



# Marrying the Billionaire

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** -Serena- Marrying the man of your dreams after crushing on him for the last decade should be cause for celebration. So why am I crying alone in the honeymoon suite on my wedding night? Because there's just one problem – it's a fake marriage. Purely for appearances as part of a business deal between our fathers' companies. But I can't sit idly by pretending this is only a platonic relationship, especially as sparks begin to fly between us. So what will I have to do to convince my stoic Prince Charming I want him for real? And what will I risk along the way?

-Archer- The plan is simple – act like a husband in love publicly after I foolishly got myself involved in this fake marriage, and behind closed doors keep things separate. But the longer we continue this charade attending events and staging selfies, the more I'm unsure what's fake and what's not, especially when things start to heat up in private. As the successor to my father's billion dollar company, work has been my life. Focusing on my job has never been harder, though, when there's a temptress living in my guest bedroom. What are the chances this business deal of a marriage could turn into the real thing? The last person I ever expected to fall for is... my wife.

**Total Pages (Source):** 112

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:19 am*

Serena

“I can’t do this,” Gabriel says, his voice echoing off the walls of the ballroom.

If everyone’s attention wasn’t on us already, it definitely is now.

I stare at my fiancé from across the altar, but he refuses to meet my eye, instead looking slightly over my shoulder. Not that I blame him. If I was announcing I’m not marrying someone in front of four hundred plus people, I wouldn’t want to look them in the eye either.

“You can’t?” the minister whispers, clearly at a loss on how to proceed.

“No.” Gabriel turns his head slightly, finally looking at me, the resoluteness in his gaze easing something within me. After all that heartache, all that worry that was making me literally sick to my stomach, I’m... free.

Now don’t get me wrong, Gabriel Bishop seems like a nice enough guy, but I barely know him. He’s not the reason I agreed to this business deal of a marriage to begin with.

His brother is.

My gaze cuts away from my fiancé’s face to the man standing behind him. The best man. His brother.

Archer Bishop.

Two years older than me and the star of my teenage fantasies back when we both attended Redmond Prep a decade ago, time has been kind to him, only growing more handsome with age in that way men do. Dark hair brushed back neatly off his face. Strong jaw accentuating full lips. Piercing blue eyes... suddenly turned on me.

Oh God, everyone's looking, aren't they? I glance out into the crowd, immediately regretting my decision as I realize people are no longer staring just because I'm the bride, but pointing too. Whispering to each other, eyes filled with pity. For me. The girl who's getting dumped at the altar.

The relief from earlier at Gabriel's announcement twists in my stomach, dragging me down, my arms prickling with dozens of invisible pins and needles as a disquieting wave washes over me.

My hands twist together and I wish I still had my bouquet to hide the way they're trembling. The way my knees are barely holding me up. The way my back seems to hunch forward instinctively.

"He can't marry her... because I'm in love with her."

My gaze flies up to meet Archer's, steady on mine, an embarrassingly loud gasp escaping me. Did I hear him right? Or am I in some kind of mental state of shock dreaming up a fantasy scenario to get me through the next few minutes?

But as he switches places with his brother, the minister backtracking through the script, it doesn't seem like a dream as he repeats the vows, his deep, "I do," sending a rush of warmth through me, scattering the anxiety away.

I stand in a daze, barely hearing the words I'm repeating myself, unable to process exactly what's happening right now. Am I really marrying this man? And it turns out he... loves me?

He reaches into his breast pocket, pulling out two wedding bands, and motions for me to take the larger one. I blink rapidly, my brain taking a moment to catch up, and I carefully accept it from him, my only thought that this was originally meant for Gabriel. Will it even fit him?

“These rings are a symbol of your union. An unending journey you are about to embark on together,” the minister says as Archer slips the band over my left ring finger, his hand warm and steady where it briefly touches mine.

I nearly drop his ring with how badly my hands are shaking, and have to pause and regroup before I manage to get it on him.

He doesn't seem to judge me for my nervousness, silent as the minister continues speaking, and I'm almost calm until we're pronounced as husband and wife, those infamous you may now kiss the bride words making my stomach rise once again.

My hands grip the skirt of my dress at my sides, guilt momentarily flooding me as I realize I've torn the intricate beading. But I can't worry about that now because the man I've dreamt about for the last decade is bending down to kiss me.

This is it. The moment I've been waiting for. If I could speak to my younger self, I'd tell teenage Serena not to give up hope. It'll happen someday.

But a chaste peck on the lips is all I receive for my years of anticipation. I swear I've gotten more tongue action from dogs at the animal shelter than that.

It's probably just because we're in front of all these people. Archer is a reserved guy. And it would be tacky to get hot and heavy when I was literally supposed to marry his brother five minutes ago. That has to be it.

The recessional starts and the wedding planner, Mackenzie, thankfully has the

presence of mind to give me my bouquet, my brain still in a fog as Archer holds his arm out to me and I loop my hand through the crook of his elbow, the fabric of his navy suit luxuriously soft.

The growing buzz of excitement around us surges in volume as we walk down the aisle, until I can barely hear myself think. The only thing I'm able to focus on is that steady chant in my head. He loves me. He loves me. He loves me.

Me. Serena Montague. I honestly wasn't sure he knew I existed. But maybe all this pining for him in secret was mutual after all. He certainly did a good job hiding it. Even I didn't know.

I'm on cloud nine as we're whisked away by the photographer to take pictures together, his body close to mine, a subtle spice emanating from him that must be his cologne. I inhale, drunk on his presence, on the knowledge that this man is my husband.

## Page 2

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We're too busy posing to speak privately, and when we're finally finished, Mackenzie's there to guide us over to the tail end of the cocktail hour. We're almost immediately bombarded by all sorts of well wishers with thinly veiled requests for more information about this strange turn of events. Archer keeps tight-lipped, refusing to indulge their morbid curiosity, and I take his lead, mostly because I have no clue how to respond. This is all a happy surprise for me too.

When everyone takes their seats for dinner, I realize my cheeks are aching from smiling so much. The food is to die for, our first dance perfection as I gently sway in Archer's arms, the bouquet toss thrilling as a woman I've never met whoops and hollers in delight after catching it. Mackenzie's there by my side directing us as we cut the cake, the feel of my husband's hand warm on top of my own. He holds his fork out to me and I take a bite, a smile overtaking my face at his romantic gesture.

How could I have missed any sign from him that he felt this way about me? Did he not want to tip Gabriel off? But then why not say something back when the engagement first started? I assumed it was a family decision.

It all still seems so unreal. This honorable, kind, brilliant, insanely attractive man is mine. My husband.

He takes my arm at the end of the night, leading me out of the reception and toward the elevators. Up on the thirty-third floor is the honeymoon suite. Where Archer and I... A rush of goosebumps races across my skin at what's to come. We've been surrounded by people the entire time, unable to have a private conversation. Once we're alone, maybe he'll want to give me a proper kiss. One that would have been entirely inappropriate at the altar.

I hold my hand over my stomach as we ascend, containing the butterflies trapped there, biting my lip so he won't see the goofy smile that wants to break through. Almost time now.

The elevator dings upon our arrival, room 3301 directly in front of us as the metal doors slide open. I turn to him, expecting him to lift me in his arms and carry me bridal style into the room, but he merely pulls the key card out of his pocket and swipes it, holding it open for me, his face impassive.

Okay, maybe he doesn't know about that tradition.

I squeeze the tulle layers of my gown through the doorway, eyeing him as he passes by me to slump down in a chair in the corner. He sighs as he scrubs a palm over his jaw, weariness radiating off him.

I stand awkwardly in the middle of the room as he continues to ignore me, staring down at his glossy shoes. Shouldn't we be kissing already?

He fumbles at his neck to loosen his tie, leaning forward to remove his jacket next, his shoulders broad and defined even through his dress shirt. I release a breath, my stomach easing. He's just getting comfortable before we get to the good stuff.

But when he pulls out his phone and starts scrolling, the butterflies from earlier sink.

"I'll wait around for a bit and slip out a back exit once it's died down."

Um, what now?

"You're an amazing actress by the way. I don't think anyone suspected."

My knees suddenly give and I stagger over to the bed, barely reaching it in time. If he

thought I was acting, does that mean... he's acting?

"You said you loved me." I can't help how small my voice sounds, how pathetic. I'm not capable of mustering anything stronger it seems.

"It's the only thing I could think of in the moment," he says distractedly, attention still focused on his phone. "I was just trying to recover the situation. Dad really wants this deal to go through."

"Right," I choke out, a weight settling in my chest. I try to take a deep breath, but the heaviness spreads, pushing my shoulders down, compressing my lungs. It's all I can do not to let out the sob that's building inside.

"Are you okay?"

I glance up, realizing his focus is finally on me, right when I least want it. I rub at my breastbone, then make a motion toward my back. "Can you, um, loosen these corset strings? I can't breathe."

"Yeah, sure."

He settles in behind me on the bed, his breath warm against the nape of my neck. But instead of the sensation leaving a pleasant wash of shivers racing through me, it's only more fuel for the icy dread creeping out from my chest.

When my dress is loose enough to take a deeper breath, I stand, holding the bodice up with one hand. "If you'll excuse me," I murmur, heading toward the bathroom.

I flip on the fluorescent light and accompanying exhaust fan, the humming drone drowning out the sound of my gasps as I brace my palms on the counter.

It was all an act? A way to preserve this asinine business deal our fathers have arranged? I still don't even fully understand why Dad insisted on it to begin with.

"Do you need help?" Archer's deep voice calls through the door. "With your dress? I won't look."

A mirthless chuckle escapes me. What a time to be a gentleman.

"I'm fine."

Outwardly, everything is perfect. I just married a man who's set to inherit an insane amount of wealth one day. Who's already the CFO of his father's billion dollar company. The guy I had a raging crush on throughout high school. The one I've tried to forget about over the last decade.

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And someone who apparently is following the same deal me and his brother had arranged. A marriage in name only for the sake of our fathers' companies.

How did I not pick up on that? Am I really that delusional?

I take a few calming breaths, running my fingers carefully underneath my eyes to wipe away any stray tears before opening the door a sliver. "I'm going to take a bath. You can..." I swallow heavily, willing my voice not to shake. "You can leave whenever." If I'm around him much longer, I might start blubbing on his shoulder.

"I'm meeting with my father tomorrow. We'll come up with a game plan for the curveball I threw everyone."

I nod, not that he can even see me through the slight crack in the door.

"And I'm sorry. I know you were supposed to marry-"

"It's fine," I interrupt him. "I'll talk to you tomorrow." I rest my forehead against the door frame, just wanting to escape this situation already. That's what I've always been good at. Running away.

I close the door and plug the drain to the bathtub, turning on the tap. Laid out on the edge of the sparkling white tub is an assortment of high end toiletries, and I grab the bubble bath bottle, twisting off the top to dump it in. It takes me a minute to wiggle out of my dress and peel off my bridal lingerie, each layer I shed releasing a weight from me. I undo the complicated braid around the crown of my head, finger combing it out the best I can, and sink into the hot water, letting the jasmine scented bath

soothe the tangle of my mind.

I'm married. To a man who doesn't want to be married to me.

It's no different from the situation I expected as of this morning when I thought I'd be marrying his brother, but knowing it's Archer I won't have a true marriage with somehow seems infinitely worse.

I was resigned to a married on paper but completely separate lives arrangement with Gabriel, but I don't want that anymore. Now that I have Archer, I want the real deal.

Tonight, he'd radiated that same confidence and authority I remembered from high school, grown only stronger with time and experience. He'd been gracious with guests, accommodating to me as I'd trampled over his feet dancing, patient as he pretended to be in love. And even if it wasn't real, he's still everything I've ever wanted.

My eyes flutter shut, a hundred different scenarios racing through my mind, but in the end, it all boils down to one thing as a resolution settles upon me.

If I want a real marriage... I'll have to make it one.

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Archer

What the hell am I going to do?

I wipe the sweat off my face with a towel, trying to concentrate on my last half mile, but it's no use. My focus is shot.

I have bigger things to worry about today than my normal gym routine anyway.

