the future of our lives, I'm suddenly feeling annoyed and a little embarrassed. She's over twenty minutes late. The servers are starting to give me weird looks.

I don't have to wait long.

I'm not going to make it.

That's it.

No explanation.

No apology.

What do you mean????

I stare at the phone, wondering what I'm supposed to do now. In all of the different ways I saw the night going, her not coming isn't something I could have possibly predicted.

She doesn't text me back, though. Not that minute, not that hour. Not even that day. Another day goes by and then another, and finally, I show up on her doorstep demanding answers. She doesn't answer, though, because she's not there. No one is, and that's the moment I realize I don't know her at all.

I never have.

And I hate what Toni has done to me.

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Toni

Two years later

We have a problem.

I'm staring at my email, wondering if I'm reading this correctly, when Hillary walks in. She's tall, curvy, and full of sass. This makes her an incredible assistant since everyone is scared to cross her. She's my right-hand lady and knows everything that's happening at my company. More than that, she's got her thumb on the pulse of Ashbury in general, so Hillary knows everything that's happening in town and what that means for our business.

"Hey. You see the message from Mark?" Hillary pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose. Most of the time, she wears contacts, but today she's slumming it, as she would say.

"Not yet. I'm reading something else right now." I look down at my laptop for a second before turning back to Hillary. She's got her red hair in pigtails today, which doesn't really scream "corporate America," but I didn't hire Hillary because she fits the corporate model of what an assistant looks like. I hired her because she's a badass and she's loyal. She does anything I need – most of the time before I even anticipate needing it.

"Something...bad?"

“Kind of. Maybe.” I push away from my desk and stand. “Yes. Something bad.” Shit. I don’t like saying those words out loud. When I’m dealing with a business issue, I like to use corporate speak as much as possible. Things are “bad,” they’re “inconvenient.” We don’t have “problems,” we have “issues that need to be resolved.” There’s a business way of dealing with issues that come up at the company you own, and saying “something bad” isn’t the way to command respect from my colleagues.

Luckily, Hillary is more of a friend than an employee at this point, and she knows how to read me. More importantly, she knows how to help me calm down. She’s talked me down from many ledges during our tenure together.

Now, she crosses her arms over her chest and raises a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

“Okay, then. Spill your guts.”

I don’t want to, but I know that this involves Hillary, so I’m going to have to get real honest, real fast. While running a business isn’t an easy endeavor, there are certain things that make it harder than it should be. Dealing with people from my past is one of those things.

“Do you know who Jessica Mortimer is?” Part of me hopes that Hillary says she doesn’t know, but I have no such luck today.

“Your ex?” The look on Hillary’s face lets me know that she remembers exactly who Jessica is. The businesswoman broke my heart when my dad died and she’s still breaking it today. No matter how many times I try to move on, I find that I can’t. Jessica was perfect, and I blew it. I pushed her away, but she didn’t chase after me. The demise of our relationship was a terrible twist of fate, and I miss her every damn day.

“Um, yeah. My ex. You know who she is.” This time, it’s not a question. It’s a statement because Hillary obviously remembers how many mornings I came into the office with tears staining my face. She was always kind enough not to call me out on it, but I know she remembers how pathetic I was.

“Yes, I’m aware you have an ex. You took her house and her dog. I’ve heard the story.”

“That’s not really what happened.”

“Not here to take sides. You know I’ve got your back.”

I do know that. Hillary will do just about anything for me, and I appreciate that very much. Still, it doesn’t change the fact that I’ve got to deal with Jessica now.

Like, today.

And unfortunately for my reputation, today’s issue doesn’t involve arguing with Hillary that I didn’t take Jessica’s dog or her house. I bought her those things preemptively because I was going to propose to her, but then my dad died, and then my mom died, and I retreated into myself instead of reaching out to the one person who could support me. I lost the girl of my dreams, and now I might be about to pay the price. Well, I feel like I’ve already been paying the price, but apparently, there might be more to pay.

“Northington Tech...she just took over.” I say the words out loud, but they feel strange to me. Jessica is now the owner of a huge corporation that happens to be a competitor of mine. I just run a little software company, but many of my clients used to be clients of Northington Tech. I’m sure the reverses is also true.

“Yeah, the former owner sold it to her. Jessica was the VP.”

“How did I not know this was happening?”

“It was all very hush-hush,” Hillary shrugs. “Besides, you’ve kind of been preoccupied, you know.”

With the death of my uncle. Yeah. How could I forget? I don’t want to think about the fact that I didn’t get a real goodbye, nor do I want to dwell on the fact that my uncle’s legacy is basically non-existent. Uncle Jake was just a normal, ordinary guy. He didn’t do these big, huge things. He didn’t create a huge company for me to run. That was my dad.

And Mom supported him.

“It’s been over a month since the funeral,” I tell Hillary. “You don’t have to hide any of this from me.” And I’d like to think I’ve done a better job of handling my uncle’s passing than I did my parents’. I know I screwed up that one. Big time.

“Grief works in funny ways. You know, when my dad died, I was a mess for like five years.” Hillary shrugs, holding out her hands in a “What can you do?” gesture. We’ve never talked about her parents, strangely enough.

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“When did your dad pass away?”

“Five years ago.”

“Funny.”

“Oh, cancer is never funny,” Hillary says. She smiles, though, and I know she’s got that dark sense of humor so many other people don’t really understand. When it comes to death, sometimes you have to laugh. Otherwise, you really will cry. When my mom and dad passed away on the same damn day, I thought it was the end of my world. Then, when my girlfriend left me, I thought that was the end of the world.

Somehow, though, I kept on living.

I don’t really understand how, but I just kept putting one foot in front of the other and slowly but surely, I made my way forward.

Now I’m here.

And now that I’m here, I’ve started to realize that maybe Jessica didn’t leave me. Maybe she just couldn’t wait around for me to get my act together. Maybe she didn’t know I was grieving because I didn’t tell her. I never really gave her a chance to be supportive, but then I acted hurt when she didn’t support me.

What a twist.

“I’m sorry about your uncle.” Hillary and I have talked about him before. His death

was long and drawn out. Painful. It was very much unlike my own father's passing. One minute, my dad was here. Then he was gone. It was like lightning.

"We don't have to go there." I sigh. "Why the fuss about Mortimer?" I think about Jessica Mortimer every damn day, but I try not to. The more I think about her, the more I realize that the two of us never really had a chance. She was a businesswoman with big dreams. I was just a girl whose dad owned his own hardware store. My dad had money, but not in the same way Jessica did. I never cared about her cash, though. I just liked her.

Sometimes when I think about Jessica, I wonder if she remembers me. She doesn't know that I was going to propose to her on the night my father died. I bought a ring and everything. We were supposed to meet at our favorite restaurant, and I was going to tell her that I wanted to be hers and only hers for all eternity. That was the plan.

Unfortunately for me, life happened.

"Jessica Mortimer doesn't have a reason to buy that company." I also didn't realize she had the money. I wonder if Ashley cut her a deal. She must have.

Hillary presses her lips together tightly.

"What?" What does she know that I don't? Hillary doesn't hold back with me, but this is twice now in as many minutes. Something is seriously up.

"Word on the street is that Mortimer plans to buy you out."

"Why would she want to buy my company? It's not worth anything to her." It's a good company. It's not a multi-million dollar firm, regardless of what the local news rags like to say. It's a modest company, but it's mine. It pays the bills and I turn a good profit, or at least a normal one. I'm not really in the same realm as Northington



Tech, though. I'm not even close.

In fact, West Mountain Software and Security is a company that I'm surprised Jessica even remembers existed. It's something I was launching right at the start of our relationship, and she played an integral role in helping me shift from my mother's dream of running a software company to my own dream of focusing on cyber security. Hacking is a very real issue, and I want to help companies – especially companies in our area – do better. After my parents died, I sold my dad's hardware company and used the money to expand my own business. It's a move that I'm proud of. I didn't try to hang onto my dad's dream – I went after my own.

Hillary shrugs. "Maybe it's worth more than you know."

"It's not."

"Either way, I'd watch my back if I were you."

"You can't just buy someone's company," I point out. "That's not really the way that it works."

"No, but you can put them out of business and scoop up the trash."

"Hey! Don't call my company trash."

She holds up her hands. "I'm not calling it trash," Hillary says. "I'm just telling you that when you see your mortal enemy making moves that don't make sense, you need to remember that the world of business is basically one big chess game."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you need to figure out where she's forcing you before you're in check."

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2

Jessica

I'm standing in my office staring out at the city. The lights are shining, reflecting into the office, and I find myself suddenly feeling wistful. I know that Ashley was more than happy to pass the baton to me, but it still feels like a dream. I went from being her right-hand lady to being the lady, and somehow, it all feels mystical.

As often happens in transitions like these, a few key players of Ashley's team left. That's okay. Having someone new take over the business often provides a good opportunity for those who want to transition to new jobs to do just that, while others are happy to settle back into their roles.

I hear a knock at the door and turn to see Patrick standing there.

"Is this a bad time?"

"You're fine," I tell him. He was my executive assistant as VP, and he's chosen to stay on as my assistant now that I'm running the place. "You're working late tonight."

"I'm aware."

"You don't get overtime." I don't want him to work too much. I believe in paying my people what they're worth, and while I'm happy to give Patrick bonuses and incentives as frequently as possible, I don't want him to feel like he has to stay late.

“I pay you for forty hours, Patrick. That’s all I expect.”

“You’re weird, you know that?”

“Am I?”

“When I worked for the Stout family, they ran their people into the ground.”

“I’ve heard their company tends to do that.”

“They’re rough to be around,” he continues. “When I found the job working for you, I snatched it up. You were an escape.”

I’m quiet for a moment. I’m not sure if this is supposed to be a compliment or not, and I don’t want to interrupt while he’s speaking. I’ve found that people will keep right on talking if you let them, so right now, I’m going to let him.

“After I got to know you, I realized that what I see really is what I get with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you aren’t fake.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean that, Jess.”

I look up at him. For just a moment, I wonder if Patrick is about to start hitting on me, but I know he isn’t interested in me that way. I’m definitely not interested in him that way. All of these years later, and the only person I want is the one who is the absolute worst for me. No matter how deeply she hurt me, I can’t get Toni Ventris out of my

damn mind.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“Why are you here, Patrick?”

“I think you’re making a mistake.”

“I’m not.”

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“I know what you’re doing.”

“I doubt it.”

“You’re trying to get back at her for hurting you.”

“That’s not it, Pat. I’m just playing the game.” The business game. It’s one my dad taught me, and it’s one that I’m going to use to my advantage. Nothing good comes to those who wait. I’ve learned this now. Life is all about tactics and making the right moves at the right time. When it comes down to it, it’s important that I make the right moves that will protect me.

“I’m pretty sure you just want your dog back.” Patrick cocks his head, looking at me like he can see right through me, and I kind of hate it. Tonight was supposed to be a peaceful, quiet night where I could just be for a little while. I wasn’t expecting to have to defend myself to the one person who was supposed to always have my back.

“You’re being a bit aggressive,” I tell him.

“I just call it like I see it.”

Then he’s gone, and I’m alone. The worst thing is that I know he’s right. I’m not shocked, but he’s right. I don’t like knowing that he can read me so easily or that I still show my true feelings so easily. Reluctantly, I head back to my penthouse apartment. It’s only a few blocks from the office and it’s got a gorgeous view of the city, but what I really want is to just get away.

I need a vacation, maybe. Or maybe I just need someone new.

Reaching for my phone, I open a dating app and start swiping. It's useless. I know this when I get started, but I try anyway. I swipe and I swipe, but each time I see someone's pretty, smiling face, I just wish they were Toni.

I wish they were her.

Like a total creeper, I jump over to social media: first Facebook, then Instagram. I scroll through pictures of Toni from the past week. It looks like she's been having fun. She's always been a hard worker, but she's also always believed that hard work should be rewarded with lots of play. She's not afraid to take a day off. She's not afraid to just relax.

Am I?

Is that my problem?

I've always been intense. In some ways, this makes me a great businesswoman. I'm strong. I'm determined. I don't mind working late or taking on hard projects. I'm a leader, through and through. Is that enough, though? Is that what I want from my life?

I'm officially the owner of my own company. I've purchased Ashley's business and completely taken over. My life is no longer my own because the foreseeable future, I'm going to be doing whatever it takes to keep the company running smoothly. Oh, Ashley was honestly great at what she did, so it won't be hard for me to step up and lead in the areas where she was working.

It's just that things are different now.

Harder.

I feel more alone than I have in a very long time, and sometimes, I wonder if I should just call her.

Maybe trying to buy her company is too far. Maybe trying to run her into the ground is unfair. My mom would say it's a cruel way to treat someone you used to love, but then I see a picture of Toni and Max, my dog, and I realize that no, it's not too far.

It's not far enough.

Only, I don't know if anything is ever going to feel like it's far enough. I decide to call Ashley. She picks up on the first ring. Just like she supported me when I was in the process of trying to propose to Toni, I have a feeling she'll support me now.

"Tell me I'm crazy," I say.

"Probably. What is it this time?"

"I need you to know that I bought your company to give myself power," I say. It's weird explaining this over the phone. I really shouldn't be. At no point is it a good idea to lay the truth out bare. Not when money is involved.

"I'm aware."

"What?"

She laughs. "Come on, Jessica. Buying a business? I was ready to get out of the corporate world, so I obviously jumped at the chance, but it's obvious to everyone that you need something to leverage against your ex. A huge business with a board to back you is a great place to start."

"Oh."

“Yeah,” she says. I can practically hear her smile. “Is that why you called? You felt like confessing?”



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“Sort of.”

“It’s something else, isn’t it?”

“Maybe.”

“What?”

“Am I wrong?”

She’s quiet for a long time. At first, I think she didn’t hear me, but she finally speaks.

“Are you asking if I think you should harbor anger in your heart and go after the person who hurt you?”

“Yes.”

“You already know my answer to that, Jess. You already know what I’m going to say.”

“Have you ever had an enemy?”

“Lots of them.” She says this as casually as though she’s talking about how she brushes her teeth every day. “But I don’t let them get under my skin. I think you need to ask yourself what destroying Toni Ventris’ company is going to do. Is it going to give you back the time you’ve lost? Is it going to help you heal and move forward? Or will it just be one more step you take to hurt her as much as she hurt you?”

“Why does it sound so simple when you ask me like that?”

“Because it’s a simple problem,” she says. Her tone softens. “Listen, you can do what you want. You’ve got the power. You want to shred that little bitch? I’ll have your back every step of the way, but I think you need to ask yourself whether this is going to give you the peace you need to move forward. I don’t think that it will.”

“She really did a number on me, Ash.”

“Then show her you’ve moved on. Show her that she can’t hold you back. You’ve got a bone to pick, and that’s fine, but you aren’t going to win the breakup by being a dick right back. You win the breakup by succeeding without her and by living your life to the fullest.”

“Thanks, Ash.”

“Anytime.”

After the call ends, I pace in my office for what feels like hours. Maybe she’s right. Maybe I have this whole situation totally wrong.

Maybe it really is time to move on.

3

Toni

There’s nothing like an early-morning jog to clear the air.

Max and I make our way along our usual route. We head four blocks south of the house before we veer left. Three more blocks, a right turn, and then we’re at Raven

Park. It's one of the best places in town to spend a morning because there are playgrounds, walking trails, and of course, a path for running and jogging.