I shut off the treadmill, not bothering to cool down, and head into the bathroom to take a quick shower and then into the kitchen, where the aroma of fresh coffee permeates the air.

My housekeeper, Lori, stands at the stove, flipping bacon in a skillet, her gaze flicking up to meet mine. "You're done early. You'll have to give me a few more minutes before it's ready."

"You're fine." I pour a cup, savoring the dark roast, letting my mind rest for a moment.

"How was the wedding last night?"

I nearly choke on my next sip, pounding on my chest till it goes down. "You didn't hear?"

She pauses in turning over a slice of bacon. "Hear what?"

“I’m... married.” The phrase sounds foreign, the feel of it on my lips unnatural.

Her only reaction is a slight raise of her brows. “Wasn’t it your brother that was doing that?”

I sink down onto one of the bar stools, the cool metal chilling me slightly. “Yeah.”

“And is she invisible or something?”

“What?”

“Where is she?”

I shrug. “At her apartment, I guess.”

“You got married and you lost your wife already?”

“I didn’t lose her, I-” I stop myself, tamping down the rising emotion when I notice her smirk. She’s as bad as Gabriel trying to get a rise out of me. “I stepped in for my brother when he tried to call off the wedding at the altar. The marriage is in name only.”

I trust Lori not to tell anyone the truth. She’s like family at this point. Besides, there’s no way Serena and I could keep up the ruse at home too. Wait, is she going to live here? We never actually discussed anything like that.

“I wasn’t aware you’d become a soap opera character.”

I roll my eyes.

“I mean, congratulations.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, a brief flashback running through me from last night accepting a never ending stream of well wishers. More like nosy bastards.

“So when do I get to meet the lucky lady?”

I clear my throat, realizing I don’t even have Serena’s phone number. For that matter, does she know where I live?

“Soon,” I answer, adding it to my mental list of things to do.

She plates the bacon and a trio of buckwheat pancakes in front of me, a tall glass filled with my matcha protein smoothie next to it.

I dig in, scratching at the back of my neck as I take the first few bites. I don’t even know my own wife’s phone number. How are we going to get through convincing everyone we’re a legitimate couple? The whole point of my inane gesture yesterday at the altar was to save the family from embarrassment, not create more of it.

I can already hear Dad quoting some tabloid article to me speculating about the state of my relationship. If we’re not seen out together, people will question if it was all a publicity stunt. He’ll claim the public can’t trust us anymore, stock will plummet, and so on and so forth until it ends with us bankrupt and laughingstocks. I know the way his mind works and the conclusions he’ll jump to. The need for perfection and inability to accept mistakes. I’ve done well over the years to use that knowledge to my advantage and keep ahead of the game.

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I'll just have to do the same now.

I tap out a quick text to Vivian, my father's secretary, to get me Serena's number ASAP. I'd ask my own assistant, but it's easier not to open that can of worms until Monday.

"You want me to make you lunch today?"

"No. I'm meeting Connor later."

"Steak and cauliflower rice for dinner tonight?"

"Sounds good."

"All right, I'm getting started on laundry then. See you tomorrow morning."

She exits the kitchen and I take a long draw from my smoothie, contemplating how exactly I've found myself in this mess. Sure, Gabriel said he wasn't into this girl, but goddamn. What prompted him to call the wedding off at the worst possible time? And just when it seemed like we were starting to understand each other a little better too.

I polish off the rest of my meal and head into my home office to catch up on some things before the workweek starts tomorrow, surfacing hours later when I realize I'm running late to meet my brother for lunch.

I stride into the restaurant only a few minutes after I was supposed to, spotting

Connor's dark head at one of the back tables, ignoring the curious glances of other diners as I pass by.

"Archer," he grins when he spots me, standing and giving me a bone-crushing hug. I return it cautiously, a bit surprised since he didn't hug me at the rehearsal dinner Friday night. Then again, Gabriel beat me to it.

"When do you fly back?"

"Tonight. Seventeen straight hours of fun."

I wince, thankful once more Dad sent my youngest brother to the Philippines to oversee our business interests there rather than me.

Taking a seat, I pick up a menu, squinting to see what they have. Why do they make the print on these so damn small?

"Oh, there he is."

I glance up, following Connor's gaze to find Gabriel winding his way through the tables to our spot, a frown settling over my mouth.

"He's our brother," he whispers.

I wipe my face clear, his gentle chastisement leaving an unsettled sensation in my stomach. "He was also just disowned by Dad."

"He wasn't serious about that."

"Oh, he was," Gabriel says, pulling out a chair to sit down. "If we didn't already have plans, I'd have no way to say goodbye."

“What?”

“He had his goons take my phone, along with everything else.”

Connor’s eyes widen in surprise, but the news isn’t shocking to me. I heard their Gabriel screws this, so help mespiel from Dad more than once over the last month, enumerating the many things he’d take from him. To be honest, I was a little alarmed with how vindictive he’d sounded. Gabriel’s been better lately, lightyears away from the angry teen after-

Nope, not thinking about that.

“He actually took your stuff?” Connor asks. “So, what, you’re just sitting in an empty apartment?”

“There is no apartment,” I say softly when Gabriel merely looks down at the table. “He was evicted. Dad wasn’t bluffing. He-” I clear my throat. “He said he only has two sons now.”

Tensions were running high when he declared that, though, during a brief moment he pulled me aside at the reception. Maybe his anger’s reduced some in the light of day.

Gabriel gives a rueful smile. “Think he’ll let me keep the last name Bishop?”

Connor cracks a grin, but I’m not exactly in the mood for jokes. He’s put me in a hell of an awkward position.

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His mirth fades when he realizes I'm unamused. "Thank you, Archer. I mean that sincerely." He folds his hands in front of him, glancing down briefly before meeting my gaze. "You stepped up making sure the deal went through and saved Serena a lot of embarrassment. And I'm going to do what I can, so there's as little backlash as possible."

I take a sip of water as the server finally comes by to fill our glasses and put bread on the table, silently acknowledging my thanks, then order, waiting till we're alone to speak again.

"I actually have a meeting with Dad about next steps after this."

Gabriel blows out a breath. "Too bad I'll have to miss that."

"So... we're good then?" Connor glances between the two of us, ever the peacekeeper.

I give a single nod, ready to put this behind us. "Who are you staying with?" I may not be completely happy with him right now, but he's still my brother.

"Don't worry about it."

"Is it that woman you told me about?"

We both turn heads toward Connor, who immediately goes sheepish as Gabriel shoots a death glare at him.

“I said don’t worry about it,” he grits out.

My eyes flick between the two of them. “You were seeing someone else the whole time?”

“No,” he insists, running a hand through his dark hair, tugging at the ends. “Listen, I have to go.”

“Sit down.”

He pauses from halfway out of his chair and plops back down, heaving a long sigh.

“You can trust Archer,” Connor murmurs, guilt all over his face from spilling the beans about whatever secret this is they’re in on together.

Gabriel purses his lips, staring at his untouched glass in front of him. “I fell in love with someone else after Serena and I became engaged. We didn’t mean for it to happen, but it did.”

I suck in a breath. He’s always been more cavalier in his dating life than me, but he’s never mentioned love. Never even dated anyone more than a week or two as far as I know.

“Don’t ask me who. Please.”

“I won’t snitch to Dad if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“There’d be consequences,” he says in a low voice. “I’m not telling anyone until it’s safer.”

“Safer?” Is this woman in the witness protection program or something?

“Just... until some time has passed. I’m not excluding you, I promise.”

I nod, sensing his resoluteness. Maybe the less I know, the better. Deniable plausibility if Dad questions me about it.

“I never wanted to put you in an awkward position - either of you. But this is something I had to do. And honestly, I’m fine. More than that actually. I’m... alive.”

He smiles, some kind of inner peace radiating from him I’ve never seen.

It’s weird.

“Well, if you need somewhere else to stay, you can always use my place,” Connor says, dipping a hunk of bread in the bowl of olive oil and herb mixture on the middle of the table. “Dad doesn’t have to know.”

“Didn’t you just hear Archer? Dad wasn’t bluffing when he said he’ll take everything away. I don’t want anything from either of you.”

A small part of me eases at his words. I was half afraid when he walked in he’d ask for a handout, dreading having to deny him. I may not always have been the best brother, but the recent interactions we’ve had over the last month during his wedding planning seem to have... changed something between us.

But it’s not only a matter of me or Connor snitching. Dad has eyes everywhere.

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“I did manage to grab a few things out of my apartment unnoticed.” He reaches in his pocket to extract a diamond ring set in a gold band, which he places carefully on the table.

I tug at the neck of my shirt, the air in the restaurant unbearably thick.

“Is that...?” Connor asks, wonder in his voice.

“I didn’t intend to give Serena this. She didn’t even want a ring from me at all. But I thought you might-”

“No,” I choke out. “Excuse me.”

I push back from the table, my chair screeching loud enough to cause several surrounding diners to look at me in alarm. Running a hand down the buttons of my Oxford shirt, I stride toward the bathroom, catching sight of my pale face in the mirror. Fuck.

I wash my hands, scrubbing harder than necessary, giving myself time to calm down. How did he even get Mom’s ring? I thought they buried her with that.

I take a long inhale through my nose and hold it for a count of five, then exhale slowly, repeating the process till I’m centered.

I avoid catching anyone’s eye as I make my way back to the table, and note that the ring is absent now, probably tucked away in Gabriel’s pocket. Good. That’s where it belongs. He should give it to whoever this woman is he’s in love with. Something

like that doesn't belong anywhere near this business deal of a marriage.

"Tell us what you have going on in the Philippines," I request of Connor as I take a seat, even though he already spoke of it at the rehearsal dinner.

He glances between me and Gabriel before letting loose an easy grin, proceeding to regale us with a few new stories that are a bit more risqué than the ones we heard previously.

The tension in my shoulders lessens, and I peek over at Gabriel to find his gaze on me, sharper than I'd like. My muscles tighten back up, but he remains silent, eventually turning his attention to Connor.

We settle into our familiar dynamic as lunch goes on, Gabriel the self-deprecating middle child, Connor the jovial, lighthearted baby. And me, the watchful eldest brother, a weight of responsibility on my shoulders these two will never understand.

I make my excuses an hour later to get to my meeting with Dad, hugging both my brothers before leaving. There's a ready made reason for embracing Connor. With him being overseas, who knows when I'll see him again?

But Gabriel? The one I hardly see despite living so close? The one I've come to realize I don't know as well as I thought I did? The one I failed when Mom-

My body is stiff at first as my middle brother's arms encircle me, but soon eases as he seems to sense what I can't outright say.

"Thanks, Archie," he whispers, a broad grin on his face as he lets go of me.

I roll my eyes, clearing my throat loudly. "I'll see you... sometime." It's not like he'll be around the office. Dad might even have him banned from there.

“Sometime,” he agrees, giving me a mock salute.

I meet James, my driver, at the curb, checking my email on my phone in the backseat as we drive the short distance to Bishop Industries. We’re almost there when a text comes through from Vivian with Serena’s number, my stomach sinking at the reminder that I need to call her.

My finger hesitates over the green phone icon on the screen, recalling how we parted last night. She told me I could leave whenever, her tone begging me to go. I know I wasn’t her first choice, but I hoped we could at least be civil to one another.

Best to rip it off like a band-aid then, bringing the cell up to my ear.

“Serena, hi,” I say as she answers. “It’s, uh, Archer.” I swallow, my throat suddenly parched.

“Hi.” Her voice is sweet, the same way it was last night thanking guests for coming to the wedding. Her green eyes had sparkled then, her lithe body leaning into me, the picture of a woman in love. A one-eighty from how it’d been in the hotel room afterward, muscles rigid, back hunched.

I shake my head to clear it. Why am I dwelling on that? “Are you able to meet me at Bishop Industries now? I’m heading into a meeting with my dad about next steps.”

“I’m across town. I just left the hotel.”

“Right.” I tap my thumb against my knee, flicking a piece of lint off my pants. “Well, we should probably go over some ground rules soon.”

“Rules?”

“You know, expectations we have of each other and the... situation.”

There’s silence from the other end, and I’m just about to repeat myself when she finally whispers, “Okay.”

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I rub my temple, wishing I could see her to gauge what she's thinking. "Can you come over to my place tonight? Maybe around seven?"

"I'd like that." There's that sweetness again. How can she switch between that and cold dismissal so easily?

"We, uh, never discussed living arrangements-"

"I want to live with you," she interrupts in a rush, leaving me blinking. "I mean, it wouldn't seem like we're in love if we lived separately in the same city."

"That makes sense," I manage to get out, my world abruptly shifting. Not only married but now living with a woman I barely know. At least I have a guest room. "When do you think you'll move in?"

"I'll need to go through my stuff and decide what I want to keep and get rid of. I'm assuming it's okay to bring some things with me?"

"Yeah, of course." My head spins, already jumping ahead to the logistics of accommodating her belongings and making space in the apartment.

"Maybe a couple weeks then?"

"Take as much time as you need." Seriously.

"Thank you."

“I’m on the top floor of Bishop Plaza. I’ll let the doorman know to expect you.”

“Okay.”

There’s an awkward pause as my mind blanks on what to say. Everything is moving so fast.

James pulls up to the curb and I jump on the opportunity to tell her I have to go, relief settling over me as I end the call.

The building’s almost empty with it being a Sunday, but Bishop Industries is never fully closed. Dad expects twenty-four seven performance from his employees.

“The will’s been changed,” he states upon my arrival, his stare as icy as ever. “You and Connor will split the inheritance originally meant for Gabriel.”

I carefully take the seat across from him, the hard back digging into my spine. “You might not want to be so hasty-”

“Like I told you last night, I only have two sons now.”

So it seems time hasn’t lessened his anger.

I clasp my hands in front of me. “It’s your decision.” That’s become my go-to phrase over the years when I privately disagree with him. He’s not the type to take verbal dissent well.

“Has he reached out to you? Asked for money? A place to stay?” The energy surrounding him is almost manic, so different from his normal severe demeanor.

“He met Connor and me for lunch just now.” There’s no way I can lie to him. It’d be

too easy for a photograph on some gossip site to pop up proving me wrong. “But he made it very clear he wouldn’t ask anything of us.”

The grooves next to his mouth deepen, almost like he’s displeased that Gabriel is following the stipulations he set. “Why are you meeting with him? Didn’t I just say he’s not a part of this family?”

I take a moment to collect my thoughts, but ultimately decide I can’t keep this from him. “Whether or not he’s your son, Gabriel’s still my brother.” I’m twenty-nine years old. It’s not his place to tell me who I can and can’t see. “But I promise not to financially help him.”

His lips thin. “And you understand the consequences if you do?”

Jesus Christ, I just said I wouldn’t help him, didn’t I? I’d never say that aloud to him, though. That was Gabriel’s problem. He never learned when to keep his mouth shut around Dad.

I nod. “So about this marriage...”

His face pinches even more. “This whole thing is a clusterfuck. I’ve had the PR team on it all morning, but they’ve barely come up with anything useful.” I don’t point out it’s Sunday and they’re probably unhappy to work on the weekend. “You’re my successor. You need someone by your side with the right image, the right connections.”

Her father owns a successful multi-million dollar tech company. What’s not to like? Besides, this is the first I’m hearing about needing a certain type of woman. If anything, Dad’s always discouraged me from dating. There are too many money-hungry women out there, according to him.

“I thought I was doing what you’d want. I kept our end of the bargain with Montague.”

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His gaze narrows. “And now it looks like you were going behind your brother’s back having an affair with her.”

I fight the instinct to sputter. Any sign of weakness in front of Dad is grounds for punishment. Some lessons from childhood never leave you, no matter how old you are.

“I’ve spoken to Gabriel. He says he’ll work with us to minimize backlash.”

He stabs his finger against his polished oak desk. “He betrayed us.”

“If I’m seen out with him,” I continue, “it’ll help. Show there’s no animosity, no resentment on his part.”

“Send it to PR,” he grumbles, calming down. “See how they can spin it.”

“Serena’s moving into my apartment soon, we’ll attend some public outings together, some charity events. Enough to assure people we’re in... love.” The word leaves a funny taste in my mouth.

He sighs, folding his hands over his stomach. “I’ll have a judge I know change the marriage license. Make it legal.” He leans forward and presses the intercom button on his phone. “Vivian, send Angelina in.”

I guess that means we’re done with any personal conversation.

Our public relations expert comes in and briefs us on what her team has come up

with, marketing us as star-crossed lovers. And in opposition to how Gabriel and Serena were labeled as an intensely private couple due to a lack of photos of the two of them together, her and I need to be a splashy, seen all about town pair, unable to hide our love for one another.

I swallow, unsure how well I can pull this off. Besides having no formal acting skills, I work at least sixty hours a week. I don't have time to gallivant all across New York pretending to be in love.

But I was the one who offered myself up. I deserve this.

Now to just get Serena on board.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:20 am*

Serena

I hang up my phone and stow it in my purse, allowing myself a small smile. Maybe all hope isn't lost. Yes, our conversation had been a little awkward, but at least Archer is trying. Not because of me specifically - I'm not that delusional anymore - but for his wife and this situation we've found ourselves in.

After a relapse this morning moping in the honeymoon suite until the late check-out, I'm now resolved to doing everything I can to make this marriage a true one. I just need to show him how amazing of a wife I'll be. Easy, right?

Even though I've never been in a long-term relationship. Or have the first clue about his interests, his likes and dislikes, how he spends his days...

I take a deep breath, then another, until the panic recedes. I can do this. I have a plan. And I've already made progress. I'm moving into his place. Item one on my checklist accomplished.

I step out of the cab in front of my building and lug my overnight bag over my shoulder, thankful that Mackenzie thought to pack it for me. Otherwise, I'd be coming home in a wedding dress. At least the concierge at the hotel agreed to hold it for me until I can figure out what to do with it. It's not like I plan on wearing it again.

"Miss Montague," Raul greets me as I enter my building, holding the door open. "Your father is upstairs."

My father? I did what he asked and married into the Bishop family. What more does

he want?

“Thank you,” I murmur as he calls the elevator for me, appreciating the heads up.

I’ve composed myself by the time I reach my apartment, finding Julia, my father’s personal assistant, and a man I don’t recognize along with Dad.

His lips purse for a moment, his telltale sign of annoyance, before he clears his face, pasting on a jovial smile. “Sweetheart,” he booms, crossing the living room to give me a brief hug.

I return it, wishing he’d explain himself, but he merely looks at me, waiting for me to initiate. “What brings you by?” If I were to word the question in any kind of accusatory way, likewhy are you in my apartment unannounced without my permission, I’d hear no end of it.

“Well, now that you’re married, it’s time to sell this place.”

I blink, unsure I heard him right. “Excuse me?”

The grin briefly slides from his face, the message clear that he doesn’t appreciate my tone, but I honestly can’t help it. He just said he’s selling my home.

“I planned on staying here after my marriage.” He doesn’t know that I changed my mind after marrying a different brother.

He casually waves off my statement. “Nonsense. The Bishops have plenty of real estate in the city. If you don’t want to live with Archer, they can find somewhere else for you.”

“Or I could just stay in the apartment I’ve lived in for the last five years.” The words

slip out unbidden, but in my defense, I thought it was mine. He bought me this place after I graduated from college. I'd assumed he'd gifted it to me, but apparently, I was wrong in that assumption.

"Don't make a scene," he grits out, his smile so at odds with his tone as he pulls me over to the corner away from where the unknown man is measuring my living room from wall to wall and Julia is taking photos of my framed art.

"I'm not," I whisper, "but you've caught me off guard here."

"Sweetie, I can't keep paying your way. You're a grown woman."

I instinctively shrink back. "I just thought-"

"You thought what? You'd get to use Daddy's credit card forever?"

My tongue seems to swell, unable to form any defense. He's acting like I spend frivolously. The only thing I generally pay extra for is clothing, but that's because he insists I need a new dress for each event I attend. Heaven forbid I'm photographed in the same outfit twice.

His face softens, temper from just a moment ago gone. "Come on. I'll even let you keep some things from your closet."

Somethings? Implying that my clothes aren't my own. I wasn't aware all these conditions existed.

I follow him mutely to my bedroom, which appears to have been ravaged by wolves by the way everything is strewn about. Julia enters behind me, giving me a sympathetic smile.

There are sticky notes with numbers on all my belongings, and it's not until I realize the designer items have higher numbers that I make the connection they've appraised the perceived worth of all my things. He's not just selling my apartment, but everything in it too.

Then again, he essentially sold me off to the Bishops. And I'm still unsure as to why that stipulation was even part of the deal. Dad has plenty of connections without needing Harold Bishop's too. But you don't tell Dad no.

Ever.

## Page 11

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He motions to a pile of clothing on the bed and looking closely at them, I realize they're dresses I picked up on a whim when out at places like Target. Apparently, these aren't worth enough to resell or auction or whatever he's doing.

Julia packs them in a suitcase for me, which I guess I'm allowed to keep, and my tongue finally unfreezes. "You know, I paid for some of these things with my own money."

He gives me a sardonic look. "You don't have any money."

"I do in my account. Sometimes people give me money for my birthday or Christmas."

"You mean I give you money for those things. And not too much or you'd spend it all on your little charity project."

I shrink back at his tone. The Montague Animal Foundation is what I devote most of my time to, but he's acting like it's some unreasonable thing.

Wait, he's not stopping funding for it, is he? The clothes are replaceable, but my animal shelter isn't.

"You'll still fund the shelter, right?"

"Harold Bishop can," he says distractedly, going through some of the more expensive dresses again.

“But I got married. You only said you would stop funding if I didn’t marry Gabriel.”

“And you didn’t marry him.”

“A technicality. It wasn’t my fault he backed out.”

“Maybe he wouldn’t have if you’d tried a little harder.”

I take a long breath through my nose, exhaling slowly. “I did what you asked. The animals shouldn’t suffer because of all this. And I married Archer. It’s the same difference.” Well, not to me. But he doesn’t need to know that.

“Julia has packed your toiletries,” he replies, changing the subject. “And we’ll start moving your things out tomorrow. Your presence isn’t necessary, though. We have it covered from here.”

Tears form in my eyes at his callous words. This is five years of my life being boxed up and shipped off. “Why are you doing this? Why do you have to get rid of all my stuff?”

“Sweetheart, you don’t need to worry about that.”

He passes by me to go back into the living room and I bite my lip so the bitter sound stuck in my throat won’t escape. He might as well have patted me on the head like a child. But what can I do? It’s his money, not mine. And he’s never been one to explain himself if I question things.

Julia wheels over the suitcase to me, whispering, “I got him to agree to give you some of your nicer dresses, especially if they had any rips or stains on the hems.”

Wow, how lucky for me. I get to keep all the inferior stuff.

“Thanks,” I mutter, knowing she’s only trying to help but unable to appreciate it at the moment.

I sink down on the edge of my bed, hiding my face in my hands, wishing I could bury myself under my soft floral comforter and make it all disappear.

I’ve done too much of that lately, though. Ignoring problems, hoping they’d magically go away. And look how that’s turned out.

At least I already told Archer I’d move in with him. Now that timeline will just have to shift up a little. As in... tonight, apparently.

I sneak anything else I can stuff in the suitcase when no one’s looking, and don’t bother saying bye to my dad as I leave, my hands full anyway.

Twenty minutes later, with the very kind help of first Raul and then Archer’s doorman with my luggage, I’m standing at his front door three hours before I’d planned to show up, his confusion apparent on his face as he stares at my suitcase.

“Could I, um, move in earlier?”

He glances back up at me, gaze sharp. “What, tonight?”

I nod, my arms crossing over my stomach. There’s no way I’m admitting to him the way Dad had talked down to me, somewhere between the level of a child and a simpleton.

He motions toward my single suitcase. “Are you having the rest of your things delivered?”

## Page 12

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I swallow heavily, shame settling low in my belly. “This is it.”