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Max silently runs beside me. He knows this route as well as I do. The two of us are the best of friends, even if he is a dog.

“Good job, Max,” I encourage him as we make our way around a little pond. I don’t hear anything except for the thump of my shoes against the path. Max is quiet. He’s in better shape than I am, apparently, which is saying something because I’m in pretty good shape.

My dad and I used to come to this park when I was little. He’d jog while I played on the playground. Sometimes Mom would come along and the two of us would hang out on the swings together. Mom was never much of a runner. She liked to watch Dad, though. She always said he had good form, that he made it look easy. A college knee injury meant Mom was never able to match his pace, so she stayed on the sidelines while he took off.

It’s hard sometimes to believe that two years have passed without them, without Jessica. My entire world imploded on the same night, and even now, I still don’t know what to do. I think about the desperate voicemails she left me, and I wonder sometimes how I could have just left her hanging. My therapist says I was in shock, that it’s understandable, but the truth is that I got overwhelmed and didn’t know what to do, so I did nothing.

Out of all of my available options, I chose the absolute worst one.

It cost me the girl of my dreams.

I’m lucky that I still have Max. He’s a sweet dog that Jessica and I picked out

together. We were going to adopt him as a couple, but the night before my parents died, I secretly adopted him without telling her. My plan was to surprise her with Max after I proposed to her. I wanted to ask her to marry me at the restaurant and then take her back to the house so she could see him. I feel like it would be a really good surprise.

As it turns out, everything about that night was just a terrible surprise.

As I run, I realize my phone is ringing. I pause long enough to answer it.

Hillary.

“We’ve got trouble,” she says. “Get here as soon as you can.”

“I’m at the park.”

“Just jog right here, then.”

“Max is with me.”

“We’ve had worse dogs in the office,” Hillary says. Then she hangs up and leaves me wondering what the hell is going on. I don’t want to head right in, but I decide to, anyway. I’m right between home and the office, which means it’ll take me twenty minutes to get home. If I shower and change, that’ll take another twenty even if I’m fast. Driving to the office will be an additional ten minutes, plus parking time. If I just jog straight over, I can be there in twenty minutes. Fifteen if I’m fast.

I decide to listen to my assistant and get my butt there instead of doing math problems in the park.

When I reach the office, I realize that something is seriously wrong. There’s a media

van outside of the building. While there are no reporters outside yet, I have a feeling they're going to be. Why is there a van here? And what's so important that Hillary would have told me to hurry in?

I dart up the steps with Max in tow. When I enter the building, Hillary is on me instantly.

“What do you know?”

“Nothing. Fill me in.”

“We got this.”

She hands me a sheet of paper. It's an email explaining a social media crisis that's currently happening online involving our company.

We're just a little business.

We're nobody special.

“What happened?”

“Last night, someone Tweeted about you and Jessica,” she explains. “They said that your companies are competing entities and that you have a goal of taking each other out.”

“That's not true at all.”

“It's a little true.”

“Did you turn this in?”

“No.”

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“Do you know who did?”

“Nope.”

“Why is this big news?”

“Because in our town, every little piece of news is huge. No matter what you might like to say or think, you’re important, Toni. You’re a leader. Not only that, but you’re a woman leader. You’re a gay woman leader.”

“I wouldn’t describe myself like that.”

“The people of Ashbury will. Not only are two big-time businesswomen going for each other’s throats, but you used to date. In the media world, this is a big deal. Huge.”

“What do we do?”

“I’ve called a crisis PR representative to help us out.”

“And?”

“She’ll meet with us in an hour.”



“She’s taken things too far.” I’m staring at the piece of paper in front of me. I don’t know why, but Toni has apparently decided to take our not-so-sneaky feud to the World Wide Web, and somehow, the bloggers and influencers in town have decided that they’d like to spend their time weaving intricate lies that revolve around both me and Toni.

Why the hell would she do something like this?

“To be fair, we knew something like this could happen.” Patrick is standing in front of my desk wearing a crisp blue suit. It brings out the blue in his eyes – something I know he does to attract the attention of both men and women. Patrick doesn’t talk about his dating life, but he sure seems to know a lot about mine.

“Is that something we knew?” I’m desperate here. It sounds like Patrick was expecting something like this, but I definitely wasn’t. “How would we know this?”

“You kind of planned to steamroll her, didn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t describe it like that.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do you prefer ‘hostile takeover’?”

“No.”

“Either way, it doesn’t matter. Not anymore. Cat’s out of the bag on this one, and no matter how you paint it, you’re screwed.”

“How do you figure?”

“It’s a total PR crisis,” he assures me. “We need to get a specialist in here.”

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“A specialist. Get Maggie.” She’s our marketing director. She’s good at what she does. She’s been with the company for years, and she’ll definitely know how to handle this, but Patrick shakes his head.

“I mean someone legit.”

“Maggie’s legit.”

“Maggie has been on your payroll for years,” he agrees. “She’s an expert in selling things to people, but not blatant lies.”

“Meaning?”

“She sells products. She can’t save your reputation.”

So, who can? What am I supposed to do now? I have a vision of everything I’ve tried to build coming down around me. I don’t want to have this vision, but I do.

The worst part is that these rumors are true. I did want to destroy Toni. Part of me still does. I could buy her company up in a damn heartbeat and make her regret hurting me. The problem is that I’m starting to get tired, and revenge is starting to sound less appealing than it used to.

Am I getting old?

Or am I starting to grow up and realize that I don’t have to buy out someone’s company just because they pissed me off?

My phone rings. I pick it up without looking at the number. A terrible choice.

“Miss Mortimer? This is Juniper Jackson with The Times. I’d like to talk with you about-“

I end the call. I don’t even say a damn thing. I just end the call.

“Why would you do that?” Patrick chastises me.

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do know.”

“I don’t.”

“You can’t answer your phone until we talk with someone about what you’re supposed to do next here.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. It’s not like they teach you this at business school.”

Patrick stares at me like I’ve grown three heads.

“Yes,” he says. “They do. They literally teach all of this.”

“Oh,” I whisper. “Well, I didn’t know.”

“Because you didn’t care to.” He sighs. “Look, I didn’t want to be the one to tell you this, but you’re in a huge pickle.”

“A pickle?”

“A huge one,” he nods.

“Patrick, I don’t have time for your double entendres tonight.”

“You don’t not have time for them.”

“What?”

“Call this lady.” He places a business card on the table. “She’s my sister. She’ll help you.”

“I don’t think this is the time to be calling your family members.”

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“She’s a crisis PR person. She’ll know what to do.”

5

Toni

I’ve dreamed of seeing Jessica again many times. I’ve thought about her long, dark hair that she wears back in a bun. I’ve thought about taking it down and running my fingers through it, loosening her curls so I can play with them. I’ve thought about what it would feel like to have the chance to kiss her again. I’d start at the nape of her neck. She loves being kissed there. It’s her favorite.

But out of all of my fantasies and all of the moments I have imagined sharing with her again, I never thought I’d be staring at her in the middle of a conference room on a hot Wednesday in the summer.

Here I am, though.

Sitting.

I clear my throat, but I don’t say anything. Neither does she. I want to ask if she missed me. I’m self-conscious about my dark red hair. It’s shorter than it used to be. I know she liked my hair long. She used to compliment me on it all of the time, but after the breakup, I chopped it all off and haven’t looked back.

Jessica doesn’t shy away from eye contact. She’s never been one to be nervous about just looking at me. I try not to think about all of the times she stripped me bare and

just stared at my body. I never felt used. I never felt uncomfortable. I always felt adored. Cared for. Protected.

She was always so damn gentle with me.

Now, her stare is different. She's trying to figure out why we're both here, but we know why. We're both concerned about the futures of our companies, and we're both here because someone decided to verbalize one of my biggest fears: Jessica has come to destroy my company and there's nothing I can do about it. At least, that's what the person Tweeting about our organizations would have us believe. We're here in this room because we've hired a public relationships professional who might be the only person who can help us navigate the murky waters we're finding ourselves in.

"I can't believe it's come to this," she snaps.

"You shouldn't have posted something online, then."

"Cute. You really think you can shift the blame to me?" She frowns at me like she thinks I'm trying to play her. I'm not. She's also staring at me like she really believes I'm the one who caused all of this.

Could we both have it all wrong?

"You're really good at playing the blame game, Toni," Jessica snarls. That's all it takes. I completely lose control and snap right on back at her.

"I don't know what you're playing at, but you should have just stayed out of it. It's bad enough that you destroyed my life."

Shit.

I shouldn't have said that.

She didn't. Not really. She only destroyed what I let her, and I promised myself I wouldn't let her take everything from me. Not really.

The truth is that my life is my own. I have agency. I always have. And more importantly, it's not exactly her job to keep me feeling normal and fine. It's her job to make sure that she runs her business and takes care of her life in the best way she can. She's not responsible for my feelings.

But she did hurt me.

And she's still hurting me.

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Jessica is saved from having to respond because Piper Prince walks into the room. Her long blonde hair falls in waves over her shoulders. She looks too young to be here – maybe early 30s. Is she even old enough to know what a PR crisis is – much less how to save us from one? Jessica seems to be thinking the same thing I am because her eyes widen for just a moment. Then she presents a neutral face: one I'm very familiar with.

This is her war face.

“Ladies. Thank you for meeting with me.”

We both mumble replies that are completely inappropriate for company leaders. We're better than this. Jessica has been dealing with shrewd businessmen for years. She's always been tough and strong. She's never even thought twice about shying away from adversity or from someone being in a bad mood, so I'm not completely sure why she isn't saying so much right now.

“I understand you're having a bit of a crisis. Let's start with the facts. First things, first: I'm familiar with both of your companies and to a certain extent, your relationship.” Piper turns to me. “My brother, Patrick, works for Jessica.”

I appreciate her telling me this. I get the feeling that she doesn't want me to be left in the dark. She seems like the kind of person who likes to keep things out in the open. I'm good with that.

“Oh,” I manage to say. She nods and continues.



“I wanted to make sure we were all on the same page. Now.” Piper shuffles the papers in her hands. “Let’s talk about options.”

“We could start with having Toni’s team stop spreading malicious rumors,” Jessica offers. “I think that might help.”

“It wasn’t my team.” Why does she keep saying that? Does Jessica really feel like denying that it was her? She’s never been dumb, but her insistence that it was me is starting to feel like she actually believes this, rather than something she’s just saying.

Could there be someone else trying to cause problems between us?

And if yes, who?

“It doesn’t matter,” Piper says. “What matters is how we move forward. First things first, did either of you actually start this rumor? We have a Tweet that was posted yesterday morning that reads, What’s worse than a shady bitch? A shady bitch who wants to destroy someone else’s company.” Piper looks up. “The name on the account is Miss Trust. Obviously, this is a fake account. The only Tweets throughout the Twitter profile are about your two companies.”

“It wasn’t me,” I say.

“Wasn’t me,” Jessica says. She looks at me, suddenly, and for the first time, I wonder if there’s any chance she’s going to actually believe me here. I want her to. I really, really want for her to look at me and have this realization that I wouldn’t be so petty. I never have been.

I loved her, once upon a time. Part of me still does.

“Good. Then, just an FYI, you have some sort of mole or rat or enemy within your

corporations. This message is very personal, and while I'm not someone who gets to the bottom of messes – I just solve them – I'd recommend you look into that at a later date. For now, let's talk about options."

"Options are good," Jessica says. "I think Toni's team should issue a public apology. That should keep my board members calm and at bay." As she stands and walks to the corner of the room where there's a coffee bar set up, I realize she's nervous.

Oh.

She actually thinks this is going to impact her bottom line.

She thinks I'm trying to hurt her company and that the way I do that is through brute force, apparently.

Well, brute force and lies.

Jessica pours herself a cup of coffee. She's quiet as she adds cream and a dash of honey, but her stillness speaks volumes. She's starting to feel anxious and lost. She isn't sure what to do.

For a woman like Jessica, there aren't many moments where she feels lost. For me, I felt the most lost the day my parents died. It was like a trainwreck that tore through my heart, and then I lost Jessica, too. I know perfectly well that I handled that entire period of my life poorly. I was trying to juggle multiple problems and instead of giving Jessica a chance to help me, I pulled away.

Now, as I watch her turn and walk quietly back to the table, I wish I could reach out and help her, too. It's not a good time, I know. She still doesn't trust me. She believes that she can handle this alone, and she might be right.

I turn back to Piper, who is watching me.

No, she's waiting for me.

"Since my company – to my knowledge – didn't put out this Tweet, that might backfire," I suggest.

"Correct," Piper nods. "If you take credit for something you didn't do, what are you going to do when this person Tweets again? They have some sort of vendetta against you both. Well, it seems as though they're very against Jessica, to begin with."

"Why?" Jessica sighs. She raises her cup of coffee to her mouth, and I'm caught off guard – not for the first time – with how damn pretty she is. Her lipstick is perfectly applied. How many nights did she brush those lips against my cheeks? How many nights did I lie in bed while she kissed lower and lower?

Too many.

Not enough.

“That’s not our problem for today. I’d recommend you hire a private investigator for that or do a deep dive into your personal lives. For now, we’re going to figure out a way to move forward. The best way to squash these rumors is going to be to present yourselves as a united front.”

“Meaning?”

“You need to be friends.”

Jessica cringes. I know my face reflects the same thing.

Friends?

After all we’ve been through?

“No offense, Miss Prince,” I say, “but I’m not sure if that’s possible.”

“If you want to stop the – pardon my language here – media shitstorm that’s brewing, that’s what you’re going to do. The two of you need to let the world know that even though you’re no longer dating, you’re not enemies. You’re friends. You get along. In fact, you go out in public together. You’re photographed together. Maybe you even go on a trip together. No matter what you decide, the thing you need to begin doing is changing the narrative.”

“Meaning?” I ask.

“Whoever wrote this wants the world to think that Jessica is a big, bad monster who only cares about squashing the little guy. You. That’s the story they’ve created, and it’s what the world is going to believe unless you stop them.”

I look up at Jessica.

“All right, then,” I nod. “Let’s stop them.”

6

Jessica

Her words surprise me.

She wants us to team up, does she? Sweet Toni with her hot body and sweetheart attitude wants us to team up to stop the bad guy.

“How do I know this isn’t a trick?” I ask. “What if it really is you pulling the strings?”

“For the sake of moving forward, let’s say it’s not,” Piper says. “In fact, I can all but guarantee it’s not Toni.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because Toni is still in love with you.”

The two of us turn to Piper, jaws wide.

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“I’m sorry,” she says, holding her hands up. “I know it’s not my place. It’s just very obvious to me that the two of you still have feelings for each other. In some ways, that makes my job easier since it means you two aren’t actually going to do anything to hurt the other one.”

“What if we do?” I ask. I glance over at Toni with her short red hair and her soft pink lipstick. The hair looks good. It was long when we were together, and I loved that. Now, though, she looks fiercer. Stronger. She used to hide behind her long bangs like a shield when she was nervous. Now her hair is short enough that she’s forced to look in my eyes.

I kind of love this.

“If you wanted to hurt each other, you wouldn’t be here.” Piper looks frustrated. I know this meeting isn’t going in the direction she wants it to. Our time is almost up, as well, and Piper’s services don’t come cheap. We need to wrap things up.

“All right,” I say. “You suggest we play nice together. What else?”

“Issue a joint statement,” she tells us. “You don’t know who the anonymous writer is, but you disagree with what they said. You don’t date each other. In fact, you’re besties now. Look at these pictures of you two having coffee together. Oh, here’s a picture of you volunteering. You’re going to need to continue the charade for a bit after the post. If you don’t, people will pick up on that. Then everything will crumble, and they won’t believe that you’re in this together.”

“How long?”

“A few weeks, at least. Maybe a month. There are some big events coming up for both of your companies, if your website calendars are correct.”

“You looked at our company calendars?” Toni asks. For some reason, she almost sounds betrayed.

“It’s my job.”

“And?”

“Jessica’s company has a networking dinner at the Peak this weekend. I suggest you go together. It doesn’t have to be a date, but you should at least be seen there having drinks together. Toni, your company has a volunteer event on Saturday. Puppies, is it? You should both go to that. If you’re smart, you’ll reach out to a few reporters in advance and invite them. Don’t demand that they come along but ask if they’d be interested in coming out.”

“Understood,” I nod. I don’t like this anymore than Toni does, but she’s not resisting. She’s open the idea, which is strange to me. I really would have assumed she wouldn’t want to be helpful at all, but Toni is managing to surprise me over and over.

“Do you provide assistance writing the public statement?” Toni asks.

“As an add-on service, yes.”

Toni’s eyes catch mine and I nod slightly. I don’t know how her company is actually doing, but I can foot the bill for this. Relief swims in her eyes. Then Toni turns back to Piper.

“We’d love that,” she says. “Please and thank-you.”

Jessica

Hours later, Toni and I are sitting side-by-side at Rocky Beers. It's a small dive bar that has a miniature climbing wall. You can have a drink and try to climb. Personally, I think it's a lawsuit waiting to happen. The "wall" is only seven feet high, so most people only step on the lowest footholds, but it still seems like a bad idea.

Toni reaches for her pale ale, pulling the cold glass toward her. She grips the drink but doesn't raise it to her lips. Her lipstick has long faded, and her hair is frizzy now. She still looks great. If anything, she looks even better than she did at Piper's.

"You doing okay?" I ask, sipping my own beer.

"As well as can be expected."



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“It’s been quite a day.”

“I know you probably don’t believe me,” she says, “but I didn’t write those things.”

“I shouldn’t believe you, but I do.” I don’t want to. It’s much easier for the two of us to navigate this situation if there’s a clear villain.

“What changed?”

“I suppose it doesn’t make a lot of sense for you to attack my brand and then come to the business equivalent of couple’s counseling.”

She laughs. “It did feel like that, didn’t it?”

“Order up!” We turn as the bartender yells and places a hot plate of fries next to us. A curvy woman who looks to be in her late 40s scurries up to the bar and grabs the plate.

“Thanks, Hank.” She turns to us and smiles, holding out the plate. “Want one? I can’t possibly eat them all myself.”

I laugh and accept a fry. I love hanging out in bars because you never know what’s going to happen. People are friendlier here. They can be mean, of course, and they can be emotional, but in general, it’s in these places where people let their guard down just a little. It’s the alcohol, of course, but I’m still a fan. Toni accepts a fry, as well, and thanks our new friend before she makes her way back through the crowded bar to a table of ladies who seem to be having a girl’s night out.

“Think any of them will climb the wall?” Toni asks.

“Maybe.”

We turn to the rock wall at the back of the bar. Sure enough, a few brave souls have set their beers down and are trying to get their footing.

“The most I’ve ever seen people do is the third row of footholds,” Toni says. “And that person was petite, but even at that level, her head was almost hitting the ceiling.”

“That’s how they get away with having this place here,” I point out. It feels obvious, like we should all know this, but Toni just nods. When she turns back to me, she’s all business again.

“So, do you want to come to the volunteer day at the park on Saturday?”

“I think it sounds like that would be best. What is it?”

“We’re partnering with an animal shelter to try to get some animals adopted,” she tells me. “There are four cats and three dogs who have been struggling to find their forever homes. We’re hoping to get those seven pets, at minimum, adopted. They’re the ones who have been in the shelter the longest, though.”

My heart swells even though I don’t want it to. I’ve always had a passion for animals. Ever since I was a kid and my parents did the thing where they brought me a dog for Christmas, I’ve loved working with animals. For a hot minute, I actually considered going to vet school. I loved the idea of working with animals on such a personal level and being able to help those in need. Of course, the pressure from my parents was that I’d go into business. They had money and wanted me to follow in their footsteps.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I’d walked away from it all. What

if I hadn't gone to college? What if I hadn't pursued business roles? What if I'd never met Ashley and never become her VP? There are so many questions bouncing around in my head, but they're mixed with this: what if Toni and I had never broken up?

This is a dangerous thing to think about, so I shove the question from my mind and instead focus on the present.

"Yes," I nod. "I'd love to participate."

"I'll do what Piper suggested. I'll reach out to a few reporters I know."

"I have some media contacts, as well," I share. "I'll let them know about the event, too."

"And the thing your company is doing? The networking thing?"

"That's Saturday night. It's at The Peak." One of the most exclusive hotels in the area, The Peak is a place even I can barely afford to stay. Still, my marketing and events people suggested it would be the perfect location to hold a networking event. We've got three different presidents from three different companies coming to speak on leadership and making a difference within our own organizations. It's going to be a total snoozefest, but maybe having Toni there will be okay.

"Okay," she nods. "My thing ends around three, so we'll have plenty of time to shower, change, and get over to the hotel."

I cock my head as I look at her. She really doesn't realize how big of a deal this is, I realize.

"Shower and change? And then have our hair and makeup done," I point out.

“Hair and makeup?”

“Yes.”

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“I...what?”

“I’ve hired someone to come over to style me,” I explain. “She can do you, too. Do you have a dress?”

“I think so.”

“Toni,” I say. My voice suddenly becomes firm. “Do you have a dress?”

“No,” she whispers.

“It’s now Wednesday. We have two days to find you something. What’s your schedule like tomorrow?”

“I work until five, maybe six.”

“I know a place,” I tell her. I pull out my phone and text her an address. “Be here at seven. We’ll get you a damn dress.”

8

Toni

“She said what?” Jordan and Clara are sitting on my couch staring at me. I nod. All I can do is nod. Clara and I have known each other for years. She was with me throughout the entire breakup and in the aftermath. Her partner, Jordan, is lovely. The two of them make a great pair, and I’m so happy they’ve found love. I’m not at all

jealous. Nope. Not me.

Well, maybe a little.

“She said she wants to help me find a dress,” I admit.

“You’ll look great in a dress,” Clara says kindly.

“You don’t have to wear a dress,” Jordan tells me firmly. “If you’re more comfortable in a suit, get a suit. That’s allowed.”

Jordan, a lumberjack, is all about destroying gender roles. The problem is that I don’t really mind this gender role. I don’t mind wearing a dress and I really do want to see Jessica in one, too. Most of the time, she dresses like the badass businesswoman she is. When we were together, she always wore dresses. After the breakup, suits became her armor. The fact that she’s setting that armor aside for me this weekend feels important. Besides, most of the time, I try to wear things I think she would like. And when I’m not at work, I’m in jeans or pajama pants because I don’t go out much anymore. I kind of just hang out and read.

“I appreciate that,” I tell Jordan. “Truly, I do.”

“I think Toni wants to wear a dress,” Clara smiles. “Let me guess: something else is bothering you.”

“Yeah,” I sigh.

“What is it?”

“It’s just that this is a big deal,” I tell them both. “Jess and I...we haven’t spoken in two years, much less hung out together.”

“And how did today go?” Jordan asks.

“It was...better than expected.”

“Did you sleep together?”

“No.” I’m not offended or even surprised at the question. My friends and I are very open about these things. It takes a lot to bother me, and talking about sex isn’t something that annoys me or makes me uncomfortable. If anything, I wish more people were as open as Jordan and Clara are.

“Kiss?”

“No.”

“Hold hands?”

“There was no touching. Not even a hug.”

“Did you want there to be?” Clara looks at me with a knowing smile. She understands that the situation, for me, is complicated.

“A little bit,” I admit. “I wanted there to be something.”

“And does it maybe hurt a little bit that there wasn’t?”

“Yes.”

“She’s an idiot for letting you go,” Jordan tells me. “You’re a catch, Toni. I tell you this all the time. You’re a catch and she needs to pull her head out of her ass.”



“Jordan!” Clara frowns, but Jordan just shrugs.

“It’s true. Toni, you’re pretty. You’re smart. You’re clever. Most of all, you’re tough. You’re going to get through this situation. This rumor about your company...it’s all just something to overcome. Most importantly, I know that you can. You’re not the kind of person who’s going to let this get to you. I know that about you and I respect it.”

“Thanks,” I say. “What about you two? How was your week?” I reach for the bottle of wine on the coffee table and top off all of our glasses. That finishes out our bottle, and I’ll need to grab another one. Ladies wine nights are always fun for me, and I love having my friends over.

“We had dinner with Melanie and Brianna last night,” Clara tells me. “They’re planning a vacation, so we were looking at rentals.”

“Find anything good? Where are they going?”

“We found a ton of good options. They’re trying to decide between Florida and North Carolina. Their only requirement is that it needs to be a house on the beach, so they’re going back and forth right now with where they want to go.”

“I’m sure wherever they go will be lovely.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Clara says longingly.

“You want to go on a trip, baby?” Jordan slides her arm around Clara’s shoulder and pulls her close. The three of us are on the couch together, but I suddenly feel like I’m intruding. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

Clara giggles. Yeah, I’m intruding.

“I’ll grab some more wine,” I say, standing up and slipping out of the room to the kitchen. Luckily, I bought a huge assortment of white wine before the week started. It’s like I had a premonition I’d be drinking more than usual this week. I grab a bottle from the fridge and turn around to see that Max has followed me. Before I open the wine, I squat down and pet him.

Max is the best.

Whenever I’m lonely or sad or nervous, he’s here for me. He always seems to know exactly when I need a little bit of support, and I love that about my sweet dog.

“You’re the best,” I tell him. Max licks my hand and then nuzzles his head against me. I accept the comfort my sweet dog is offering me, and then I stand up, open the wine, and head back into the living room. Clara and Jordan look over and smile at me when I come back.

“What about you?” Clara asks. “Do you have any trips you want to take soon?”

“Nope,” I tell them honestly. “I just want to sit back and get through this weekend.”

“Spending time with your ex is probably going to be weird. If you need any help or anything, just let us know,” Clara suggests. “Jordan and I are always happy to come crash the party.”

“The networking thing?” I laugh. Clara comes from a very wealthy background, so she’d probably be just fine networking. Jordan, while also from a wealthy family, is a rancher and lumberjack, so while she’s comfortable with money, she’s also very down-to-Earth. I wonder how it would go to have Jordan schmoozing at this event. Somehow, I feel like it wouldn’t be our finest hour.

“Or the volunteer thing,” Jordan says. “But don’t let the flannel fool you, Toni. I

clean up nice.” She smiles, and I nod. I really am lucky to have them as friends. A lot of people have to go through life alone, but I don’t. No matter what I’m facing, these two are always there for me. They’re always by my side.

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I felt that way about Jessica, long ago. The two of us were supposed to be a forever sort of thing, but everything fell apart. The worst thing is that I know it's all my fault. I should have tried harder to fight for our relationship, but I was dealing with grief I didn't know how to handle and loss I couldn't explain.

Now, I wonder if it's too late.

Would Jessica forgive me if I tried to right my wrongs?

Would she even care?

9

Jessica

Annabelle Reiser is the best dressmaker in town.

Whether you need a wedding dress, something for your first communion, or even the right outfit to wear to a networking event, she's your lady.

Toni and I arrive at the shop at the same time. She's dressed comfortably in tight jeans and a loose blouse that shows off just a hint of cleavage. My outfit is similar, although I'm in a blazer, as well. The thought of getting to spend the next few hours trying on dresses with Toni should be absolutely horrifying to me, but it's not. Instead, I'm hyper-aware of the fact that we're going to be in side-by-side fitting rooms, naked.

Anything could happen.

“What are we doing here?” Toni asks, looking up at the building.

“Shopping.”

“This is a tailor shop,” she points out.

“Annabelle sells off the rack, as well, and she can make modifications to anything we need.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

I start to walk into the shop, but I feel Toni’s hand on my arm. Surprised, I turn to her.

“Everything okay?”

“I just wanted to thank you.”

“For?”

“I know we issued our joint statement earlier today.” It went out on all of our socials – both personal and professional – and was posted on our websites, as well. The marketing team suggested leaving our posts up indefinitely but removing the verbiage from our websites next week. “I just wanted to thank you for covering the cost of the crisis manager.”

“It’s not an issue.” I have plenty of money. I’m happy to share it with the world. Part

of me wants to say that I'm happy to share it with her, but I still don't trust Toni. I feel like I'm seeing a part of her I haven't seen ever. When we were together, she never seemed unsure of herself. She was always so brave and strong and bold. Now, she seems unsure, almost shy.

Has she changed?

Or have I?

Or, I wonder as my stomach twists, did our breakup change her?

“Well, I appreciate it. I really do have a small company,” she continues. “And I know it’s nothing compared to yours, so thank you.”

“Of course.” I don’t tell her that the statement is true. I don’t tell her that until it came out, I was, in fact, planning to try to destroy her. Being forced together with Toni is making me wonder if perhaps I overreacted.

Okay, maybe I completely overreacted.

She’s not the vicious villain I really did think that she was. Instead, Toni seems soft. Sweet. Delicate.

“I know that this isn’t really how we’d pictured reuniting after so much time apart,” she continues. “It’s weird, right?”

“A little,” I admit.

“Did you ever think of me?”

I should lie.

I should tell her that I haven’t thought about her since the night I was going to propose. I should say that I haven’t missed her, haven’t longed for her. I haven’t

thought about dancing with her every time it rains, and I haven't wondered what it would be like if we actually did end up adopting a dog together or buying a house together.

I should lie.

But somehow, when Toni looks up at me like this, I don't know if I can. I don't know if I can bring myself to tell her that she's not important because she is. Even now, even after all of this time, she's important to me. I want her to continue to be important.

I'm saved, though, because Annabelle opens the door to her shop and ushers us inside.

"It's going to rain," she says.

"Is it?"

"We've got a thunderstorm warning tonight," she nods. "Today, tomorrow, and probably even on Saturday." I see Toni cringe. Her volunteer thing is outdoors at the park on Saturday. Rain is going to mean people can't attend, which means she's not going to get those pets adopted.

"I've got a good feeling about Saturday," I tell Toni, and that seems to calm her down. Annabelle cocks her head, but quickly regains her composure.

"Tell me what you're looking for," she says. "I know you have an event on Saturday, which doesn't give us much time. We'll need to choose something off-the-rack for both of you. I'll measure you today, make alterations tomorrow, and have the gowns for you on Saturday."



“Are you sure?” Toni asks. “That sounds like a really tight squeeze.

“Jessica is paying me well for the service,” Annabelle smiles. “Trust me. I don’t do this out of the goodness of my heart.”