His brows raise the faintest bit, but he doesn’t question me further as he opens the door wider, letting me in. I hesitate at the threshold, not sure what to do with my belongings.

“I’ll take care of that,” he murmurs, easily hefting my bag toward a hallway on the far side of the apartment.

I follow him, catching sight of a matching queen-sized bed and dresser in the dimly lit room, decorated in neutral shades of cream and white.

“This will be your room. You can redecorate it however you’d like.”

“It’s fine.” Beggars can’t be choosers.

“Really, it’s not a problem. This should feel like your home too.”

I nearly tear up at his words. This is the same kind, chivalrous man I remember from all those years ago. I half thought I’d built him up to hero proportions in my mind.

“Listen, I was in the middle of something for work...”

“Oh, of course. Sorry. I’ll just, um, unpack.” You know, my one measly suitcase that all my possessions now fit into.

“I should be done in a few hours.”

I nod, already feeling like a nuisance. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

He leaves, and I stay on the bed for a few minutes longer, taking in my new room. White linen curtains cover a good portion of the east wall, and I pull them back, looking out at clouds and the bustling city down below. I can’t believe how high up we are.

I peek my head out into the hallway, the door two doors down from mine closed, the light on underneath. Archer must be in there.

The room to my right looks like a home gym with a treadmill, elliptical machine, free weights, mats, and a whole mess of other equipment I’ve never quite understood the purpose of, and I creep down to the other end of the hallway, discovering a massive master bedroom decorated in shades of black and dove gray.

Out in the living room, striking black leather and chrome furniture fill the area, yet the vibe is impersonal. There’s artwork on the walls, yes, but no photos, no knick knacks. It’s like a designer came in and styled it, but nothing has changed since.

I have a momentary pang in my chest for my living room plants in their colorful pots, my vintage French press I used to make coffee every morning, works of art I’d personally selected and taken pride in.

But that place doesn’t belong to me anymore.

My stomach gives a quiet rumble and I head into the open kitchen, a gorgeous granite counter spanning its length. Everything is top of the line in here, and it appears to be the one room in the house that’s actually lived in judging by the pan soaking in the sink and glass storage containers filled with food I find in the fridge.

My belly gurgles again, and I clutch at it, glancing around to make sure Archer isn’t

near. I was too busy at my apartment getting kicked out to eat, and he did say it's my home now...

I grab a homemade container of hummus and rifle through the cabinets till I discover a bag of pita chips, then hop onto one of the bar stools at the counter and dig in, nearly moaning aloud at how good it is. Who knew he was a phenomenal cook?

After a few minutes, I pause in my gorging to find Archer's blue gaze focused on me.

Crap.

"Sorry," I mumble through a mouthful. "I should have asked. I never had lunch--"

"You're fine. Anything in there is yours. You live here now."

A thrill runs through me hearing him say that, even if it is for show.

"I came out to give you this."

He hands me a packet with Archer and Serena Phase One written on the front page, and I open it to find a detailed listing of upcoming events with photographers attending, local restaurants and shops where paparazzi are known to hang out looking for shots, and ideas for ways we can play up our relationship on ThousandWords, his dad's social media company.

Not that I do anything with my account. I gave Mr. Bishop's PR team access to it back when I got engaged to Gabriel and haven't touched it since.

"This is... thorough."

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“Yeah, Dad had PR working on it all day.”

“And this is phase one? How many phases are there?”

He twists his lips. “Listen, I know I got us into this mess-”

“No, it’s fine.” Seriously, better than fine. “We’re in this together. A team. We’ll figure it out.”

He blinks, almost like he’s taken aback.

“What?”

“Gabriel said you were, uh...” he trails off, seeming to search for the right word.

Unenthused? Uninterested? Unwilling? Yeah, because I didn’t want to marry him.

“I could’ve done more with the wedding planning,” I admit. “But he and Mackenzie were really into it. I always felt in the way.” I set the packet down, unsure how to voice this next part. “But this is different. I-” I bite my tongue before I confess it was him I was interested in from the start. Pretty sure that’ll scare him off. “I want to make this work.”

He narrows his eyes slightly. “So the deal will go through,” he clarifies.

“Right.” Can’t forget this whole thing is a ruse.

He scratches at the back of his neck, gaze flicking away from me. “Dad’s lawyers are working on a post-nuptial for us. It’s nothing against you-”

I hold up a hand to stop him. “I understand. My parents had one.”

Relief flashes in his eyes for a brief moment. “Mine too.”

There’s a lull and I flip through the marketing packet again for something to do. “Are you going to work tomorrow?” He nods. “Maybe we could go out to lunch? I can meet you at your office so people will see us, and then we can go to Evergreen?” I point to the open page. “It’s on the list.”

He considers me for a second, the weight of his gaze rooting me to the spot. “Good plan. I’ll make reservations.”

I release a breath, resisting the urge to bask in his praise. See, we’re already working together well.

Now to just have him fall in love with me.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:20 am*

Serena

My bedroom is almost eerily silent as I wake, the usual noise of distant traffic absent. This high on the fiftieth floor, the sounds of New York in all its glory can't reach us.

I spend extra time in the en-suite bathroom fussing with my hair and applying makeup, wanting to look my best for Archer, but he's nowhere to be found as I walk through the common areas of the apartment, a stillness in the air implying I'm the only one home.

I sigh, flopping down on the couch, and sink into the leather cushions, propping my feet on the coffee table. He holed up in his office the rest of the night doing God knows what, our meeting about rules and expectations thankfully delayed, but at least I got all my things unpacked and put away.

I scramble to get my feet off the furniture as the front door unlocks, and spread the bottom of my pink floral dress out around me, one of the few good ones I still own.

But it's not my husband that walks through the door.

It's a woman.

Archer never mentioned a woman.

"You must be Serena," she smiles, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Look at you, you're beautiful."

On second glance, it appears she's in her late forties, a few strands of gray at her temples, but her figure is trim, energy radiating off of her.

"Oh, let me wash my hands. I just took the trash out."

She heads to the kitchen and I follow her hesitantly, fairly sure she's not an intruder since she's familiar with where everything is.

And knows my name.

"I'm Lori," she smiles again, drying her hands on the dish cloth hanging on the stove handle. "Archer's housekeeper." I shake the hand she holds out, her nails clipped short and unpolished, her friendliness instantly putting me at ease. I've been so tense over the last month dreading the wedding, it's nice to finally relax.

"Well," she continues, "I'm part chef, part maid, and sometimes part emergency personal assistant when he needs it. I basically make sure his life runs smoothly at home."

Wait, did she say chef? "Did you make that hummus in the fridge? I nearly devoured that whole container."

"I did," she beams. "I whip a batch up every week. I've been trying to convince Archer to let me add in some new flavors. Roasted red pepper, smoky chipotle, jalapeno. But no. I swear, sometimes he has the tastebuds of a five year old."

My eyes widen, my lips tipping up at the corners on their own.

"Now if you wanted me to make some special kind for you..."

"Yes, of course. I'd love that."

She grins. “Oh, I think we’re going to be friends.” She pulls a magnetized notepad off the fridge and fishes in a drawer for a pen. “Let me know some of your favorite meals, allergies, likes and dislikes, things like that. I’ll make it happen.”

“Well, I’m vegetarian.” I internally cringe remembering Mackenzie and Gabriel getting mad at me after failing to mention it during the wedding planning.

“Good to know.”

“And sometimes the smell of cooked pork makes me nauseous. I got food poisoning from it once when I was younger-”

“Not a problem,” she says easily. “Turkey bacon is healthier for Archer anyway.”

I hide a smile behind my hand, wondering what he’d say if he knew she was talking about him like this. “Where is he?”

“He leaves for work around seven-thirty.” Oh, I definitely missed him then. I need to wake earlier if I want to see him in the morning. “He told me about your arrangement, by the way. So you don’t have to pretend anything in front of me.”

Great. One more excuse to stay apart.

She cocks her head at me. “I thought you’d be happy about that.”

I wipe clear my expression. I’ve never been good at hiding reactions. I think the only reason I got it past Archer Saturday night was because he was paying more attention to his phone than me.

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“Oh... yeah.” Not a good liar either. Time to deflect and change the subject. “Do you have an iron? Some of my clothes are wrinkled.”

“I’ll take care of that for you.”

“Okay.” It seems Lori is definitely an extra perk to marrying. Despite Dad’s money, he never shelled out for any kind of cleaner or housekeeper for me.

We talk a while longer about food, and she even makes some new hummus for me with avocado mixed in, but I have to stop myself from gorging to save room for my lunch date with Archer. At least, I’m telling myself it’s a date. He probably considers it a business meeting.

An hour later, I step off the elevator on the fiftieth floor of Bishop Industries, receiving a few curious stares as I make my way to the reception desk, where I’m directed to Tracy, Archer’s private secretary, down at the end of the hall.

A perky brunette makes eye contact with me as I near her, grinning from ear to ear. “Shut the front door,” she says excitedly as I stop in front of her desk. “You’re really here.”

Um, yes? I’m not sure how she wants me to respond.

“I just can’t believe Mr. Bishop was in love with you this whole time,” she gushes, apparently not needing a response from me. “When I saw him declare himself like that, I nearly fell off my bed.”

“Your bed?”

“Oh, yeah. Someone was live streaming it.”

Wonderful. There’s probably already some meme floating around out there about the three of us at that altar.

“Anyway, he’s just so stoic here at the office, so it came as a huge surprise. But then when I read Gabriel’s editorial this morning in the Manhattan Herald... Wow, what a revelation.”

What’s this now about an editorial? That wasn’t part of the marketing packet.

I paste on a smile, unsure how to answer her. “Is Archer available?”

“Oh, yeah, of course. Here I am, just gabbing away.” She picks up the phone on her desk, murmuring, “Mr. Bishop? Your wife’s here to see you.” Your wife she mouths to me, giving me a thumbs up. Did she mix energy drink in her coffee this morning or something?

She hangs up, continuing her one-sided conversation fluidly. “Anyway, you two are just the cutest couple. You’re so gorgeous, and Archer, well, you’ve seen him. A total fox, right?”

She pauses a beat, then seems to realize what she said. “Don’t tell him I said that, okay? Oh God, I’d die if he knew I was talking about him like that. Anyway, he’ll see you now.”

I cautiously tread past her, half expecting for her to jump into another monologue, but she simply smiles at me.

The furniture in Archer's office is eerily similar to the living room at home, all black and silver, and he glances up at me briefly as I enter. "I'll be a few minutes," he says brusquely, turning his attention back to his monitor. "I've been putting out fires since last night with my stupid outburst Saturday."

"No rush." Well, at least I know now why he never came out of his office again yesterday. I thought he might have been avoiding me.

But I wish he wouldn't say stepping in like that was stupid.

I take a seat on the couch against the window and pull out my phone, curious about this editorial Tracy mentioned.

The first search engine result links me to the Manhattan Herald's site, a photo of me and Archer exchanging rings at the top of the article. And the author is listed as Gabriel Bishop. What in the world?

Serena Montague and I had a whirlwind courtship - there's no denying that. We rushed into an engagement blindly, not realizing how wrongly suited we were for one another, but it was too late by the time I realized it.

As we planned the wedding, I could sense the growing friendship between her and my brother, happy they were getting along even as the ease between them confused me. I didn't recognize it for what it was, how much better the two of them fit together. But Serena and Archer were too honorable to act upon the connection.

At the rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding, I finally admitted to myself that Serena and I had rushed into this impulsively. What had been an initial spark was only that - a small ember that had already fizzled. But between her and Archer? That was a steady flame.

There was mutual respect there. Laughter from her I'd never been able to replicate. A happiness from my brother I've hardly witnessed in the nearly thirty years I've known him. But most of all, an attraction they refused to acknowledge out of deference to me. And I couldn't be the one to deny them that. So I stepped aside.

Now, please don't call me some kind of martyr. I should have done it earlier. I shouldn't have selfishly thought things would be fine. But looking into Serena's eyes at the altar, I knew I could never make her as happy as Archer could.

I wish them both a lifetime of happiness. They are two of the finest people I know.