At 62, Annabelle has been making dresses for a long time. She’s good at what she does. Not only does she measure us effortlessly and help us each consider an assortment of dresses that highlight our best features, but she makes us both feel comfortable and at ease. Within half an hour, I’ve selected my dress, and Toni has narrowed her options down to two.

“Which one do you think?” Toni asks. She holds up a red dress and a blue one. They’re both lovely. She’s tried them both on, and either one makes her look drop-dead gorgeous. Not that she needs the help of a dress to look drop-dead gorgeous. She doesn’t. She can do that all on her own.

“They’re both beautiful,” I admit. “The red one clings to you. It gives you a sort of Jessica Rabbit vibe.”

“And the blue one?”

The blue one is shorter. It’s almost a mini dress, but not quite. The silk fabric swoops down in the front, revealing her cleavage, and it’s short and flowy, so it almost shows off the curve of her ass cheeks.

Is it what someone would normally wear to a business networking event?

Probably not.

Do I hope she chooses it anyway?

Absolutely.

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“Pick the blue one,” Annabelle recommends, walking over. She looks from me to the dress. Then, she leans over toward Toni and in a stage whisper says, “The blue one is going to drive her batshit crazy.”

Toni laughs.

Our eyes lock.

She stops smiling.

“Let’s go with blue.”

10

Toni

The next morning, the world seems to be on fire, as it always is. Hillary is already buzzing around the office. She’s trying to get all of her paperwork done, emails sent, and meetings scheduled, but the office is chaotic. She comes into my office at nine and stands in the doorway.

“I need help,” she says.

“What can I do?”

“You can let me hire an assistant.”

I pause. Interesting. An assistant would be a wonderful choice. I don't know what it would cost us – and I want to be fair when it comes to salary, if not outright generous – but I can talk to my accounting people and see what they have to say. I know that Hillary is right, though. We're drowning. We're completely in over our heads.

“Maybe.”

“I need help.”

“I know you do.”

“Have you run the financials lately?”

Only every day. And I know what Hillary is hinting at. We're not doing as well as we wanted to. Correction: we're not doing as well as I wanted to. While I think we could be doing better, I know that if we were in any sort of serious trouble, Mark and Anthony would let me know. They're my accountants for a reason. I look at the basic numbers, but they do deep dives and will know exactly what's going on.

West Mountain Software and Security is my pet project. I started this during the early years of my relationship with Jessica. She was always a huge supporter of going after my dreams, but I don't know if she really believed my company would be able to take off. And the truth is that these days, I'm not sure where to go.

My company has clients. I've got a lot of clients, but I'm still small. I only have fifteen employees, while Northington Tech has hundreds. That's why the idea of them buying me out feels so bad. On a certain level, I wonder if it would be the right thing to do.

But how do I know when it's time to give up on a dream I've had for ages?

How do I know when it's time for me to admit defeat and try to move on?

And is that something I even want to do?

"I'll talk to our accounting people," I say quietly. Maybe they'll have some ideas for how we can afford another person. Who knows? I could be totally wrong with my assessment that we're staying afloat and then some. Maybe we're flourishing and they just didn't have a chance to tell me yet. Yes, let's go with that.

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“You mean Mark and Anthony? Yes, I’ve spoken with them already. They said we can’t afford it, but I’m telling you, Toni, you need to find a way to afford someone else.”

She stares at me, and I’m smart enough to read between the lines. Hillary is being overworked and she’s thinking about leaving the company.

Shit.

“I don’t want to lose you,” I tell her.

Her eyes soften. “You’re the best boss I’ve ever had,” she explains. “And the pay here is great. You’re super generous. It’s just that we’re trying to grow. I know that every company has growing pains, but we’re drowning here. We all are.”

“I know.”

“Do you have a plan?”

I don’t.

I don’t have a plan.

I don’t know what to do next. I’m not a business guru. I’m not Jessica. I’m not as smart as she is or as capable. If I’m being honest, I’m not even sure if I really did make the right choice in launching this company. We’re a private security firm that helps people in the area keep their computers and personal devices safe. We install

their security software, we help them remove viruses from their computers, and we teach cyber security safety classes. We do all of those things, and it's not enough.

My stomach twists as I wonder what I'm supposed to do next. I wish – not for the first time, and not for the last time – that my parents were around to help me out on this one. Mom and Dad always seemed to know what to say. Even if their answer was “figure it out, Toni,” they'd say it in such a kind and loving way that everything would be fine.

Now, I'm not so sure.

Now I feel lost.

LUNCH IS A TURKEY SANDWICH I brought from home. Mark comes in during my lunch hour and leans in the doorway.

“You can come in,” I tell him.

“Are you free?”

“Yes.”

“We need to talk.”

“Sure thing.”

Mark struts into the room acting like he owns the place. Confident, charismatic, and not even thirty, he feels like he's on top of the world. As a finance guy, he kind of is. I'm lucky to have both Mark and Anthony on the team. They're both go-getters. While I trust Anthony with every ounce of my financials, Mark is the one who is aggressive. He knows exactly how the budget works and how we can reel it in and

improve it.

He also rarely makes office visits, so I'm not sure why he's here.

“What's on your mind?”

“It's that Tweet from the other day. The one about Jessica.”

“Right. What about it?”

Jessica and I made an agreement not to tell anyone that our joint statement was an outright lie. The only people who know that we met with Piper are Patrick and Hillary – our assistants. We've agreed to keep things between the four of us, and Hillary and Patrick are both completely trustworthy. Neither one of them would ever say anything to betray our trust. I know that we can count on them.

But Mark is a wildcard. I trust Mark with my company's money, but the two of us don't share personal life details. I know he's got a girlfriend. I know he dislikes birds. I also know that he recently bought a house and has been renovating it on the weekends.

Beyond that, I don't know.

Do I want to know?

Mark eyes me suspiciously as he slides into one of my guest chairs. The chairs are outdated, I know. Like many things around the office, they're sort of falling apart. I don't generally meet with clients in here, so the chairs are just more items on an ever-growing list of things that need to be replaced and upgraded.

“Do you know who made the Tweet?”



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“I don’t, Mark. Do you?”

The question catches him off guard. I’m tired, so I’m being short. I get that. Most of the time, I don’t speak rudely or curtly to my employees, but today is different. Today I’m reeling from the fact that tomorrow, I’m spending the entire day with my ex-girlfriend. I’m going to be doing volunteer work and then a public appearance with a woman I used to love. I used to sleep with her. I’d kiss her like crazy. I’d make her have orgasm after orgasm after orgasm.

We were so damn in love.

And then we weren’t.

And then I ruined everything.

“Of course not,” he says. “But we need to talk about your statement.”

“I believe the statement was very clear, Mark.” Jessica and I followed all of Piper’s advice. We apologized for the strange Tweet, explained that we had nothing to do with it, and affirmed everyone’s understanding that our companies are both in great shape and that nobody is mad at anybody.

“Why did you make that statement? You know she’s out to get you.”

“I don’t know that, Mark.”

“Well, she is.”

I lean forward and set my sandwich down. Suddenly, I don't want to eat anymore.

"Mark, what do you know that you're not telling me?"

"I didn't want it to have to come to this," he sighs. "But you're wading into dangerous waters."

"Okay?"

"Jessica Mortimer is a snake," he says. "She snakes people's companies. That's what she does."

"I believe she bought Northington Tech on her own." Because Jessica comes from a background of money most people can't possibly imagine. In some ways, dating Jessica was fantastic because money was such a non-issue that we never had to talk about it. If we wanted to take a trip, we'd just take the trip. If we wanted to go to dinner, we'd go.

It grated on me a bit toward the end, though. There was a part of me that wished she understood the world that most people live in a bit better. I was still dealing with helping my parents pay their bills when they passed away. Mom and Dad grew old together as a couple who loved each other – not as a couple with unlimited amounts of cash. Every penny they spent had to be carefully planned and accounted for.

Every.

Last.

Penny.

With Jessica, she just took the things she wanted. She was vicious. I imagine she's

still that way.

I don't like Mark talking about her, though. For some reason, when he says these things, they feel bad. Alarm bells are going off in my head.

Could Mark have written that Tweet?

Would he do something to destroy my company?

And if yes, why?

"She might have bought it fair and square," he concedes, "but that's not what she's planning to do with you. Are you really still friends with her?"

"We've been friends for years."

"Oh?" Mark leans back in his chair. He crosses one leg over the other. One of his shoes gently bumps the desk and makes a loud squeaking noise. He looks embarrassed. He repositions his feet. "Why haven't I ever seen her?"

"I don't know, Mark. Probably for the same reason I've never met your girlfriend."

"Kendall is shy," he tells me.

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“Maybe, but that still doesn’t explain why you never bring her around.”

“I literally just said she’s shy.”

“A lot of people are shy, Mark. If you’re going to waltz in here, interrupt my lunch break, and start complaining that you don’t know the most intimate details of my love life, I’m going to shove that right back in your face.”

He frowns and stands.

“Well, maybe I’ll bring her around.”

“See that you do.”

He leaves, and as soon as the office door closes, I stand and carry my sandwich over to the trash can. I don’t like wasting food, but suddenly, I realize that if I eat anything else, I’m going to throw up.

When I settle back down at my desk, I’m quiet as I jiggle my mouse and bring my laptop screen back to life.

Time to figure out if we can afford to hire more people – or if I’m going to actually ask Jessica Mortimer if she’d be willing to buy my company.

It might be the only way to save it.

Jessica

Hot summer days have always been my friend.

While I know plenty of people who dislike feeling sweaty or the warmth of the sun against their skin, that's never been me. As a kid, I used to come home with the nastiest sunburns and my mother, a dermatologist, finally banned me from hanging out with my friends. She started dressing me in hats, SPF 70 sunscreen, and long-sleeved shirts before she'd let me leave the house. As soon as I moved out, though, I was back to bikinis and lounging around in the warmth.

My dad used to call me a lizard. He always said I should have been born in a warmer climate, rather than in the chilly mountains of Colorado. Still, even Colorado gets nice, warm summers, and this year is no exception.

After thunderstorms on Thursday and Friday, as predicted by Annabelle, Saturday starts off looking beautiful. I arrive at the park in shorts and a tank, but I still follow my mother's advice and wear sunscreen and a hat.

Does the hat look silly?

Maybe.

Do I want to upset my mother and end up with skin cancer?

Not so much.

The park is already bustling when I arrive. I know there are going to be multiple reporters on site, so I ditch the sunglasses and instead settle for squinting when the world gets too bright. Toni and I are both aware we're going to be photographed together today, so we want to make it count as much as possible. If someone takes

pictures and the viewers can't tell that it's definitely one of us, the pictures will be useless, and we'll be back to square one.

I spot Toni at a little table that has a tablecloth on it. I smile at the picture of dogs on it. The name of the animal shelter – Love 'n' Paws – isn't even displayed. The tablecloth just says ADOPT A FURRY FAMILY FRIEND TODAY.

“That’s a terrible sign,” I point out. “Where’s the name of the shelter?”

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“I know,” Toni sighs. She doesn’t bother arguing with me. “I pushed to have the name of the shelter on the tablecloth, but Jerry wanted the furry family friend thing instead.”

We both turn to see Jerry, a gentleman in his 70s who is standing six yards away with two dogs on leashes. He’s smiling at each person who walks by and offering waves and dad jokes.

“He’s been here a long time,” she says.

“I remember.”

“Do you?”

Toni and I used to volunteer together at the animal shelter. Even though it’s been years since the two of us were together, I haven’t forgotten the time we spent together or how much fun we had taking care of pets and helping them get adopted.

“I do.”

“Jerry remembers you, too. He was excited to hear you were coming out today.”

“That’s nice.”

“Maybe, but he’s going to try to get you to adopt two dogs.”

I laugh. I don’t even want one dog right now. I’m not home nearly enough to be able

to take care of a pet, and the only dog I ever really felt connected with is the one Toni adopted from underneath my nose. A fresh burst of anger courses through my veins, but I shove it down. Today isn't about talking about the past. Today is about the future and moving forward together.

"Anyway," Toni says. She gestures to the table in front of her. "We're going to be getting people to sign up for our mailing list today. If they want to pet a dog, awesome. Want to play with a cat? Also cool. We have volunteers ready to help with that. Our job is to make sure we get their contact information so we can add them to our mailing list."

"Smart," I nod, taking a seat beside her. "That way, if they don't adopt a pet today, we can get them to consider it in the future."

"Exactly," she smiles.

I don't say all of the other things that I want to say to Toni. I don't tell her I'm actually feeling excited about tonight or that hope has been playing a major role in my heart this week. I'm supposed to be mad at her. I'm supposed to absolutely hate her for everything she's done to me, but somehow, being around her just feels right.

And it shouldn't.

My therapist would tell me that this is wildly unhealthy behavior, that this is wishful thinking on my part or that I'm doing things I'm not supposed to be doing just because it feels good.

And it does.

It does feel good.



Being around Toni feels amazing.

I can't even be toying around with the idea, but I want to kiss her. She is not wearing a hat, nor is she wearing sunglasses. I can see little bits of white cream around her ears, so I know she's at least wearing sunscreen. Her nose is dotted with freckles – my favorite – and she's smiling at each person who walks up to the booth.

For it being ten in the morning, the park is already booming. Kids are running around, playing on the equipment and then dashing over to say hello to the dogs and cats before racing back. Parents are hollering at their kids to leave the animals alone, while a few brave couples are wandering over to hold a cat or ask to try walking one of the dogs.

“How long does the event go?”

“Three,” she says. “Or until everyone gets adopted.”

“Think we'll get them all adopted today?”

“I have a good feeling.”

A woman is jogging around the outskirts of the park and the dogs catch her eye. I spot her right away and smile as she veers off of the sidewalk and comes toward our table.

“Good morning,” I greet her.

“You selling dogs?”

“We're helping to match dogs with adoptive families,” I correct her.

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I see a look of relief wash over her face.

“My dog just passed away last month,” she says. “I want one, but it still hurts.”

To my surprise, Toni stands, walks around the table, and hugs the sweaty jogger. “My uncle just passed away last month,” she tells her. “I’m really sorry for your loss. I know it still hurts.”

The jogger bursts into tears, and I stare, helpless to do a damn thing, as Toni just holds her for a few minutes. When she pulls away, the jogger shakes her head.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “It’s just that nobody really understands. People always tell me he was just a dog, but he wasn’t just a damn dog. He was my best friend. He was everything to me.”

“You’re so right,” Toni nods. “He was your family.”

“He was.” The jogger wipes her eyes. “I’m Kayla, by the way.”

“I’m Toni. This is Jessica.” I finally stand and offer my hand, which Kayla shakes. “I know you’re not in a place to adopt a pet right now, but would you like to meet some of the animals we have on site today?”

Kayla nods, wiping her eyes.

“Please,” she says.

“Okay,” Toni smiles. She looks over at me. “Can you handle the table by yourself for a few minutes?”

“Happy to do so.”

Toni gently leads Kayla to a little pen where there are several dogs hanging out quietly. Toni explains that they didn’t bring puppies today because young animals always get adopted right away. Today’s event is all about those animals who have a harder time finding homes because they’re older.

I help a few other visitors get signed up for the shelter’s newsletter, and just when I think the day is starting to calm down, I spot a familiar face.

Kendall McCarter – my ex-girlfriend.

She struts toward me wearing booty shorts and a crop top. She looks great. Kendall always looks great. Unfortunately for her, good looks aren’t all that go into a relationship, and the two of us encountered multiple problems because she was more interested in hitting the gym and starving herself than she was in working on our relationship.

Besides all of that, I dated her for a few months after Toni and I split up. Kendall was my rebound. I’m not ashamed of dating her. She’s gorgeous and funny, but she’s also mean. That was the reason we broke up, in the end. Kendall doesn’t have a problem with being cruel.

And you don’t?

The thought is invasive and unwanted, and I try to shove it away. It wasn’t until much later that I discovered that Toni’s parents both died the night I was going to propose. By then, the two of us had already pushed each other away. If I’d known that she was

going through something so terribly traumatic, I want to think I would have been there for her.

But what if that's not true?

What if I wouldn't have?

Toni has always been a kind, gentle person. She's always been the kind of woman most people could only aspire to be.

Kendall McCarter, on the other hand, breeds meanness.

Maybe she's the reason I'm so cruel now. No, it would be too easy to blame her.

"Kendall," I say. "Long time, no see."

"Fancy seeing you here."

"Are you interested in signing up for the shelter newsletter? You'll be the first to hear about adoptable pets."

I sound like a robot, but I can't help myself. I don't want to sound normal right now. What I want is to pretend like everything is fine and that it's not super weird hanging out with not one, but two of my ex-girlfriends today in the park.

Where are my shades when I need them?

"No, I'm not interested in that," Kendall says. "What are you doing here?"

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“Just trying to help these dogs find new homes.”

“Are you sure you’re not here for a photo op?” She gestures to the guests and volunteers who are taking pictures. I haven’t seen any reporters yet, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t here.

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone heard about your plan to completely take down Toni’s company,” she says. “It’s a bit cruel.”

“I think you’ve been misinformed.”

She hasn’t. She’s read the news, just like everyone else, and she knows that this thing between me and Toni is weird, awkward, and complicated. She knows what the media wants her to know, but luckily, since Toni and I spoke with Piper, the only “proof” anyone has of our relationship is that we’re just two gal pals hanging out.

Our past relationship has luckily stayed private so far.

“Ah, perhaps,” Kendall says. “So, what are you doing after this?” It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her to fuck off and that I don’t want to talk to her. That would be mean, though, and I wouldn’t put it past Kendall to be recording this conversation somehow. She’s always been sneaky, and unfortunately for her, that doesn’t really bode well when it comes to relationships.

One thing I’ve learned is that if you can’t trust your partner, you have no business

being in a relationship with them. That was just one of the reasons my breakup with Toni hurt so much. She was the first woman I really met who didn't care about the money. She didn't care about the fact that my parents had so much cash. She never asked about it and I never offered. Money was something that was completely removed from the equation of our relationship, and I appreciated that.

I still do.

Before I can respond, I'm saved because Toni and Kayla come back. Kayla has a small blue heeler dog with her: a potential adoptee named Pretzel.

"I want to adopt Pretzel," Kayla says proudly.

"Woah," I grin. "Really? That's so awesome!"

"Let's get the paperwork started," Toni says. She slides into the seat next to me, and when I look back to where Kendall was standing a moment ago, I realize she's gone.

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Toni

Pretzel gets adopted. So do all of the other cats and dogs we brought to the park. Jerry is so happy that he calls his granddaughter on the phone and invites her out for ice cream. It's just after two o'clock when he tells us he has to go and hurries off, scurrying away.

"I've never seen that guy so excited," Jessica says. She grins as she watches Jerry leave. He reminds me of my own granddad. I miss that guy every day. I'm sure Jerry has people he's lost, too, but he somehow manages to keep on smiling. I think I've got a lot I could learn from a guy like him.

“He’s a character,” I admit. I don’t know whether he’s a good character or a bad one, but he’s something. Jerry isn’t perfect, but he makes volunteering at the shelter much easier. Now that he’s gone, the other volunteers get busy cleaning up, and Jessica and I find ourselves standing alone by a maple tree.

“How was the day for you?” Jessica asks. She smiles at me. It feels genuine and real. I know I can’t read too much into it, but it’s hard not to. Being around her like this feels comfortable and familiar. I realize this isn’t love, but I feel at ease. I’ve missed that feeling.

“Good. Overwhelming,” I admit. I don’t like to share when I’m feeling out of my element, but Jessica and I are going to be spending the rest of the day together with that networking event we’re going to, so I think it’s important that I be honest with her. At the very least, it’ll give her the chance to show some empathy if I start feeling cranky or acting weird later.

“Overwhelming?” Jessica doesn’t seem bothered by this question. Just curious. “How so?”

“It was a lot of chaos. Events like this always wear me out.”

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“I can see how it would get to you. There were a lot of people and a lot of questions. Plus, we were out in the heat all day. Do you come to a lot of these?”

“As many as I can,” I admit. “Ever since I adopted Max, I’ve been trying to find ways to give back to the community. He helped me through a really hard time.” I pause, suddenly embarrassed that I’ve revealed more about myself than I planned on revealing. Jessica doesn’t need to know that our breakup was so hard on me. She doesn’t need to know that I was in pain after she left or that I’m sorry for pushing her away.

I don’t want her to know – at least not yet – that I’m aware that my behavior was atrocious. I should have just reached out to her after my mom and dad died. I should have tried harder. I didn’t. I let her down. I blamed her for a long time for not fighting harder for me, but the truth is that I pushed her away and she respected that enough to stay away. Maybe I should be thanking her. At the very least, she gave me room to grieve on my own.

“I’m glad he was there for you,” she says gently. Relief washes over me. She’s not calling me out even though she totally could right now. I’d deserve it, I know.

“He was. I know people always say this about dogs – cats, too – but having someone waiting for me when I get home who isn’t going to judge me or ask too many questions is just really, really nice.”

“I’m happy for you,” she admits.

And I believe her.



That's the problem with Jessica. I don't think she's as deceptive as I want to believe she is. I know that Mark is convinced she's going to try to take over my company or force me to sell somehow. Obviously, other people in the world feel the same way, but I don't believe that. Not really. Not anymore. The fact that she was so willing to meet with Piper and me says a lot, I think. More importantly, it means a lot.

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"Any pets?"

"None at all. Unless you can count my assistant, Patrick."

I laugh. "I don't think assistants can reasonably count as pets."

"He's awesome, though," she tells me. "I can't thank him enough for sending us to Piper."

"Me too," I agree. I think we're really lucky to have found her. Without her guidance, I wouldn't have known what to say or what to do after the media picked up that random Tweet. "I still want to know who started that rumor, though." It's so strange. I can see how there could be people who think Jessica's purchase of her company was strange, but I'm not sure who would make the link between us. Jessica hasn't gone crazy buying up little companies. Yes, Northington Tech has acquired other brands, but it's not a regular thing. She's hardly the shark Mark accused her of being.

"The Tweet that started it all." Jessica rolls her eyes. "It's annoying, isn't it?"

"That's one word."

“Unprofessional.”

“There’s another.”

We smile at each other as we lean against the tree. It’s still kind of hard to believe that we just spent an entire morning and the first part of the afternoon together. We did it without fighting or bickering or breaking down. I don’t want to get my hopes up that Jessica and I can pick up where we left off, but it’s starting to feel like maybe we can.

Would it be crazy to think that maybe there’s still a spark between us?

I think about her all of the time. I know that she’s single right now. I am, too. Does she ever think of me? Does she miss me? She’s looking at me right now like she misses me, at least a little bit.

At least sometimes.

“Are you excited about tonight?” I ask, breaking the silence between us. It feels strange to speak, but far too intimate to stay silent.

“More than I thought I’d be.” She smiles at me like she’s got a secret. What’s going through that pretty head of hers?

I don’t get to wonder, though, because we’re interrupted.

“Hey, a little help, please!” We both turn to see one of the shelter employees, Anya, trying to fold down the portable fencing we used for the dog pen. She’s obviously struggling to break it all down. Before I can even move, Jessica leaps up and scurries over, anxious to help.

And that's the kind of person she is, I realize.

The media gets her wrong, but I do, too. She spent the whole day here helping and even though I didn't see a single reporter show up to provide proof that the two of us are friends and not enemies, she stayed. She could have taken off at any point, but she didn't.

She wanted to be here, and she was here.

13

Toni

Once we finish cleaning up all of the shelter supplies from the park, Anya and the other shelter employees head back to return their supplies to the building. The volunteers disperse, and Jessica and I are left standing by the playground. Once more, we find ourselves standing together without knowing what to say. The problem is that I want to say everything. I want to tell her that I'm sorry and that I was wrong. I want to tell her that we should totally try to make up for lost time.

I don't.

Instead, I stand where I am, and I let her lead.

"I'd invite you to go on the swings, but I think it might be weird," she says. Jessica glances around at the moms and dads hanging out at the park. I'm pretty sure there are a few babysitters and nannies, too. There are two swings open, but I think she's right.

"I think the moms might yell at us."

"You never know," she smiles.

"It's almost three," I tell her.

"You ready to go back to my place?"

“Your place.”

“Your dress is at my place,” she reminds me. “And the makeup and hairstylist is coming over there, too.”

“Right,” I nod. I had tried to put all of that from my mind. The idea of spending the entire day with my ex-girlfriend is rough. As if trying to save me from the embarrassment of having to speak again, my stomach rumbles. Jessica hears and laughs.

“We’ll order something when we get home. I assume you remember where my apartment is.”

“I remember.”

“See you there.”

As soon as I’m in my little Honda Civic, I call Clara to provide me with emotional support on the drive to Toni’s house. She answers on the first ring.

“What’s happening?” Clara says this in a casual way and not like she’s worried. Now that she’s out from under the thumb of her family, she’s experimenting with sounding more relaxed. For the first time in her life, she doesn’t have to follow a bunch of rules, and I’m pretty sure she’s thrilled about this.

“I’m driving to Jessica’s,” I tell her.

“How was the adoption event?”

“Great.” I fill her in on how we found families for every single animal. No one is going back to the shelter tonight.

“That’s awesome! But I have a feeling you didn’t just call me to tell me about your adoption success.”

“I called because I am freaking out.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:10 pm*

“About hanging out with Jessica?”

“Yes.”

“About being alone with Jessica?”

“Yes.”

“About being isolated in an apartment where you used to make love to Jessica?”

I cringe because yes, that’s exactly what I’m worried about.

“Is it bad if I say yes?”

“Can I ask you something?” Clara answers my question with a question. She’d make a good government official.

“Sure.”

“Do you think about her when you masturbate?”

“Yes.”

“Do you ever think about anyone else?”

“Not really.”

“Have you slept with anyone since her?”

“Is it bad if I say no?”

“I knew it!” Clara squeals. “You are still in love with her.”

To be honest, I’m not sure if I ever stopped being in love with her. I want to pretend like I don’t care. I want to pretend like nothing matters and that the world is a terrible place and that whether Jessica and I ever work things out is irrelevant, but it’s not. And now that Clara knows, I can’t keep lying to myself.

“I wouldn’t call it love.”

“No? What would you call it? Obsession?”

“Maybe.” Shit. I’m almost at her place. I still don’t know what I’m going to do when I get there, but I’m nervous, and we still have the entire night together.

“Look.” Clara’s voice takes a serious turn, and I realize that she’s actually going to offer me some real advice. Good. I can use it. “I don’t know what all happened between you two. I’m not asking. I’m sure you’ve got a handle on things. What I am going to say is that tonight is your chance at a fresh beginning.”

“Meaning?”

“Just go for it. What’s the worst that could happen?”



14

Jessica

Sometimes it still doesn't make sense to me that people care who I date or what my company does. Being the head of Northington Tech is a big deal, though, and people truly are always watching. Even when I think they're not, I always have eyes on me. Because of this, I'm careful about how I act in public, where I go, and what I'm seen doing.

I'm not even trying to be overly sneaky. I'm not being followed by the paparazzi or anything like that. It's just that if the face of Northington Tech is seen doing something shady – or something that could make my shareholders feel like I'm unbalanced or unhinged in any way – it could impact our bottom line.

So, I'm careful.

When Toni comes up to the apartment, I'm pacing back and forth because tonight doesn't feel very careful. I realize that Piper recommended we do this thing we're about to do, but it still feels awkward.

No, it doesn't feel awkward.

It feels dangerous.

Only, it doesn't feel dangerous because of my company. It feels dangerous because the last few days of talking to Toni and being around her have made me realize that

maybe I'm not as "over" her as I wanted to pretend I was. Maybe I'm still in love with her and I don't actually hate her.

I tell myself to be strong as she knocks on the door. I stride over and pull the door open. She's here. I breathe out a sigh of relief. Was I worried she wasn't going to come? No. Maybe. I didn't allow myself to consider the fact that she might chicken out at the last second. Still, I'm thrilled that she is here and that it's just us now.

"Hey," she says, looking up at me. She's still wearing her shorts and tank top from the event. "Can I come in?"

"Please." I take a step back.

"So, do I stink?"

"What?"

"Should I shower?" She laughs. "I'm not sure if having dirty hair is going to affect the way it's styled."

"You know how it goes with styling hair. Most of the time, the dirtier, the better."

"I remember. Just not sure for today."

"You're welcome to rinse off," I tell her. "You remember where my bathroom is."

"Of course," she says. Toni kicks off her shoes and starts heading down the narrow hallway that leads to the bathroom. Although I was the VP of a company and am now the president and CEO, I still have a modest apartment. I don't know why except for the fact that it's all I need. I could easily afford to spend more on a nicer, better place, but I like this one. I have a nice view of the city, I have a pool and workout center

here, and I have everything I need to be happy.

And now Toni is about to shower in my bathroom.

I wait until I hear the water turn on. I didn't tell her where the towels are, but their location hasn't changed. Not much has changed in the last couple of years, actually.

Quietly, I move to the kitchen. I promised to order food, but I think I'm just going to cook instead. I like cooking for Toni. I used to make this incredible egg and cheese wrap she really liked. I'd cook bacon, too, and sprinkle that in. Toni isn't the kind of girl who worries about her body – and she shouldn't – so she's not going to say anything like, "I can't eat before I wear a dress."

She'll want to eat, so I start cooking.

I'm almost finished with the wrap and am, in fact, sliding it onto the plate when I bump my elbow against the gallon of milk I left on the countertop. Somehow, it's just a perfect enough hit that the milk goes flying all over the floor. Three hand towels aren't enough for the mess, so I step into my bedroom to have Toni toss me a towel from the bathroom. I didn't knock because I figured she was still in the bathroom, but she's not.

Instead, Toni is completely, totally naked.

And she's staring right at me.

15

Toni

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out. “I forgot where the towels are.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “I just came in to grab one because I spilled the milk.”

“You spilled milk?” I ask, but she’s not listening. She’s staring at me. No, she’s devouring me with her eyes, and I feel my body heat as she looks at me. I don’t know why there aren’t any towels in Jessica’s bathroom. Maybe it’s laundry day. Who knows? All I know is that I suddenly don’t regret not spotting one and instead walking around her bedroom naked.

“I spilled milk,” she repeats.

“And I spilled water on your bathroom floor,” I admit. “I should have checked for towels before I got in.”

“No, you’re perfect,” she says, and she takes a step closer. Her eyes are heated. Passionate. She’s looking at me like she wants to devour me, and honestly, I think I’d be okay with that. Jessica is the best lover I’ve ever had. She’s passionate and wild and fun. She’s always willing to try new things.