My phone drops in my lap, surprised at Gabriel's words. They're obviously fake, but parts of it hit closer to home than he knows. It's true he could never make me as happy.

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On the other hand, if all Archer and I have is a pretend marriage for the next however many years, could having unrequited feelings end up being worse than the indifference Gabriel and I shared?

“Sorry about that,” Archer says, standing and buttoning his suit jacket. “It was time sensitive.”

I nod, surreptitiously eyeing the way his shoulders fill out his suit as he rolls them back, how handsome he is, how powerful.

No, I’ll never regret marrying Archer instead of Gabriel, no matter how it turns out.

An aura of quiet authority surrounds him as we head out of his office and toward the elevator, the people we pass giving deferential nods or murmuring, “Mr. Bishop,” with respect in their tones.

There’s something exciting about being by this man’s side, his long legs striding confidently down the hall like he owns the place. Well, I guess he does in a way. Or will one day as his father’s successor. And from what I can gather, it wasn’t just a vanity appointment to his current position as CFO solely because of who his father is.

He jabs the elevator button as we reach it, his thumb tapping restlessly against his leg for a moment before he sticks his hands in his pockets, and the metal doors slide open, a heavysset man already inside. “Mr. Bishop. Mrs. Bishop.” He nods, stepping aside to make room for us.

Full body chills race over my skin at his reference to me as Mrs. Bishop. No one has

called me that yet.

I glance over at Archer to see if he caught it too, but he's concentrating on the elevator's digital readout descending methodically.

Today's mission is to figure out a way to break through his reserve. Discover things we have in common. Make a connection.

No pressure.

For now, I enjoy standing close to him, inhaling the subtle spice of his cologne, and as we exit the elevator, a tingle of electricity rushes through me as he gently presses his palm against my lower back.

I shouldn't read anything into it, but I can't help but savor it all the same.

The stares are even more obvious as we pass through the lobby of the building to his waiting town car downstairs, and if it's this bad here, it's sure to be worse at Evergreen. Expensive, exclusive, and frequented by the elite of New York, the marketing packet listed it as a prime location for paparazzi.

He scrolls through emails on his phone as the driver takes off, and I rack my brain for something to say, unwilling for any private time we spend together to be in silence. We're supposed to be connecting, not ignoring each other.

"I read that piece Gabriel wrote for the Manhattan Herald. Or did the PR team write it?"

"What?" he asks, only half paying attention.

"The editorial about us."

His thumb pauses in its scrolling before he carefully sets his phone down on his lap. “What are you talking about?”

“Tracy told me...” I fumble in my purse for my phone, praying I still have the article up in my browser. “You mean it wasn’t part of the strategy?”

“No.” The single word sends a shiver down my spine.

I hand him my phone, his face impassive as he reads through his brother’s explanation to the world.

“Well, this will help squash the rumors we’ve been going behind his back,” he finally says.

People are actually saying that about us? I’ve deliberately avoided social media the past few days.

“Has your dad seen it yet?”

“I’m sure I’ll hear about it,” he mutters as the car comes to a stop.

He grips my hand as we step out, keeping it in a loose hold as we enter the restaurant, a few whispers and curious glances circling us as we pause at the hostess podium and then continue on to a private table in the corner. I choose the seat facing away from the other patrons, pretending they aren’t actively staring at us.

After the server takes our orders, I pull the marketing packet out of my purse, smoothing it out in front of me. “Should we come up with a game plan for the next few days?”

He nods, folding his hands in front of him. “Do you have any events you planned to

go to?”

“No, just work.”

He frowns. “You work?”

“I run a nonprofit. The Montague Animal Foundation.” Although, maybe I should change it to Bishop now that Dad refuses to fund it. “I sit on the boards of a few other local nonprofits too, but I’m not as involved with them. We only meet once a month at most.”

“Oh.”

Why does he sound surprised? “Did you have something in mind to attend?”

He adjusts his silverware in front of him, aligning it with the edge of the table. “There’s a benefit I’m expected to go to tonight, actually. It’d be easy to add you as my plus one.”

I internally grimace. Small talk with people I don’t know? Terrible vegetarian options? Just please let it not be one that has dancing too.

“Sounds great,” I say, pasting on a smile. “Who’s it for?”

“American Heart Association. No, lungs. Wait... kidneys?” He shakes his head after a moment. “One of those. Dad bought a table and wanted me to make an appearance.”

“Will he be there?” I’d rather avoid Mr. Bishop’s cold air of disapproval if possible.

“No. He’s stepped down from attending a lot of these kinds of things over the last

couple years.”

“And you go in his place?”

He nods, his lips twisting. “Well, Gabriel did most of it. But now I guess he won’t.”

“And you don’t enjoy going?”

He stills. “What makes you say that?”

My hand flutters up to my face. “You made this expression...” Crap. I shouldn’t be admitting how closely I’m watching him.

He sighs, realigning the silverware. “It’s not that I’m unwilling to help - I’ll donate all day - but I don’t see how me sitting in a ballroom with a bunch of other suits is going to make a difference.”

I take in the expensive cut of his suit, the heavy watch on his wrist that screams wealth. The breadth of his shoulders, those piercing blue eyes. But all of that isn’t what makes him so captivating. He has an aura of... power surrounding him. There’s no other way to describe it.

“You lead by example. Others see you there and realize it’s a worthy cause. People have always followed you.”

“I... guess I’ve never thought of it like that before. Outside work at least.” He squints at me like he’s trying to figure something out, but our server comes then with our salads and I use the opportunity to look busy so he won’t scrutinize me anymore.

We decide on a few other places to make our appearances over the next week, each one a necessary evil, but it’s guaranteed time to spend with him. To appear in love.

But as our entrees arrive, he utters those dreaded words, “So about some ground rules.”

I don’t want there to be rules. I want this to be a marriage, or at least like dating. Exploring this new relationship, discovering each other, intertwining our lives.

Not separating things further.

“What did you have in mind?”

“For starters-”

A shadow crosses our table, Archer going silent.

“Well, if it isn’t the happy couple.”

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Archer

“Harlan.” I nod politely, resisting the urge to roll my eyes at his shit-eating grin.

“What are the chances I’d run into you right after your big declaration? Congratulations by the way.”

Serena sinks down the slightest bit in her seat, warily glancing between the two of us.

He holds his hand out to her. “Harlan Nash. I went to high school with your husband here.”

“I know,” she murmurs, slipping her small hand in his for a handshake.

What does she mean she knows?

“I went there too,” she continues at his quizzical expression. “I was two grades behind you guys.”

That’s right. I forgot about Gabriel telling me that.

“My apologies,” Harlan laughs. “You must know my wife, Courtney, then. She’ll be here in just a- Oh, there she is.”

A brunette struts out of the ladies’ room, with a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses on despite being indoors, and makes her way over to Harlan, wrapping her arm around his waist. “Look who you found,” she says, smiling coquettishly at us. “Serena, I

haven't seen you in ages."

Serena gives a half-hearted nod, clearly not enthused with Courtney.

"Would you like to join this party?" our server asks them, menus in hand.

"Oh, you don't have to-" I start, but I'm soon cut off by Harlan's enthusiastic assent as he takes the seat next to me.

Wonderful.

"You have to tell me how you two met," Courtney says, finally taking off her sunglasses as she sits down. "Was it through Gabriel?"

There's a calculating gleam in her eye, her fishing for information obvious. And, unfortunately, I don't have an answer to give her. Serena and I haven't got that far in coming up with a fleshed out story. And unlike at the wedding, when I could pawn any busybodies off with the claim that we had other people to talk to, there's no way I can avoid the question now.

"We met at Redmond Prep actually," Serena says, looking down at the table.

"Really? Do tell."

She fiddles with her straw wrapper for a moment before balling it up in her fist. "Well, it was the first week of classes and this big guy bumped into me, knocking me on the floor. My textbooks and notes I was carrying went everywhere. God, it was a huge mess." She peeks up at me, a shy smile on her face. "And Archer was the one who helped me up."

The way she's looking at me, almost like she's captivated... Wow, her acting's top-

notch.

“He asked if I was okay and made the guy apologize, then picked up my books. I never forgot how kind he was to do that.”

She stares at me for a moment longer before breaking the contact. “We lost touch after high school but reconnected again recently. He hasn’t changed at all. Still kind and honorable. I’m the luckiest woman in the world.”

I continue watching her, but she won’t look at me, a faint wash of pink on her cheeks. How does she do that so easily? The story seemed so believable, her reactions so natural. Has she taken acting classes?

“That.” Harlan points at her. “That’s what we need.”

Serena rears back at Harlan’s finger, eyes going wide. “What?”

“For the show,” he says to Courtney. “Damn, we should have had the cameras follow us today.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Me, Frank, and Jordan are doing a show. They’re calling it Nash Ville.” He frames his hands wide like the title is supposed to impress us. “And you two would be perfect to have on it.”

Serena sinks further in her seat. Yeah, I’m not crazy about the idea of being on reality TV either.

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“Isn’t there already a show with that name?”

Courtney makes a noise of derision. “That’s what I said.”

“No, ours has a space in between it. Because our last name is Nash.”

“But you don’t live in Nashville. Aren’t your brothers here in New York too?”

Courtney raises her brows at her husband as if she’s made this same argument, until he finally grumbles, “Fine. I’ll talk to the producers about it.”

“Anyway,” Courtney picks up, “we’re filming now and would love to have you over for a dinner party. We can plug your app too during the segment.”

Dad definitely wouldn’t say no to free publicity for ThousandWords. Plus, Serena and I need people to notice us doing things as a couple. But the thought of spending a night listening to Harlan Nash talk about himself is up there with gouging my eyes out. “We’ll think about it.”

Serena sinks down in her seat even further, hunching her shoulders forward as she takes a bite of her food.

She doesn’t utter a word as lunch continues on, and when Harlan and Courtney excuse themselves briefly to speak to another couple who just walked in, I gently nudge her.

“Hmm?” She glances at me, a question on her face.

“What’s wrong?”

She blinks, appearing startled. “Nothing, why?”

“You’re not talking.”

“I... I don’t know them.”

“I thought you knew Courtney.”

She rolls her eyes. “From ten years ago. And it’s not like she was nice to me back then.”

Why would anyone be unkind to her? “What do you mean?”

Picking at her food, she takes a moment before answering. “You don’t remember me from high school, do you?”

Am I supposed to? “I don’t,” I admit. “But the story you made up was a nice touch.”

“I didn’t make it up.” She keeps her head down, staring at her plate, nearly empty since she’s had time to eat rather than attend to Harlan’s questions.

Wait. That actually happened?

“It’s okay if you don’t remember. I was pretty forgettable.” Her gaze meets mine briefly before it darts away. “Courtney and her friends came up with this nickname for me. Ice Queen.”

Gabriel mentioned something about that at his bachelor party.

“Like I thought I was too good for everyone,” she continues. “But I was just shy. I kept to myself and I guess they took it as rude. And then after that name stuck, it was even harder to make friends.”

She sets her fork down, curling her hands together in her lap. “Anyway, that time you helped me up was the nicest thing anyone did for me at Redmond Prep. I really did never forget it.”

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out, the silence between us stretching.

“You probably have to get back to work, right?” She stands, her chair scraping against the floor loudly. “I’ll take a cab home.”

I nod, still unsure what to say, and watch as she strides out, clutching her purse tightly to her, her head tilted down.

What just happened?

“Shit.”

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I rub my eyes, a headache forming from staring at the screen too long. Of all the pictures someone could have taken from our lunch, it had to be one from the end, Serena looking down at her lap sorrowfully, me with a deep frown on my face.

Not when we walked in and I made sure I was holding her hand. Not when we were chatting with another high profile couple. It had to be the least flattering moment.

We've got tonight to make up for it, though. I confirmed with Vivian and it's the American Lung Association we're supporting, apparently. I'll have to head straight there from work, but that's why I keep extra tuxes here.

There's a knock on the door and Tracy bustles in, laying a thick folder on my desk. "Purchasing needs your signature on these."