Perhaps best of all, Jessica isn’t scared.

Maybe that’s why she’s such a great leader in her company. She’s not afraid to take

risks. She'll be the first to jump into something new. She's always learning, always evolving.

And right now, I kind of think she's going to kiss me.

She takes another step toward me.

"What are you doing?"

"Why are you here, Toni?"

"I'm here because we're trying to prove we're friends."

"We're not," she says. "We haven't been friends for a very long time."

"I don't think we were friends back then."

"Tell me what we were, Toni."

"Lovers." The word feels good on my lips. Passionate. Wild. She's getting closer to me, but I'm not embarrassed or nervous. I should be. When your ex-partner looks at you like they want to make you fall apart, you're supposed to be nervous.

Not me.

Not with Jessica.

Not ever.

"Yes," she says. "We were lovers."

“And now I’m naked.”

“You look so damn good, baby.”

She’s in front of me now. She’s still dressed. Her long hair hangs in two braids, but she’s taken off her sun hat. She’s standing in front of me in a t-shirt and shorts, but she’s never looked hotter. Never.

“Do I?”

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I don't tell her not to call me baby because I like it when she says this.

I don't tell her not to touch me because it feels so damn good when she does.

“Yes.”

“Have you thought about me?”

“Every day.”

I think of Clara's question to me in the car and realize I want to ask Jessica now.

“Do you think about me when you touch yourself?”

Her hands are on my waist now, and her eyes lock onto mine.

“Every time.”

I lick my lips. She thinks about me. She runs her hands over her own body, playing with her breasts and teasing her way down to her soft pussy while she thinks about me being the one to touch her. That's what she does. That's what she's been doing this whole time.

My mouth suddenly feels dry.

“And do you make yourself come when you think about me?”

She leans closer, her lips hovering over mine.

“Every time,” she repeats.

16

Jessica

Kissing her would be wrong, but I no longer want to be right, and I bring my mouth to hers. It’s no surprise to me that Toni kisses me back, eagerly and greedily. We both need this. We both want this. It feels like a mix between a hate-fuck and a one night stand, but I’m not going to question that right now. Instead, I’m going to let us have this moment. I’m going to stop thinking and just feel.

I’m just going to feel.

My hands glide up her hips until I’m cupping her soft, full breasts. They feel good in my hands. Right. My thumbs find their way to her nipples, and I twirl those hard buds until she groans and thrusts her pelvis toward me.

“How wet is that soft pussy right now, Toni?”

“Wetter than it should be.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you,” she whispers.



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“Tell me you need me.”

“I need you.”

I kiss her again, palming her breasts with my hands. Our bodies are flush together, and my own breasts are aching to be touched by her. As if on command, as though she’s reading my mind, she brings her hands to my breasts and starts massaging them over my shirt.

Yes.

This is what I want.

This is what I need.

This is what I’ve been waiting for.

The world falls silent and everything fades away as Toni starts tugging at my shirt to pull it over my head.

Oh, I’m going to fall apart for her.

She asks me.

“Do you want me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need me?”

“More than anything?”

“Take your bra off, Jessica.”

She’s a little bit bossy tonight, but I like it. She wasn’t bossy before. She was more submissive than dominant, but I’m okay with this. I’m surprised, but it’s hot. I like that she’s telling me what she wants and she’s taking it. I like that she’s going for it.

I spin around so my back is to her and I reach behind me.

“Oh, you’re going to tease me first.”

“Good things come to those who wait,” I smile over my shoulder at her. She’s biting her lip like she can’t handle the pressure of waiting. I don’t feel bad for her at all. My pussy is aching, throbbing with need, and I know hers must be, too.

I get my bra unhooked and let it fall to the floor. When I finally turn back around, I keep my hands over my breasts. Yeah, I’m going to tease her just a little bit more.

“What are you doing to me, baby?”

“Getting you excited.”

“I’m excited.”

“Making sure you’re ready for me.”

“I’m ready.”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me what you want.”

“I want to see your breasts.”

Slowly, I lower my hands to reveal my tits to her. They’re bigger than Toni’s. She likes mine and I like hers. Then again, I’ve never met a breast I didn’t like. She stares at them like she’s missed them.

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“They’re even hotter than I remember,” she admits.

“Show me,” I say. She can boss me around, but I can do the same damn thing. There are no rules in the bedroom. There’s nothing that stops us from going after what we want. It’s a free-for-all between us. It always has been.

Toni takes a step closer to me. Instead of reaching for my breasts with her hands, she lowers her head. She sucks one of my nipples into her mouth and groans at the taste. Oh, she’s going to have me falling apart. I haven’t even taken my shorts off yet, and already I know that they’re soaked. My panties are soaked. My pussy is soaked. Everything.

I want her to touch me there.

I want her to touch me everywhere.

She raises her hand to one of my breasts so she can touch them both at the same time. Expertly, she alternates between kissing and massaging each of my breasts. I keep my hands in her hair while she does. I don’t let go. I don’t want to ever let go.

But then the doorbell chimes, and we’re suddenly pulled from the trance we’ve been sucked into.

“Who’s that?” Toni looks up at me, as if she’s in a daze.

“That,” I sigh, reaching for my shirt, “is hair and makeup.”

Toni

I almost did it.

I almost did the one thing you've never supposed to do.

I almost slept with my ex-girlfriend: the one who broke my heart. I know you're not supposed to. I know that it's a terrible idea and everyone says not to, but I also know that somehow, it just didn't feel as bad as I thought it was going to.

Now, it's hours later and I'm mingling with people I don't know at a hotel I've never been to and all I can do is stare at Jessica like she's the best thing I've ever seen in my damn life.

Why is she like this?

How does she have this effect on me?

She's gorgeous and sweet and pretty, and even though she's got a streak of evil bitch in her and she can be a corporate monster, I don't care because when we're together, she stares at me like I'm the only girl she's ever wanted: like I'm the only one that matters.

"Excuse me?" A voice pulls me back to the present. I turn to see a tall, thin man wearing a tuxedo and holding his cell phone out. Is he recording something? "Are you Toni?"

"I am."

“Brett Swanson with The Times. Can I ask you a few questions?”

The Ashbury Times is a bigger newspaper than it should be. While Ashbury isn't even close to being as big as Denver, it's not exactly a small town, either. The newspaper gets national attention, which can be really great or really terrible depending on what they write about you. I realize that Brett is here to find out the truth about my company and Jessica's, so I push my shoulders back and jut my chin out. This is my moment to be professional: not my moment to day dream about my future girlfriend who is currently my ex-girlfriend.

“Of course.”

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“You’re here tonight. Did you come with anyone?”

“Yes,” I tell him. Okay, we’re starting with something easy. “I’m here with Jessica Mortimer. She’s the CEO of Northington Tech. Previously, she was the VP, but she recently purchased the company.”

“Yes, I’m aware.” Brett smiles. It’s a disarming smile, I realize. He’s trying to put me at ease. Unfortunately, it’s working. We’ve only chatted for a minute and already, Brett seems like the kind of person I could tell my whole life story to. I can’t do that, I realize. Anything I say can be printed in the newspaper, twisted, and used for evil. I don’t want that because suddenly, it’s very important to me that I not only make a good impression when it comes to my own company, but that I make a good impression when it comes to Jessica’s.

“Do you cover a lot of local business stories?” I ask, turning the tables on Brett. He seems surprised for only a second, but he pivots beautifully.

“Absolutely,” he nods. “Our paper is very interested in making sure we’re covering local events in a way that is fair and reasonable. We want to highlight what’s happening both in Ashbury and around the globe. Make sense?”

“Oh, it does. So what made you decide to become a reporter?”

Somehow, this question really seems to catch Brett off-guard. For a second, I think it’s going to quickly turn things back on me, but he catches himself and smiles.

“My dad was a reporter. Best there ever was.”

“That’s cool. Did he ever take you on assignments?”

“All the time,” Brett says. “He taught me everything he knew.”

From the way he talks about his dad in the past tense, I realize that Brett’s father isn’t retired. He’s passed away, just like my dad. The realization stings as I think about my own dad and all of the time we didn’t get to spend together. When you lose a parent, it hurts forever. I’m convinced that the pain never goes away. At this point, I don’t even know if it ever gets better.

“Tell me more about your relationship with Miss Mortimer,” Brett says, suddenly all business again. He seems to realize that we got off track. I wait for just a second as my eyes slide around the many bodies in the ballroom. There’s soft music playing in the background, but this isn’t a party. There’s no dancing. The music is low enough that people can chat comfortably, and they are. The mayor is here, as well as many other public officials, yet Brett is here talking to me. Not them.

“We’re friends,” I tell him. I remember the story. We spun a narrative, as Piper put it, and presented ourselves as a united front. We didn’t tell the world that we’re former lovers. We aren’t pretending to be in a relationship or anything else like it. We’re just friends.

Only, the way she was touching me in her bedroom didn’t feel like something a friend would do. The way she kissed me didn’t feel like something you’d do with a friend. It felt much better than that, and I want there to be more.

Since we got to the event, the two of us have stayed carefully close to each other, but not so close that we’re making fuck-me-eyes at each other. That’s something I don’t trust myself with right now. The truth is that I’m so turned on I think I’m going to melt if she doesn’t sneak off with me and hide away.



I want to bang her in a damn closet.

Shit.

“Friends?”

“Yes.”

“And how did you two meet?”

“A few years ago,” I tell him. This isn’t something we discussed, but it’s a safe enough answer. Generally speaking, people didn’t realize we were partners and not just friends unless they spent a significant amount of time with us. Jessica is cautious with public displays of affection. Even then, she was careful, but I didn’t think it was because she was ashamed of being queer. I always just figured it was because she didn’t want to give people anything to talk about.

“And do you have any idea who has been Tweeting about Jessica trying to sideswipe your company?”

“Excuse me?”

He said “Tweeting” in the present-tense, as though it wasn’t just the one message. When Jessica and I met with Piper, there was only one message we needed to worry about, and even then, it was only because the message went totally viral. Right now, I get the feeling that there’s more to this situation than either of us could have guessed, and possibly, more than either of us knew.

Brett instantly realizes I don’t know. He gestures to my phone.

“Do a quick search for #mortimermeddles and you’ll find it.”

“What?”

“That’s the hashtag everyone’s using,” he shrugs.

“Mortimer isn’t trying to steal my company,” I say. I resist the urge to pull up my phone and start scrolling. I don’t want to let Brett know that I’m completely out of the loop, suddenly, because it was something we worked so hard to stay in front of. After all, that’s why I’m here. We’re trying to calm people down. We’re trying to hide the truth.

What better way than by pretending everything is totally normal?

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“That’s not what the buzz on the Internet is,” he says.

“We came here tonight.” I paste a polite smile on my lips. “We’re very good friends. In fact, we also spent the day volunteering together.”

“All day?” Brett asks. “Or did Jessica take some time to connect with an old friend while you were helping people adopt animals?”

I don’t know what he’s getting at or why the room is starting to spin.

18

Jessica

Something is terribly wrong.

I don’t know what, but Brett Swanson has been talking to Toni for much longer than he spoke with me. He’s trying to find flaws in our carefully presented story so he can exploit them. I can’t let that happen.

Was I planning to ruin Toni?

Yes.

Am I still planning on that?

No.

No, no, no.

I'm not the monster I thought I was. I'm not the monster I wanted to be. The truth is that we all deserve second chances and when it comes to moving forward, I need to make sure I'm doing everything in my power to stay ahead of the curve with this weird race we're running.

I excuse myself from the conversation I'm in. Weirdly, budgetary software isn't something I'm insanely passionate about, so I slip away and start crossing the room. I push my way through people who are standing in random areas. Even though there are both low and high-top tables throughout the space, most of the guests are standing, and most of them are standing in walkways. This makes it hard to get across the room.

Once I'm standing by Toni, I realize that yes, my instincts were correct. There's a problem. I just don't know what.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing," she shakes her head. "That guy was just...he gave me the creeps."

"What did he say to you?" I turn and watch as Brett Swanson slips through the crowd, disappearing amongst all of the suits and ballgowns.

"Nothing important," she says. She shakes her head as though she's trying to rid herself of the interaction, and she turns back to me.

"Good," I say. "Forget that guy. Let's dance."

"There's nowhere to dance," she gestures to the packed ballroom. She's right: no one is dancing. She's wrong that there's nowhere to dance, though. I know this hotel

inside and out, and I happen to know that there are plenty of places to steal a private dance with a girl you like.

“Come with me.”

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I take Toni's hand and lead her from the room. The two of us slip out of the ballroom unnoticed and out into the hotel hallway. There are a few people out here taking phone calls or talking quietly, but they pay us no mind as we walk down the hallway. I keep her hand in mine. I don't really care if anyone sees this. Will anyone believe it's just two gal pals holding hands? Not really. That's fine.

There's an empty meeting room down a side hallway. It's luckily unlocked and we slip inside, but don't turn the lights on.

"How did you know this was here?" Toni asks quietly. She doesn't ask me why I've taken her to this isolated room or why I'm leaving the lights off.

"I used to come here for meetings with my dad," I tell her. "This hotel has been around forever."

"Oh."

"Oh," I agree.

"Have you ever taken any other girls here?"

I laugh. "Believe me or not, you're the first."

"And why have you sneaked me out of the party, Jessica?"

There we go.

Now she's curious.

Now she wants to know.

I don't answer her, though. Instead, I gently grip her arms and back her up until she's against the wall. Once she can't go back anymore, I lower my head to hers and kiss her. She's eager and anxious, just as she was earlier, and I eat up every second of this kiss. I love the way she tastes. I love the way she's touching me like nothing else matters. Her hands are on my waist, but not for long because slowly, I kneel down in front of her.

"What are you doing?"

She's whispering, but her voice is husky and aroused.

"I think you know what I'm doing."

"We might get caught."

"Good. People's real lives are terribly boring. We can give them something to talk about."

"Are you sure it's a good idea?"

"No more questions," I command. "The only thing I want to hear you saying is 'yes' and 'more.'"

"Understood," she whispers, and I slide my hands up her soft legs and to her thighs. I squeeze them as I glide my hands under the short hem of her dress. It's loose enough that it's easy to touch her, and as I slide my hands around to her ass, I realize something else.

“No panties.”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you wear panties, baby?”

“I don’t know.” I can practically hear her blushing.

“Try again.”

“I wanted you to touch me,” she admits.

“You wanted me to touch you at the party?”

“Yes.”

“So you thought you’d skip wearing panties?”



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“Yes.”

“Such a naughty girl. I love it.”

“I’m glad you love it.”

“Did you like knowing you were walking around with your bare pussy practically on display?”

“I did.”

“Do you think anyone saw?”

“No,” she says. “Not until now.”

I slide a finger over the front of her pussy. She’s bare. Shaved. Soft.

“You shaved your pussy.”

“I know.”

“Did you do this for me?”

Silence.

“Toni?”

“Yes.”

“You shaved your pussy because you wanted to show me.”

“I did.”

“Why did you want to show me your pussy, Toni?”

She wiggles, but I once again grip her thighs. This time, I’m holding her in place. I want to hear her say it because it’s so damn hot. I want to hear her say that she didn’t wear panties and that she shaved her pussy because she wanted me to lick her. She wanted to come here tonight and get an orgasm. Maybe she doesn’t want to admit that to anyone, and that’s fine, but she’s going to admit it to me.

She’s going to admit it before we do anything more.

19

Toni

Humiliation couples with arousal and washes over me.

I know what she’s doing. Jessica has always loved dirty talk, and she doesn’t love anything as much as hearing about what I want to do or what I want her to do. She wants me to say that I prepared for tonight because I was hoping we’d fool around.

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No, that's not quite right.

She wants to hear me say that I prepared my body for her tonight because I wanted to be her little toy.

And yeah, I did want that.

I still do.

I want to be Jessica's sexy plaything. I want her to lean forward and press her lips to my pussy. I want her to lick me until all of her lipstick is gone and my body is shaking from an incredible orgasm. I want her to slide her fingers inside of me and feel me from the inside.

These are the things that I want, but that I'm scared to say.

The question now is whether fear or arousal is going to win.

Am I more scared of the social ramifications of our relationship moving forward?

Or am I more horny and craving an orgasm I'll never forget?

In the end, the choice is easy.

My clit wins.

"I shaved for you," I tell her. "I wasn't going to, but I've been really turned on

thinking about you lately. I've been touching myself like crazy. I thought if I could come enough, that it would get you out of my system.

"And how did that work for you?"

"Not too well. I'm still so horny. I need your mouth on me, baby."

"What else do you need?"

"Your lips pressing kisses to my pussy. Your tongue inside of me. I want it all."

She doesn't wait a moment longer. Instead, Jessica begins licking me, and that's the moment when I realize my life is about to change in ways I couldn't possibly imagine. Even though it's dark, I find myself closing my eyes. Just the act of shutting my eyelids proves that even if the lights come on, I can't see. I can't look around. I can only focus on her and the feelings she's offering me right now.

Joy.

Pleasure.

Acceptance.

It's always been like this with her. It's always been hot. Heavy. Wonderful. She knows my body better than anyone else because she's taken the time to get to know it.

I want to run my hands through her hair, but it's so perfectly styled that the second I touch it, everyone's going to know what we've been up to. I don't want to ruin her reputation if she doesn't want it ruined. Instead, I want to honor her with this shared secret between us. Nobody needs to know unless we want them to know.

I force my hands to grip the wall behind me as she devours my pussy. Her tongue works magic and her hands are everywhere. I find myself growing closer and closer to that incredible edge. She knows it, too. She's practically holding her breath. I'm definitely holding my breath.

And then it hits me.

Like magic.

Like a shooting star.

I throw my head back and groan, trying my best not to cry out into the darkness of this room, but I can't help myself. My breathing stops entirely while I allow myself to just feel the orgasm washing over me.

It's perfect.

It's everything.

And then her lips are on mine, and she's kissing me. She doesn't care about messing up my makeup and I know I've already destroyed hers. I can taste myself on her tongue and it's perfect. It's everything.

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“Let’s get out of here,” she finally says.

So we do.

20

Toni

We ride back to her house together. We used a rideshare to get here in case we wanted to drink, and our drive back is entirely silent. Our driver, Kevin, is a college student trying to save up money for the fall semester. He chats happily for the first few minutes, but quickly realizes that we’re not in the mood, and the rest of the ride it’s just us breathing and the occasional sound of Kevin’s turn signal. When we slide out of the car, Jessica hands him some cash.

“Thanks for the ride, Kevin. You were great.”

“Oh, really? I worried about it being so quiet, you know, but-“

“Thanks a lot,” she says. Then we’re out of the car, in the elevator, and finally back in her apartment.

“Get naked,” I command.

“Bossy, are we?”

“Please get naked,” I say with a grin. I can be polite. I can be cool.

She obliges. I help her out of her gown and she practically tears off mine. Then we're rolling around on the living room carpet, not even bothering to go to the bedroom. We're kissing each other everywhere, making up for lost time, and the only thing I can think is that this makes sense.

All of this makes sense.

I'm thrilled with how today is working out. I'm excited. I'm delighted. Everything is exactly what I wanted. To a certain extent, it's healing to be with her again.

Have we worked out any of our issues?

No.

Do we need to?

If we want to have a real relationship again, yes.

That's not what we're doing right now, though.

Right now we're just enjoying each other. We're just being with each other. Right now, the two of us are just spending a little bit of time together.

Orgasm after orgasm after orgasm comes for both of us. Eventually, we're hot and tired and sweaty. Jessica orders pizza and we both shower together while we wait for the delivery. Then we cuddle up in her bed, eat our food, and watch a rom-com we've both seen a million times before.

It's nearly two in the morning when I slide out of bed.

"You don't have to leave," she says.

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“I need to let Max out,” I tell her. “My neighbor watched him until midnight for me, but he’s been alone for two hours now and he usually wakes up and wants to go potty about this time.”

She props herself up on her elbow.

“You want me to come with you?”

“To let my dog out?”

She nods, and I’m surprised. Does it show on my face? Jessica doesn’t exactly seem like the type of person to get her hands dirty with a dog, but then again, a lot of things have been surprising me about her lately.

“Yeah,” I finally say. “I would like that.”

She gets out of bed, too, and pulls on a pair of pajama pants and a tank top. I slide on the dress I wore to the event tonight. It’s either that or my sweaty shorts and tank from the park earlier today. Jessica’s quiet as we head out to our cars.

“Here,” I reach for her phone and punch my address into her maps app. “It’s not too far.”

She looks down at the address and some emotion I can’t identify crosses her face. Sadness, maybe? Regret? I’m not sure, but soon enough we’re back on our way home, and then we’re inside, and then we’re kissing again.



And then it's morning.

21

Jessica

When Monday morning rolls around, I walk into the office feeling good. I spent the entire weekend wrapped in Toni's arms, and it was everything I've missed.

And everything that was bad for me.

Now that I'm back in the office, I'm wondering whether it was a terrible mistake to pretend to make up with her for the sake of moving forward, especially when I open my email and I find that I'm slammed with email after email after email.

All of them are about the weekend.

"Patrick!" I yell the name and he comes rushing in.

"Miss Mortimer?"

"Why are you being formal?"

He shrugs.

"What happened yesterday, Patrick?"

"I tried to call you," he says.

And I didn't get the message because I was at Toni's. My phone died and she only had an Apple charger, not a USB C. I didn't want to leave her to go buy one, and I

didn't want to go home. I figured I'd be okay without a phone for one day. Apparently, that was incorrect.

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“Fill me in.”

“Um, the reporter from the event on Saturday night wrote a piece about the two feuding companies. He thinks he’s gotten to the bottom of the person who started the rumor.”

“Has he?”

“You should read the article.”

“Patrick, just tell me.”

“No.” He shakes his head and hands me a piece of paper.

“Did you print out the article? You could have just pointed me to the website. A tree had to die for this Patrick.”

“Just read it,” he says.

Then he’s gone, and I’m alone.

### LOCAL BUSINESS HAS BONE TO PICK WITH CORPORATION

The title is terrible. I hope Brett knows he did a bad job with it. I reach for my coffee and sip it as I start to read, but the more I read, the less coffee I drink. I find myself riveted by the story and I realize that I’m going to need to call Toni.

No, I'm going to need to call Piper.

WHEN Jessica Mortimer took over Northington Tech, she was an obvious choice. Smart, determined, and experienced, Mortimer served as the Vice President of the company until the previous owner, Ashley Smith, retired. The company was sold to Mortimer in a private deal, but Mortimer wasn't satisfied with just one company.

She wanted more.

I pause, looking up from the paper. My mouth feels dry. I can't help it, though. I keep reading.

Mortimer, ever the savvy business guru, decided to go after a small fish: West Mountain Software and Security. We've all heard the story before: big corporation destroys local mom-and-pop shops. It happens all of the time. This time, though, things were different.

Owner Toni Ventris received a heads-up about the fact that Mortimer wanted to destroy – or buy – her company, and she decided to take matters into her own hands. With the help of her accountant, Mark Thomas, and his girlfriend, Kendall McCarter, Ventris hatched a plan to make herself look weak: and Mortimer look to be a monster.

I drop the paper.

No.

This can't be true.

It really, really can't be.

There it is, though: pictures of Kennedy and Mark standing in front of Toni's building on the day he was hired. There are pictures of Mark and Toni at office events and holiday parties. There's even a picture of Kennedy at the animal shelter's adoption event.

My ex-girlfriend got together with my other ex-girlfriend and pulled the rug out from beneath me.

And I never even saw it coming.

22

Toni

Work flies by in a flurry of meetings: all over Zoom. I'm meeting with vendors and suppliers throughout the country who are going to be able to make sure my clients get the software and the support that they need. When I can't provide one-on-one support to my clients locally, I refer them to my contracted vendors who can provide additional support and assistance.

By the time I emerge from my calls for the morning, Hillary is pacing anxiously outside of the office.

"We have a problem."

"With?" What could we possibly have a problem with? I had the world's most perfect weekend with my ex. Are we getting back together? No. Maybe. Yes. I don't know. I want to, but we didn't make any promises. Instead, we just spent time loving each other and adoring each other and giving each other orgasm after orgasm.

It was everything I've ever wanted and more.

"Have you read your email?"

"I've been on back-to-back calls all morning."

"Shit. Voicemails? Texts?"

“It was kind of an off-the-grid weekend,” I admit.

“Toni, you need to read this.”

Hillary hands me a sheet of paper. It’s a news article that’s basically a slash piece about me and Jessica and our two companies. It paints me to be some kind of monster – something I don’t think that I am. It also shows that Jessica is the victim in all of this.

And it has proof breaking down the fact that Mark’s girlfriend, Kendall, is responsible for the Tweets that launched this entire mess.

“I need to talk to Jessica,” I say.

“I’ve already tried to schedule a call with you two,” Hillary says. “She’s not responding. I’m sorry.”

“Get me Piper then.”

“She’s accepted Jessica as a client and cannot work with competing agencies,” Hillary says. She cringes as the words come out. “We’re on our own with this one, Toni.”

I stare at the paper. Could Jessica really believe any of this is true? I thought she was the one who wanted to destroy me. I thought she was going to try to buy me out or worse. Now I wonder if this really was all an elaborate setup from Kendall, who apparently used to date Jessica. I didn’t know.

“Get Mark in here.”

I sit back down at the desk, staring at the news article once more. There are pictures

of Kendall and Mark at the office, but I've never met her. She didn't come to any of the holiday parties we've hosted, but I guess she dropped him off to work one day and they posted a picture on Facebook. He was proud to work here. At least, I thought he was. Now I'm not so sure.

When Mark comes into the office, he looks sheepish.

"Sit."

He sits.

"What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mark." When I say his name, it sounds like a threat. I'm proud of this. Normally, I come across as naïve and innocent. I'm aware of this. Why I come across like this, I'm not sure. I could blame it on the fact that I'm still mourning the loss of my dad, or perhaps it has something to do with the fact that I feel guilty about my mom's death. There's Uncle Jake's loss, too, and that compounds my grief in ways I can never truly explain.

But these things don't have to make me meek. They don't have to make me quiet. Instead, they give me power. I've experienced things that are terrible, but I've come through on the other side. I have been hurt, yet I have come out stronger for it. I'm going to be just fine, but I have to find a way through this.

Mark is my first step.



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“Yeah, okay,” he sighs. “Look, I didn’t know Kendall was going to post that stuff.”

“Why did she post it?”

“Sometimes we talk about work and stuff. She knew about the sale of the company from Ashley to Jessica, and she said something about it. I mentioned Jessica was your ex. She let it spiral out of control from there.”

“Why would she care?”

“Because she dated Jessica right after you did.”

“Ah.”

“And she was always really jealous of you, I guess. I didn’t know about any of that until recently. Once she made that Tweet and I figured out it was her, I asked her why she did it. She told me not to bother her and that I needed to mind my own business.”

Suddenly, I feel very old and Mark seems very young. Despite the fact that I’m only a few years older than him, I feel ancient all of a sudden.

“And did you mind your own business?”

“Yeah. I should have come to you. Really, I should have. It’s just that I didn’t know how to tell you I’m dating a psycho.”

“Let’s not call girls psychos, Mark.”

“Sorry. We broke up yesterday. I’m still pretty mad.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t keep on living with someone who was going to do shady stuff like that. I mean, running to a reporter is one thing. Spreading lies is another.”

But I’m not so sure if Kendall’s original Tweet was a lie. I’m not sure if she was wrong. Hillary and I both suspected something was going to happen. Jessica has always played her cards close to her chest.

And maybe that’s okay.

“Mark, let me ask you something.”

“Am I fired? Oh, please just tell me if I’m fired.”

“Do you want to be fired?”

“No, but I understand if I am.”

“You’re not fired, Mark.” He breathes a sigh of relief. “But I do want to talk with you about the financials.” Mark cringes, and I know I’m in trouble.

“Do we have the resources to hire an assistant for Hillary?”

“May I speak honestly?”

“Please.”

“We don’t even have the resources to pay anyone after next month. You’re in trouble,

Toni. Clients have been dropping like flies lately. Anthony and I have tried to plug the holes as best we can, and I know you have a few big deals coming through the pipelines, but things are looking rough.”

And I think I know someone who can help.

“What would actually happen if I sold my company to Jessica?”

“Toni?”

“Theoretically speaking,” I tell him. “If I were to sell, or let’s say, merge with Northington Tech. What would happen?”

“A lot would happen.”

“In a good way?”

“Maybe,” Mark says. Then he nods. “Yeah.”

23

Jessica

When I find myself sitting in Piper Prince’s office again, she doesn’t look shocked to see me.

“Repeat clients keep me in business,” she explains. She smiles as she offers me a cup of coffee, which I accept. I shouldn’t. I’m probably heading straight for a heart attack if I keep drinking like this, but life is short, right?

“I guess that’s good for you,” I offer.

“It is good for me but bad for you. Let’s talk.”

“Did you have a chance to look over the article?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And I think you have a couple of options.”

“It’s not true,” I tell her before she can begin.

“What?”

“It’s not true. There’s no way that Toni did any of this.”

“Oh? Is that the way we want to spin this?”

“Yes,” I tell her. “Let me lay out the facts for you. Then you can give me your best advice.”

“Let’s go.”

“Toni and I dated. We broke up. I dated Kendall. We broke up. Kendall dated Mark. Now they have broken up.” I know this because Kendall left me thirty angry voicemails this morning, all of which I deleted. “I purchased Northington Tech because it was a good investment, but because it also put me in a position of power. I did plan to try to destroy Toni. I was angry and hurting, but I’m not now, and I won’t be moving forward with any of that.”

Piper is quiet as she absorbs all of this information.

“There’s no way that Toni coupled up with Kendall. She didn’t know we dated, for one thing, and I don’t think she even knows who her employees are dating, for another. If she did, she would have told me.” It definitely would have come up in conversation. After all, we spent the entire weekend together in bed. Things happen when you’re in bed together.

You talk.

You share your secrets.

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You get to know each other.

You fall in love.

And that's where I am, I realize. Toni and I haven't talked about all of our problems or secrets. We haven't made a joint statement of adoration or admiration. I don't know what she's planning on doing with her company or how she plans to grow, but I do know that I'm going to be here to help her every step of the way.

Piper sighs.

"This complicates things."

"Is the problem too big for you to handle?"

She grins. "Not at all. Trouble is what I live for."