I open the stack to actually figure out what I'm signing, but I can't concentrate because her mouth takes off like a rocket as usual.

"Oh my God, Serena's just to die for, isn't she? I totally get how you fell in love with her."

I keep silent, experience telling me she doesn't really want an answer.

"I postponed your five o'clock meeting till tomorrow so you have time to prepare for your benefit tonight and got in touch with Mrs. Bishop like you asked. She's set to meet you there at six."

It takes me a moment to realize who she's referring to, the same as earlier when

Thomas said it in the elevators. Mrs. Bishop.

The image of Mom's ring sitting on the table during lunch with my brothers yesterday pops into my head, the oversized center diamond catching the light to shine brilliantly.

I stand abruptly, startling Tracy from whatever she was prattling on about.

"I'll get ready to go now."

She blinks at me for a moment, then finally jumps into action. "Of course. I hung your suit in your bathroom already. Should I tell James to pick you up earlier?"

"Yeah."

"Are you... okay?"

I wipe my palms on my pants, refusing to give credence to whatever she thinks she sees on my face. "Never better. I'll see you tomorrow."

She nods and exits the office, and I brace myself on the edge of my desk, inhaling deeply.

I've been through this. Thought I put it behind me.

So why is it happening again?

I go through the routine of getting ready and sit in the car patiently as James navigates rush hour traffic, then ask him to drop me off just before we reach our destination.

While there's no red carpet per se, there are still photographers lined up outside the entrance, waiting to capture the perfect shot. For all I know, the event organizers hired them to make the donors feel self-important since the public won't recognize most of the attendees.

Except for me and Serena.

It's our first foray to an event as a married couple. Well, as a couple, period. Why didn't I skip tonight so we have more time to prepare?

Will I ever be prepared, though?

I check my email on my phone until a cab pulls up a few minutes later next to me, Serena in the backseat. She opens the door dressed in a pale blue gown that highlights her porcelain features and fair hair, with silver stilettos and a matching shawl draped loosely over her arms.

I hold my hand out to her as she steps onto the curb, the slit in the side of her dress widening briefly to showcase long, toned legs, and I look away when I realize I'm staring.

"I was expecting to beat you here," she comments, letting go of me to straighten the slightly frayed hem. "You worked so late last night, I was half afraid you wouldn't come."

What I would normally take as an off-hand remark seems different paired with her words at the end of lunch.

"I won't leave you alone tonight."

She pauses, glancing up at me, but otherwise stays silent.

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“If you were worried about that, I mean.”

Her gaze flicks over my face, a smile finally creeping over her lips. “Thank you.”

I nod, holding a hand out to her again. “We need them to take our photo up ahead. You ready?”

“Mmm hmm.” She places her palm in mine, her skin incredibly soft.

What am I thinking? Of course her hand is soft. She’s a woman.

We walk toward the entrance, Serena nearly matching me in height in the heels she’s wearing. She’s tall to begin with, probably about five foot nine, and that combined with her slender build and delicate features gives her a willowy, nymph-like appearance.

Her grip on me tightens as we approach, the sudden flashing cameras temporarily blinding me. How in the hell did Gabriel do this all the time?

“Mr. Bishop,” one photographer calls out. Guess I’m recognized then. “Congrats on your nuptials. Can I get the two of you closer together?”

I wrap an arm around Serena’s waist and she curves herself into my side, a light floral scent teasing my nose.

“Are you wearing perfume?”

She brings her head in closer to my ear, murmuring, “Yes. Is it bothering you?”

“No, I- it’s fine.”

A tendril of her hair dances in the breeze, tickling my cheek before she brushes it away. “Sorry.”

I continue looking ahead, trying to focus on the camera and ignore how silky her dress is under my fingertips, the soft weight of her breast pressed against me, the peek of cleavage in my peripheral vision from my vantage point next to her.

I shouldn’t be noticing these things. We have an understanding. This is a business arrangement.

But that goddamn floral scent keeps getting in my nose, reminding me of something I can’t quite place...

“Be happy, Mr. Bishop,” the guy calls out again. “You’ve just married the most gorgeous woman in New York.”

I relax my mouth, clearing the frown that had stolen over it, and draw her tighter into my side, the soft sound she gives in response making my dick twitch.

Whoa. Where the hell did that come from?

“Give her a kiss,” the guy says, laughing. “You’re newlyweds.”

No. That wasn’t part of the deal. It already felt wrong doing it at the wedding when we’d never discussed if it was okay.

We haven’t gone over any ground rules, any stipulations. I can’t spring this-

She turns to me, her eyes trusting, and leans in, gently brushing her lips against mine. Her hand comes up to cradle my jaw as she deepens the kiss and moves even closer into me, her perfume weaving a spell around me, lulling me, unsure what's happening right now. My dick twitches again as her kiss turns earnest, eager, enthusiastic, her palm moving to the back of my neck to cup it, her other hand tugging lightly at the lapel of my suit jacket.

And all I can do is stand there, dumbstruck, letting her kiss me here in front of these strangers, unable to move, to think.

She slowly breaks away, her gaze searching mine until her lips tip down at the corners briefly, so quick I almost miss it, and she steps back, heading toward the open doors.

“Have a good night, Mr. Bishop,” the photographer calls, already checking the pictures on his camera.

His words spur me into motion, striding to catch up with Serena, and I pull her aside as we enter the lobby, the hum of murmured conversation and clinking glasses just ahead.

She won't look at me as I take hold of her elbow and steer her into a corner, her head cast down.

“Serena, I-”

“I'm sorry, okay?”

She's sorry? "For what?"

"Kissing you," she whispers, still looking down, her shoulders hunched forward. "He said to kiss and I thought-"

"No, no, it's fine. It's my fault. I wasn't prepared." I run a hand through my hair, pulling at it, an odd weight settling in my stomach. "I- I've never done anything like this before."

She finally raises her head, a sheen of wetness in her eyes, and my hand makes a strange twitching motion, almost as if it wants to reach out to her.

"This PDA doesn't come natural to me," I continue. "I've always been careful not to be photographed with a woman. I don't need the media linking me with anyone, getting the wrong impression. I need to... retrain myself, I guess. It's not anything about you."

She bites her lip, still wary. "I was just doing what I thought you'd want me to."

"I did want you to." Her eyes widen, and I quickly amend my statement. "I mean, it's what we're supposed to do. It's the point of all this."

I set this in motion with my outburst at the altar, and now I need to back it up.

"I appreciate everything you've done so far. Moving into my apartment, meeting me for lunch, coming with me tonight. Even though it's only been two days, you've already rearranged your schedule, your life, for this."

She tucks her hair behind her ears, her mouth finally curving in a small smile. “It’s not a problem.”

“Maybe we can go over those ground rules-”

“Mr. Bishop!”

Fuck. Can I get a minute alone with her to get on the same page?

I turn to find a woman in a red pantsuit up ahead waving excitedly as she approaches. “Thank you so much for coming.” She shakes my hand, her grip surprisingly firm. “We’re incredibly grateful for Bishop Industries’ donation.”

“We’re happy to donate to worthy causes.” Not that I have any idea what we actually donated tonight. It’ll be in some report I review later this week.

“And is this your date?” she asks, gazing up at Serena.

Wow. The one person in New York who doesn’t read the tabloids. “My wife.”

“Oh, of course. My apologies. I didn’t realize...”

“It was recent.” To put it mildly.

“Well, we have your table set up front and center.” She motions toward the open double doors that lead to the main area, and I internally sigh, knowing I won’t be able to speak privately with Serena once we’re in there.

“Thanks. We’ll be in soon.”

I wait until she walks away before turning back to Serena, tucking my hands in my

pockets. “Every time I try to talk about rules, I get interrupted.”

“Maybe it’s a sign.”

I frown, unsure what she means.

“This is a new situation. For both of us.” She gives a soft smile, hugging her shawl tighter around her. “I think we’ll have to discover our own path. There are no right or wrong answers.”

The back of my neck prickles, but I resist the urge to scratch at it. No rules?

“So... I guess we’re winging it then?”

“It seems that way.”

Well... fuck.

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Serena

“Serena?”

I lift my head to find Wendy, our executive director, staring at me, a wrinkle between her brow.

“Yes?” Wait, did she ask a question? “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

She smiles kindly. “I was asking if you’d like to be on the interview panel for our new adoptions coordinator.”

“Oh, yes, I would.”

“Great. Those are taking place next week on Monday from ten to twelve.”

I sit up straighter in my seat, glancing surreptitiously at the other board members, wondering how long I’ve been daydreaming, but no one is paying attention to me.

As chair of the board, I’m supposed to set the example, but it’s hard to focus on the animals today. I need to figure out what to do about Archer.

We’ve attended two other events since Monday’s benefit - a concert at the New York Philharmonic on Tuesday and a plated dinner for the Susan G. Komen Foundation last night. But there’ve been no more kisses after my disastrous attempt Monday. I’d been so into it, thinking it was my chance, that he’d finally feel the same attraction to me. But when I’d realized he was barely kissing me back... God, could I be any more

of an idiot?

My cheeks heat just remembering the embarrassment, and I tilt my head down so no one else sees.

Wendy continues to speak, now about a litter of puppies surrendered to us this morning and a foster family she's sure would be a great fit until we can find a permanent home, and I itch to go downstairs and play with them. Puppies make everything better.

I really should stay in the office and figure out how I'm going to break the news that almost all our funding is disappearing... but I at least have two more months until the start of the new fiscal year to figure it out.

And for now, I need puppies.

After the meeting ends, I head into the kennel, one of our regular volunteers, Sabrina, already in a stall with our arrivals.

"How are they doing?"

"A little skittish at first," she says, giving the smallest puppy of the bunch a gentle pat, "but resilient. They'll adjust well."

I carefully open the gate and step inside, bending down and holding a hand out. The bravest of the trio pads over cautiously and sniffs at my outstretched fingers, nose wet and rough. Checking underneath, I discover it's a boy, and smile as he gives a tiny lick to my pinkie.

"You're a good boy, aren't you?"

He wags his stubby tail, his pink tongue sticking out adorably.

“Looks like he’s taken a shine to you,” Sabrina says as she refills the water bowls. “Do you have any dogs at home?”

“No. I’m-” I stop, realizing how I was going to finish that sentence. Not allowed. Dad’s never been fond of pets. Even after moving into my own apartment, he wouldn’t hear of me getting one. Well, now I see why, since he always considered it his property.

But it’s still not like I have a place of my own. Yes, Archer said it’s my home too, but I’ve already disrupted his life enough. I won’t push my luck.

“I get my fill of puppies when I’m here,” I tell Sabrina. “All the cuteness and none of the full-time responsibility.”

“That’s how I feel about my grandkids,” she laughs. “Oh, and speaking of responsibility.” She motions to where one puppy is relieving himself in the corner. “Let me clean that up.”

She steps out to grab a roll of paper towels, and as she comes back in, the bell chimes over the front door.

“I’ll get that.” I’d rather deal with a potential adopter than puppy pee.

I walk into the main area, my feet slowing as I recognize who walked in.

“Claire,” I smile. “How are you?”

She takes off her sunglasses, smirking. “I wondered if you’d be here. So it’s not just your name on the door? You actually help out too?”

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My smile falters, forgetting how blunt she can be. Then again, I haven't seen her since high school. What's with running into everyone from a decade ago suddenly?

She studies me, a wrinkle forming between her brows. "Ah, shit. I did it again. I swear I didn't mean for that to come across as snotty. I promised my therapist I'd work on that."

I blink, taken aback by her change in demeanor. "Um, okay."

She blows out a breath. "All right, let's start over. Hi, Serena. Nice to see you. Yada, yada, yada." She waves her hand in a rolling gesture. "Yeah, I was a raging bitch at Redmond, but can you help me find a dog for my stepdaughter?"

"I..." It takes me a moment to process her words. "Um, yes to the dog, but I never thought you were a bitch." Opinionated, definitely. Straightforward and outspoken, sure. But she was never cruel.

She grins widely. "You don't have to sugarcoat it. I totally was." Her head tilts, lips quirking up at me. "I guess not to you, though. I never understood why you got such a bad rap when all you did was mind your business."