24

Toni

There's a knock at the door.

It's late, and I'm watching a show with Max. For being a dog, he's a huge fan of trash TV. Right now we're watching a show about a bunch of doctors who all fall in love with each other, and even the ones who don't fall in love with each other end up sleeping together. It's kind of wild, actually. Are hospitals really like this?

There's only one person who would be coming over this late, and it's not Hillary. She's at home, probably stressing out about finding a new job. Mark is a terrible secret-keeper, so the fact that he was able to keep the fate of my company from me so long is actually kind of insane. I don't think he's going to try to keep it from her, though. He's probably told her we're going to collapse, so she's finding other jobs. I haven't figured out what I'm going to say to Jessica yet or how I'm going to approach things.

Thunder sounds, and I shake my head. It's storming outside. She shouldn't be out in this weather, yet when I pull open the door and find her standing here, completely soaked, my heart clenches. I don't say anything. She looks up at me and shakes her head.

"I was wrong."

"What?"

"I was wrong. About everything."

"What are you talking about? Come inside. It's wet."

"No," she shakes her head. "You need to hear this first."

"I'm not being nice. You're getting water in the house on the floors." I reach for her and tug her inside. "I know my home isn't perfect, but the flooring is pretty cool. I don't want to ruin it with all of your waterlogged clothes. Start stripping down. I'll get you a blanket."

"I'm trying to tell you something," she says.

"And I'm going to listen to everything you have to say as soon as you dry off."

Reluctantly, Jessica allows me to strip her out of her wet clothes. It's not an easy feat. Max doesn't care that we're here. He watches us, but doesn't bother moving. He knows Jessica isn't a threat, but he isn't sure if she's a friend. Not yet.

One day, maybe he'll love her the way I do.



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Once she's stripped down to her underwear and wrapped in a blanket, I let her talk.

"I was wrong," she says again.

"About?"

"I know you didn't start that rumor about me."

"Okay."

"But it's true."

I pause. She's never said it. I had a suspicion, but I couldn't be sure if it was true.

"It's true?"

"I was mad at you. I was hurting. I dated other people, but I still couldn't get you out of my head. You wrecked me, Toni. I was going to propose to you that night."

My heart feels like it's going to explode or burst, but not in a good way.

"You were?"

"I had the ring and everything."

It takes all of my self-control not to laugh.

“Me too,” I tell her.

“What?”

“I also had a ring. I was going to propose to you at dinner.”

“You’re joking.”

“Wish I was.”

“I didn’t give you a chance,” she says. “I was hurt that you pushed me away instead of talking to me. I thought you were ghosting me, but then I found out later your parents both died.”

“It was a hard time,” I agree.

“You were going through all of that alone.”

“I was.”

“And here I was, planning to try to destroy the one thing you had going for you.”

“What was your evil plan, exactly?”

“You know,” she says, blinking. “I was going to buy your company and stuff.”

“And what? Dissolve it?”

“Well, no.”

I shake my head. “Some villain you are. You were just going to buy my company and

make it better.”

“Well, no.”

“That’s what you do, Jessica. You find things and you make them better. That’s what you did with me, isn’t it?”

“I...what?”

“You broke my heart, but only because you loved me so much. I shouldn’t have hidden away when my parents died. I did, though. I hid away and didn’t want to talk to anyone because I was in so much pain that I couldn’t focus. Should I have done that? No. I should have talked with an emergency grief counselor and gotten my shit together. Instead, I pushed away the one person who cared about me. I pushed away you.”

She reaches for me, and I kiss her. I kiss Jessica because she’s everything to me. When I pull back, I just look at her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“And I’m sorry I spent two years hating you.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “I assume you read the news article.”

“About you and Kendall plotting against me together? I read it.”

“It’s all crap.”

“I’m aware.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve never even met Kendall.”

“I haven’t.”

“She’s not my favorite person.”

“Well, she’s single again. Mark, my accountant, dumped her.”

“You have an accountant named Mark?”

“We’re doing our best.”

“Is Mark, though?”

“No, actually, and that’s why I want to talk to you.”

“About?”

“I want to be with you,” I tell her.

“You do?”

“Even after all of this, I want you.”

“I want you, too,” she says. “I was really upset because I thought you adopted the dog I wanted from the shelter.”

“I adopted him to surprise you. I also bought the house to surprise you.”

“It would have been a good surprise,” she admits.

“I think I have another surprise that might be almost just as good.”

“What is it?”

“Remember how you said you wanted to buy my company?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think that offer still stands?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re in trouble financially. We never really got off the ground, and then I grew too quickly. We’re maxed out with how many workers we have, but we need more. We can’t keep growing until we hire more people, but I don’t have the money to hire people. I’m hoping you can help.”

“How do you want me to help?”

“I want you to buy my company,” I tell her. “And then I want Brett Swanson to write an article about it.”

25

Jessica

“That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Really?”

“No,” I shake my head. “I suppose I’ve heard crazier.”

“But what do you think of my idea?”

“Come here.” I let the blanket fall and I wrap my arms around her. I’m wet and cold in my bra and panties, and she’s dry and warm in pajama pants and a sweatshirt. Max looks up from the couch but decides I’m not a threat, so he turns back to the show.

Toni kisses me. This isn't the kiss of a woman who is lonely or sad. This is the kiss of a woman who knows exactly what she wants, and what she wants is me. I don't deserve her. I know that much. What I also know is that the two of us are about to embark on an incredible journey together.

I need her.

That's what's been missing from my life for the past two years.

Toni.

I've missed her laugh and her smile and her joy. I've missed everything about her. I've missed the way that she makes me feel, but mostly, I've missed the way I feel alive when we're together.

"Does that mean yes?" Toni asks.

"It means yes." I don't know what buying her company is going to look like, but we'll talk with an attorney tomorrow. Then we'll go meet with Piper again to figure out how we want to navigate moving forward. We're going to find a way to save both of our businesses and come out looking like heroes instead of losers. The world loves a good love story and ours is one that needs to be remembered.

"Thank you." I know she means this more than she's ever meant anything before.

"Just kiss me," I tell her, and she does.

She kisses me with an eagerness I love. It just makes me more and more excited to be here with her.

"Take off your clothes."



“You’re so bossy.”

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“Just do it.”

A second later she's naked. Another second later and I am, too. We glance over at Max. He seems to realize that we want to be alone because he makes a little whining sound and turns, trotting off to the bedroom. The couch is ours now. The living room is, too.

“I've been needing you,” Toni says.

“Not as much as I need you.”

She positions herself on her back on the couch, and I climb over her, kissing her. I straddle her, grinding against her, and I elicit a soft moan.

“I want you.”

“You're the best thing that's ever happened to me.”

“More.”

“Don't stop.”

Soon we're both breathless and panting. My hands are between her legs and hers are between mine, too. We each have our first orgasm, but we both want more. I know that Toni has a strapon because we've used it in the past, but I want something else tonight.

“Get your vibrator,” I tell her. She chuckles and reaches under the couch, producing a small pocket rocket. It’s purple.

“You keep this by the couch?”

“Always.”

“For when you’re thinking about me?”

She blushes.

“Always.”

“Show me how you like to come.”

I press the toy to her pussy, but wrap her hand around it so she’s controlling it. She holds it, rubbing the vibrator over her body as I kiss her mouth, teasing her. I lick her neck, her cheeks, her ear. I nip at her skin. I do all of this and more, and soon her pussy is throbbing, pushing upward.

“You’re so close, baby.”

“I know.”

“Come for me.”

“I want to.”

“Do it. Show me what a bad girl you can be.”

That’s it.

She comes apart, crying out my name as she comes. The orgasm washes over her in waves and her body pulses as she wrings every last ounce of pleasure from her own body. She collapses back on the couch, exhausted, but we're only just getting started. The two of us have all damn night and I don't plan on leaving until our number of orgasms is in the double digits.

"Your turn," she smiles at me, holding up the toy.

"How do you want me?"

I love masturbating for an audience. There's nothing quite as hot as this. The idea that I look good enough to get someone else excited just from looking at me is incredible. It's everything I've ever wanted and more. Toni considers what she wants for a second, and then she smiles.

"I want you to stand."

"Where?"

“Right there where I can see you.”

Sure enough, I stand beside the couch. She plays lazily with her nipples and pussy as I run the vibrator over my own nipples and down to the apex of my thighs. Once I find my clit, I don't move the vibrator away. I should, of course. I should give her a nice, long show, but I can feel the workings of my own orgasm coming to life and I want to come first.

“Oh, you look so good.”

“I'm glad you like what you see.” I'm out of breath. Aroused. Needy.

“You should definitely come for me, pretty girl.”

“I want to.”

“I've thought about you so much, Jessica.”

“Tell me.”

“I always touch myself thinking about you licking my pussy, fingering me. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to have sex with you in public. Would we get caught? Could we be sneaky?”

“We were pretty sneaky in the hotel meeting room.”

“So sneaky. Nobody saw. It's a good thing, too. If they'd walked in, they would have

seen my pussy.”

“They would have seen me licking it.”

“And me coming for you,” she groans. She’s close to another orgasm, but so am I. As I watch her playing with her clit and think about how damn hot she looked at the hotel, I find myself losing control, and I come.

I come for her.

I come for the night.

I come until my legs can’t hold me up anymore.

Then I come just a little bit more.

26

Toni

We wake up the next morning wrapped up in each other’s arms. Morning sunlight is streaming into the room and both of our phones are blowing up with messages. We need to go to work. We need to get a handle on what we’re going to do next, but right now, we just want to be here together with each other.

“Good morning,” I murmur as she opens her eyes.

“Good morning.”

“How’d you sleep?”

“So good.”

She doesn't know it yet, but I'm going to ask her to stay. Jessica's apartment truly is lovely, but so is the house I bought. After all, I bought this with her in mind. It's been a long time and things have changed so much since I purchased the home, but I've always dreamed of having a life here with her. I'd love to keep on dreaming.

“We should get going to work,” I tell her. My voice holds a certain level of reluctance. I don't really want to go. I want to stay here with her and hide away.

“Only because I love you,” she says. “And only because soon, we'll be going to the same building.”

“You really think this is going to work?” I ask her.

“Yes. I've got great lawyers. I told Patrick to schedule me an appointment for this morning, so I'll talk to my guy and start working on the paperwork.”

“And everyone can keep their jobs?”

“Everyone can keep their jobs,” she affirms.

“And we'll be able to grow and expand.”

“Slowly, and with time, but yes. I think absorbing your company into mine is going to be the best move. We'll make you a department, rather than a separate entity. You had a great idea and you've done a wonderful job. I'm excited to get to be a part of

what happens next.”

It’s not a failure. That’s what she’s saying. I’ve been working on my business for years, but it’s not a failure. Even though I’m not continuing forward with my own little brand, what Jessica is trying to tell me is that I did a good job. I worked hard and all of that hard work paid off. Now I have the chance to try something new. I get to pivot. I get to change.

And I get to keep doing what I was doing before, but with the option to grow because she’s going to help me.

No matter what comes next, she’s going to be by my side.

Jessica gets up and swaggers to the bathroom. She starts the shower and comes back. She leans in the doorframe, grinning, and gestures for me to join her.

“Come with me.”

“I will,” I tell her. “I’ll be right there.” She nods and smiles, turning back. I hear her climb into the shower and slowly, I manage to climb out of bed even though I don’t want to. What I want is to start the next chapter of my life. What I want is to have the chance to spend my time with Jessica.

The two of us could grow old together, I realize. We could have adventures together. We’re both in better places than we were two years ago, and I’m starting to realize that even though we broke up and got back together, maybe that, too, doesn’t indicate failure. Maybe it indicates a willingness to succeed even when the odds are stacked against us.

I reach for my phone and start swiping through notifications. When I get to Hillary’s texts, I don’t bother reading them. I just call her.



“Did you read the news today?” Hillary says. “It’s terrible. I really think this is the end.”

“Put away your resume file, Hillary.”

Silence.

Yeah, I knew she was working on her resume. I had a feeling my assistant, whom I love, was thinking about how she was going to survive once my company imploded, but she doesn’t have to do that anymore. Jessica is going to help me move forward in more ways than one. The two of us may have had a choppy road leading to this point, but we’re a united front now. We’re going to move forward together. It’ll be one day at a time, one step at a time, but I believe in us.

“What?”

“You don’t need to apply for other jobs.”

“But I...who said...I’m not.” I hear the hint of steel in her voice, but I know she’s lying. Well, maybe she’s technically telling the truth, but there’s no way Hillary really thinks I’m buying what she’s selling.

“You don’t need to apply for other jobs because we aren’t dissolving.”

“What are you talking about? The news says...well, it says a lot of things.”

“And it’s almost all wrong.”

“We aren’t being sold?”

“We are,” I tell her. “But you’re keeping your job and you’re getting an assistant.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:11 pm*

“What?” I can practically hear the wheels turning in her head and I need to brace myself for the many questions she’s going to have, but right now, what I need most of all is to go hop in the shower with my wonderful partner, my girlfriend, my love.

“I’ll explain everything when I get to the office,” I tell her. “Don’t tell anyone. I’m working out the details, but I’m going to have more answers for you later today.”

“Are you serious?”

“More than serious,” I tell her. I end the call then, slide out of bed, and make my way toward the bathroom. The door is closed, and I can hear her singing. Oh, I’ve missed this sound. Quietly, I push the door open and step inside. The bathroom is already steamy, and Jessica stops singing long enough to peek her head out of the shower.

“There you are, beautiful. Are you getting in?” She smiles at me with a hopefulness I haven’t seen in a very long time, and with a smile that reflects how happy I am, too.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “I’ll be right in.”

### Epilogue

#### Hillary

When I was a little girl, I thought that everyone was offered a chance to fall in love. The universe was pretty, I thought, and the world was bright. I didn’t know just how hard things could really be, and while I love working for Toni, the truth is that I want what she has with Jessica. I want the passion. I want the intrigue. I was someone to

feel so excited to see me that they feel like they're going to throw up – you know, in a good way.

So after work, I head back to my tiny little apartment, sit down in the middle of my futon, and start swiping. It's not long before I find someone who matches with me. It's an instant thing, so she must have swiped on me recently. Maybe it was a day ago or a week ago, I don't know. The girl has long, red hair that flows over her shoulder. She also seems like she has the best smile I've ever seen in my life. She's sweet, beautiful, and is wearing combat boots in almost every single one of her pictures.

I find myself completely entranced, so I don't wait to send her a message. Her profile says she likes jokes, so I try to open with one that's clever. She responds right away.

And that's it.

It's a hit.

We spend the entire night talking and even end up on the phone together at one point. I feel like I absolutely know her. I feel like we're falling for each other right now.

Reluctantly, I finally end the call and we switch back to texting.

"I'd love to see you," I tell her. "Tomorrow?"

"I'm starting a new job tomorrow," she admits. "But maybe we could meet after work. Drinks?"

"Absolutely. Where's your job? Maybe we can meet in the middle."

"It's at Northington Tech," she tells me. "Do you know it?"

My blood runs cold as I realize that she's not only talking about the company where I

work, but that she's the new hire we're bringing in tomorrow. I didn't attend any of the hiring meetings because I was out sick. I let Toni and Jessica handle all of that. They assured me that they'd found me the perfect person to work with me, and I believed them, but...

But now I'm in trouble.