I shrug, not wanting to revisit memories I left behind long ago. Things already got stirred up at lunch the other day.

She claps her hands together. "Anyway, my new stepdaughter hates me. The biggest cliché, I know, but there it is. So to sweeten her up, I'm getting her a dog. It's the only thing she's ever wanted, apparently." She rolls her eyes theatrically. "Tell me

you've got one that's already house trained and won't tear up my furniture."

"Well, we normally do an interview process to make sure you and the dog will be a good fit." Basically to ensure they won't bring it back in a week when they realize how much work a pet actually is.

She nods. "This isn't just a whim. Even if Ava ends up flaking out on taking care of it, I'm prepared to assume full responsibility. I'm financially sound, have previous experience owning dogs, have my own home, blah, blah, blah. You know the drill. I'm here to scout out any contenders today and bring her back later if I find one."

"Okay." She essentially answered all the questions, although we'll still need to do something formal if she's serious about adopting. "Let's go look at some dogs."

"Perfect."

I lead her to the kennel area, some dogs shying away from the front of their stalls when they spot someone new. My heart goes out to them and I make a mental note to spend some time later giving extra pets. Hopefully, continued socialization will eventually open them to trusting again.

"If you're concerned about established habits and energy levels, you may want to consider an older dog who's already gotten all their puppy-age destructive tendencies out of them."

"Makes sense." She eyes the dogs we pass, holding the back of her hand out for a few to lick through the metal bars.

"Off the top of my head, we have a couple that might be a good fit for you. Petey here is about five years old and came from a home with kids, so he's already familiar with them. How old is your stepdaughter?"

“Twelve. Heading into prime sass territory.” She chuckles to herself. “Can’t blame her, though. I was the same way.”

She kneels in front of a stall with a fluffy tan mutt inside. “What about this one?”

“This is Sandy. She’s been here about a month.”

The dog cautiously inches forward, her beautiful brown eyes hesitant but hopeful.

“She’s six years old and we think she’s some kind of lab and cocker spaniel mix.”

“She’s got cute ears.”

Sandy sniffs at the back of her hand, then gives a small whine as she licks her.

“I’ve never seen her chew anything, and she’s always well behaved. A real lady.”

“Maybe she can teach me a few pointers,” she grins.

“Would you like to take her for a walk? We could go around the block together.”

She stands, biting her lip before nodding. “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

I clip a leash on the dog’s collar and tell Sabrina we’ll be back soon, then head outside into the warm sunshine.

“I’m guessing you don’t let just anyone take dogs out for walks this fast normally?” Sandy strains at her leash as a squirrel darts across our path, and Claire quickly corrects her.

“No,” I admit. “But I know you. I can bend the rules a little every now and then.”

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“I heard you bent the rules a lot lately.”

I glance over at her, a smirk on her lips.

“The Bishop brothers?”

Oh, that.

She laughs. “I see that look. Bit of a touchy subject?”

“Sort of. It’s been an adjustment for sure.”

“Well, from what I remember, Gabriel and Archer weren’t anything like each other. They only look alike.”

I make a noncommittal noise. Yes, their features are similar, but to me, Archer will always be the one I’m attracted to.

“I was surprised when I heard you and Gabriel were engaged to begin with. Seems like a mismatch in personalities. You and Archer make more sense.”

A goofy grin creeps over my face. “We do?”

“Yeah. You’ve both got that untouchable vibe.”

My smile slips. Untouchable? Does everyone still see me like that?

“How could I be more... touchable?”

“What?” She glances over, taking me in. “Shit. I fucked up again, didn’t I? I need a filter for my mouth or something.”

“No, no. It’s fine. I mean, it’s not fine. But it’s not your fault.” Ugh, what am I trying to say? “Just, could I ask you for some advice?”

“Me?” She points to her chest. “People are usually asking me to stop offering unsolicited advice.”

I smile, the sudden heavy weight in my stomach easing a bit. “This, um, relationship between me and Archer... it’s very new. And we haven’t exactly... in the bedroom...”

“He can’t get it up?” she asks sympathetically. “They’ve got pills for that, you know.”

“No, it’s not that.” I grimace. Oh God, wouldn’t that be just my luck? “I really want to... consummate things...” I search for a way to ask what I want without tipping her off to the real situation. I wouldn’t normally confide such a personal thing to someone I don’t know well, but I’m desperate for some advice. And there’s something about her that invites unusual conversation. “But it seems like he wants to take it slow. How can I speed things up? You know, seem more touchable?”

Sandy steers her over to a tree for a potty break, and Claire eyes me carefully. “Everyone always thought you were beautiful.”

Um, okay.

“But you had that whole Ice Queen thing going on.” She holds up a hand before she

even finishes speaking. “Not that you deserved it,” she adds. “But maybe he’s still seeing some of that.”

Yeah, don’t think that’s the problem. He doesn’t even remember me from back then.

“Instead of icy, you need to be someone who heats him up.”

“So I need to be a... she-devil?”

She throws her head back and laughs, nearly cackling. “Something like that. Show him you have a wild side. Guys like a girl they can get freaky with. Lady in the streets, freak in the sheets.”

I cross my arms over my chest, glancing around in case anyone overheard. “I need to be freaky?”

“I’m not saying install a sex swing in your bedroom or anything, but show him you’re going to do more than just lay there while he grunts on top of you. That you’ll make it exciting for him.”

Okay, yeah, that’s more reasonable. Sex should be exciting. The thought of him naked, that big, powerful body over me in bed... look, I’m excited already.

“Dress up in sexy lingerie and fuck me heels. You can’t get more obvious than that.”

Oh my God, I can't actually do that.

Right?

But if that kiss the other day was any indication, I need to up my game. The simple fact is, I want more. Sitting next to him in that concert hall Tuesday, the subtle musk of his cologne filling my nose, his hand right there on the armrest just a few inches from mine... Is it ridiculous to be twenty-seven years old and still crushing like this on someone? Especially when it's your fake husband?

I mean, I guess I could consider Claire's advice. There's that Victoria's Secret over in midtown that's on my way home. It wouldn't hurt to check out what they have. And Archer did give me a credit card yesterday. I said I'd use it for emergencies, but a crisis of our marriage could be considered an emergency, right?

"She's a really sweet girl."

What now? Oh, right. The dog. "She's always one of my favorites to walk. Very responsive to commands. Her last home must have taken a lot of time to teach her."

"Why did they give her up?"

"They were moving overseas and couldn't bring her with them. It was hard for her the first couple weeks when they didn't return, but she's bounced back."

She bends down to stroke Sandy's silky ears, and the dog preens under her touch. "And no one else is interested in adopting her?"

“People get distracted by the cute puppies when they come in. But Sandy here is already housetrained and doesn’t have all that crazy energy a puppy does.”

She continues to pet her, a quiet moment that seems to be the start of a beautiful partnership. “Could you let me know if anyone else comes in to look at her? I want to bring Ava and see how she likes her.”

“Of course.” I keep my grin to myself, loving when a dog worms its way into a person’s heart.

We return to the shelter where Claire fills out some preliminary paperwork just in case she does adopt Sandy, and I’m left with plenty of paperwork of my own upstairs at my desk. I need to figure out more grants to apply for, and more than ever, actually put on that fundraising benefit I’ve been meaning to. At least I allocated money in the budget for it. And it theoretically should net us more in return. I should also stop by Mackenzie’s shop and see what she can do for me to plan it out.

But for now, I have some other shopping to do.

Archer

Agentle knock at my home office door has me startling, and I automatically straighten, unaware I was even hunched over my desk. I glance down at the bottom corner of my laptop, discovering it's nine-thirty. Where did the time go?

"Come in." I rub the tiredness from my eyes, then have to rub them again to make sure I'm seeing right as Serena walks in holding a glass of amber liquid. It's not the drink I'm focused on, though, so much as what she's wearing. A black silk robe encases her arms and torso, ending so high on her thighs, it's a wonder it covers anything at all. What brought on this sudden change in sleepwear? Wait, have I even seen her in pajamas yet?

She turns around to close the door, her hem riding higher for just a moment as she spins, and I quickly avert my gaze north before she faces me again, and exit out of the expense reports up on my screen. "What brings you by?"

"You've been working so late, I thought you could use a drink. Something to relax."

Her blonde hair is loose around her shoulders, emphasizing the open neckline of her robe, a hint of lace peeking out from her cleavage.

She doesn't normally wear clothing so suggestive, does she? Have I just not been paying attention?

"It's Scotch on the rocks. Lori said it's your favorite."

“Thanks,” I murmur as she leans across my desk to hand it to me, her robe gaping open briefly to reveal a set of perfect breasts encased in black lace. I accept it from her, unable to look away. All that creamy, kissable, lickable skin right there... I shake my head and take a sip of the Scotch, the burn of alcohol clearing my half-baked thoughts.

She leans back, no hint on her face that I was just staring at her chest, and takes a seat on the edge of my desk, the robe riding high once more to showcase more smooth skin. Is she wearing panties underneath? Black lace to match her bra? Or if I parted that robe, would I find her bare for me?

Whoa, where the hell is this coming from? I must be hard up. It's been... God, I don't even know how long.

I take another swallow and thank her again, then realize I already did that.

“It's the least I could do. You work so hard all the time. Every night this week you've come in here and continued to work.”

That's because I'm making up for lost time attending these events that I normally would spend working.

“Here, let me help.”

She hops off the desk to walk behind my chair, settling her hands on my shoulders. She kneads at muscles I didn't even realize were aching, and a groan slips out of me, her fingers magical as the tension dissipates. My initial instinct to tell her I'm fine and don't need a massage drifts away as she works at my upper back next, the knots there releasing, a warmth spreading through me.

Has she done this professionally or something? Or am I just that tight?

After a few minutes, she runs her hands up the back of my neck, sending a wave of shivers through me. I lean forward to give her better access, her fingers massaging my scalp now.

“Fuck, that feels good,” I mutter, instantly regretting the curse. “I apologize, I didn’t mean to use that kind of language-”

“You can say fuck to me,” she says in her sweet voice, the juxtaposition between her innocence and the coarse word making it all the more arousing. “I don’t mind if you say that at all.”

Her fingers finish kneading, sifting through my hair now, a different sort of pleasure. No woman has ever touched me like this, but there’s no real reason to ask her to stop. If anything, she has more right than anyone. But this feels too intimate, like the start of something else. And she’s my wife in name only.

My desk phone rings, the display showing a business associate over on the West coast I’ve been expecting to hear from. “I have to take this,” I tell her. “It’s important,” I add, as if I need to justify why I’m answering a call in my own office.

“I understand,” she says softly, stepping back around to the front of the desk. “Goodnight.” She tiptoes out, those long, toned legs filling my vision as she closes the door behind her.

I stare at the closed door for a moment before the ringing phone catches my attention again. I rush to pick it up, almost toppling the base unit over in my haste. “Hello?” I answer breathlessly, flustered for some reason. I clear my throat and repeat myself in my normal voice. The one that conveys professionalism, authority. Not the one that teenaged me used the first time I saw a woman’s naked body in the flesh.

Not that I’ll be seeing her naked tonight, I remind myself. The whole encounter had

just been... different. A welcome one my back muscles tell me, loose and pliant for a change. Maybe I should consider hiring a masseuse.

Or you could ask Serena to do it again tomorrow night.

No, no. That wouldn't be right. She made a friendly offer tonight, but I don't expect her to do anything like that in the future.

This relationship is in name only.

"Have you seen this?"

Angelina drops a printed online article in front of me, my reckoning finally due. "Tracy already showed it to me," I sigh.

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“You’re almost worse than Gabriel,” she mutters under her breath, but I still catch it all the same. “Listen, can I be blunt?”

I think she’s going to be regardless. I wave my hand forward in any all means gesture.

“You’re supposed to be in love. Now, Serena, she’s in love. Torso angled toward you, hand on your jaw, smile on her lips as she kisses you. All great body language. But you? You’re a statue. She might as well be kissing a block of marble.”

I grind my teeth, but it’s not like I can argue with her. The photos from Monday’s benefit finally showed up online, and they weren’t flattering. For me, at least.

“She caught me off guard.”

“Well, get on guard then. Look, if you’re going to have stage fright, then try doing something at home. Take selfies together and post them on ThousandWords. Take a hundred pics if you have to, but find one where you’re relaxed and comfortable. Like you actually want to be next to her.”

“Why is this even so important?”

She gives me a saccharine sweet smile. “Because Mr. Bishop put me in charge of this. And with all due respect, I’m not putting my job at risk over something that’s easily fixable. I’ll come over to your apartment myself and snap pictures of the two of you if I have to.”

I blink. She actually would too. “That won’t be necessary. We’ll take the selfies.”

She relaxes, crossing her arms over her chest. “Archer, you’ve always been a dream to do social media for. You rarely go out unless it’s a business event, you don’t get yourself embroiled in scandals. No messy breakups, no PR nightmares. Not like Gabriel anyway.”

It’s true. Angelina’s handled my ThousandWords profile for years so I don’t have to worry about it, and she’s never once complained.

“But I’m almost regretting signing that NDA now because I can’t vent to anyone about how crazy you’ve made me the last week. I need some positive press, okay? Not a deer trapped in headlights when his wife kisses him.”

My eyes narrow. “You’re pushing it.”

She smirks. “Send me some pictures tonight. I’ll go through them and find the best one to post. Maybe we’ll start aspending time at home togetherkind of campaign, rather thanseen all about town at the hottest events.”

“Whatever you think is best.” That’s why she’s head of Public Relations.

“I’ll have my team brainstorm some ideas for more personal pictures you can take.” She crosses my office, pausing at the door. “I know this doesn’t come natural to you. I appreciate you trying.”

I nod, unsure how to respond.

“You two can pull this off. She’s good for the company image. And for you.”

For Archer, the successor of Bishop Industries, or me... personally?

I findSerena on the couch reading when I get home, her face set in concentration. I

shut the door softly so as not to disturb her, but she looks up all the same, smiling at me.

“Another late night?”

I check my watch. “It’s only seven-thirty.”

“But Lori said you leave the house at seven-thirty in the morning. That’s a twelve hour day.”

“Minus travel time and lunch. I left early today, actually.”

“Oh, okay.” She sets her Kindle on the coffee table and stands, heading into the kitchen. “Have you eaten? I can make you something.”

“No, I asked Lori to leave me dinner in the fridge.” I loosen my tie and take off my suit jacket, rolling my shoulders back, the muscles suddenly tight. It’s probably just a Pavlovian response to the idea of her giving me a massage again. I don’t actually need one. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Her eyes widen. “Sure.”

“Did you, uh, see the Manhattan Herald today?”

“The pictures from the benefit? Yeah.”

“Well, then you know what they looked like.”

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She winces slightly. “They were... fine.”

“They were awful. I was awful. PR reamed me out earlier. Said we need a new angle.”

“Okay, what does that mean?”

“They want us to take selfies at home.” I internally scoff. Selfies. “They’re coming up with a list of more specific ideas, but I have to send something to Angelina tonight.”

She shrugs. “No problem.” Yeah, for her. She can act. “How about we just snuggle on the couch? That’s easy enough, right?”

I nod and head into the living room, taking a seat on the leather cushions, and pull my phone out of my pocket. “How should we, um-”

“Here.” She gently takes the phone from me, fiddling with the settings. “Portrait mode on. Flash off. Do you mind if I...”

She gestures to the spot next to me and I scoot over to make room for her.

“No, we need to be close. Since we’re in love.”

“Right.”

She sits down, practically on top of me with the way her thigh presses against mine, her torso angled toward me, that floral perfume of hers taunting me again. She tucks her legs under her and leans into me, my arm automatically moving behind her to

make room for her against me.

I hesitantly wrap my hand around her shoulder, and she snuggles in further, holding my phone out in front of us. “You ready?”

I nod, not ready at all, which is blatantly obvious after the first few pictures she takes.

“Try smiling.”

Again, not a good look.

“Archer,” she laughs. “You’re so handsome. Why can’t you take a picture?”

“You think I’m handsome?” The question slips out unbidden.

She bites her lip, lowering the phone. “Well, yeah.”

“Oh.” A sliver of warmth snakes through me, leaving me even more tense. Why in the world should it matter that she likes the way I look?

“You seem kind of edgy. Do you want to do this later?”

“No, I want to get it over with.”

She flinches, my stomach bottoming out at her reaction.

“Not because of you,” I backtrack. “I just have more work to do after this.”

She nods, all affability gone, both of us morose as she holds up the phone once more.

How do I keep fucking everything up?

I stand abruptly and pace the length of the living room, settling my hands on the back of my neck, my chest heavy with a weight that won't lift.

"We don't have to take the picture," she says after watching me for a minute. "We can do it when you're in a better mood."

"I'm fine," I growl. Yeah, that was convincing. "I just wasn't prepared. Everything's moving so fast."

She lifts off the couch, joining me in the middle of the living room, and wraps her arms around me, my body going still.

"What are you doing?" Is that my voice that sounds so stilted? I quickly clear my throat.

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“Calming you,” she murmurs against my chest, her fingers stroking the tops of my shoulders softly, a shudder running through me. “Come on.”

She leads me back over to the couch, settling herself behind me, kneading the stiff muscles once again.

I go boneless under her touch, the tension melting away, my eyes closing as I exhale slowly.

“I understand about everything moving fast,” she whispers, her breath warm against the back of my neck. “One day I was engaged to Gabriel, and the next, I’m kicked out of my apartment and married to you.”

My stomach twists at the reminder of what I did- Wait, did she say kicked out?

Before I can ask her to clarify, she continues, “But we can make this work. You said you didn’t want to embarrass your family after what happened at the wedding, that you wanted this marriage to seem real to others. And pictures are even easier than in-person events. You only need one photo to make it look real.” She sounds like the opposite of Dad. It only takes one photo to ruin everything. “If you feel unprepared, maybe we could... practice.”

“Practice?”

“Yeah. Like getting comfortable with one another. So it seems more natural.”

She continues rubbing my shoulders, my body relaxed now, enough to agree to her

proposition. “What do you have in mind?”

“We need to seem like we want to be next to each other. Our body language can show everything without us having to say a word. That’s the whole point of ThousandWords, right?”

I nod. Our slogan is A picture is worth a thousand words. That’s why you’re not allowed any captions when you post. You’re supposed to tell a story with your picture.

And I call myself a successor to Dad’s company? I’ve been missing the entire point of our app the last few days.

“Come on, let’s try again.” She slips out from behind me and settles into my side, holding up my phone. “I won’t take any pictures right now. I just want to study how we appear.”

Our image shows on the screen, her hair bright against mine, her skin porcelain against my natural tan.

“See, we look good together.”

Yeah, we do. A power couple, as one tabloid labeled us.

“So when we take our picture, we’ll keep our shoulders dropped, face relaxed, body loose.” She touches each place she mentions, soothing something inside me. “And it’ll seem like the most natural thing in the world.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I was reading a book on body language when you came in,” she admits, setting the

phone on the coffee table next to her Kindle. “I thought it might help.”

Well, at least she’s taking this seriously. Unlike me. “When that guy said to kiss you... I froze. Like an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot,” she murmurs. “Not at all.”

I focus on her lips, how lush they look, how soft. “Do you think anyone else will ask us to kiss?”

“They might.”

I lean in, inhaling her perfume. Is there rose in there? “Then we should be prepared. And redeem ourselves for that photo.”

“Okay.”

Maybe if it’s me initiating, it’ll be different. No one watching us, expecting anything. We can take our time.

My lips meet hers, as soft as I remember, a strange waver in my stomach distracting me as I increase the pressure. She returns the kiss, her hands moving to rest on my shoulders, and I try to focus on making it appear as if I’m into it.

Except the longer we continue, it’s not a problem getting into it. If anything, I’m too into it.

Her fingers curl around the nape of my neck, chilly against my heated skin, and my hands automatically reach for her waist, tugging her in closer to me.

She complies, her breasts pressed against me, and my mind flashes back to the

glimpse I had of them last night as she bent over my desk to hand me my drink. Surprisingly full considering her slender frame, the valley between them deep, the contrast between her pale skin and the black lace stark.

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“Should we take a picture?” she murmurs, her chest rising and falling more heavily than it was a minute ago.

“Yes.”

She fumbles for the phone and opens the camera app again, not waiting for me to initiate, her lips greedy on mine. This time, though, I’m prepared, meeting her halfway, matching her energy.

I slip my tongue into her mouth, unthinking, and she startles, dropping my phone, where it lands with a gentle thump on the rug.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have-”

“No, no. It was my fault.” She bends down to pick it up, holding it against her chest, even more out of breath.

I reach out and extract the phone from her hold, my fingers grazing her breast in the process. “Should we see what you took?”

I navigate to the gallery and swipe through the photos, only one word coming to mind.

Hot.

Caught in an intimate moment, we appear hungry for each other, a prelude to what’s to come.

I glance over at Serena, her cheeks flushed. “I don’t know if we can publish these.”

I was thinking the same thing. “No. This is a little too... much.”

“How about this?” She takes the phone from me once more, angling it toward us as she presses a kiss to my cheek, her lips warm against my skin.

“There.” She shows me the picture, my mouth curved in a half smile on the screen I didn’t even realize I was doing, her eyes closed, intent on the kiss, but somehow radiating that love she’s able to flip on like a switch. “I think this one’s a winner.”

I clear my throat and hold out my hand for her to place the phone in, afraid to touch her again. “I’ll email it to Angelina.”

Not half a minute later I get a reply, effusive praise in bold letters across the screen.

“She likes it.”

“Good.”

Silence stretches, my body remembering her lips on mine, that sensation in the pit of my stomach I couldn’t quite identify before now patently obvious once I saw those pictures.

Arousal.

Serena’s a beautiful woman, though. It’s only natural to get aroused kissing her.

But this isn’t just any woman. I shouldn’t be having lustful thoughts about her. Not when she’s been so good to help me, to read up on ways we can improve our image, to work with me and the PR team fixing this mess I’ve made.

Did she do all this with Gabriel too? Other than one picture of the two of them touring a wedding venue, I couldn't find any other posts of them together.

Not that I was looking.

Would she help Gabriel the same way? Bring him a glass of Scotch at night? Massage his shoulders?

Kiss him?

I stand, suddenly restless. "I have more work to do."

She blinks at my sudden change in demeanor. "Okay. Do you want me to heat you up some dinner?"

"No." I pull at my collar, the fabric too tight against my neck. "I mean, no, thank you. I'll be in my office."

"Goodnight, then," she says softly, her gaze a weight on me as I leave the room.

The only thing is, do I want it there?

Serena

I rouse myself out of bed at eight, the earliest I've woken in the six days I've been here, but I still somehow manage to miss Archer as I head into the kitchen.

"But it's Saturday." I blink stupidly at Lori, who merely smiles in response.

"He works a half day at the office on Saturdays, then usually comes home and works some more. Unless there's a special event, he doesn't deviate from that schedule."

I chew my bottom lip, watching as she gets the ingredients out for a tomato and spinach omelet. I've gotten spoiled with her cooking for me. "What about Sundays?"

"He exercises from six to seven, then gets ready for the day and leaves at seven-thirty. That's every day, mind you." She cracks two eggs in a bowl and beats them lightly with a fork as butter melts on the heated skillet. "On Sundays, he usually holes up in his office until I leave."

"What does he do for fun?"

She shakes her head, smirking. "Archer doesn't do fun. Or, rather, working is his version of it."

Well, on the upside, I only have to compete with one thing then.

"You've been asking an awful lot of questions about him over the last week." She pours the egg mixture in the pan. "Are you looking to spend more time with him?"

I glance up, her dark eyes focused on me, and I squirm in my seat, sure she's able to see right through me. "I, um, just want to get to know him. He's my husband."

She nods, poking at the omelet with her spatula. "Serena, I'm going to say this with all the love in my heart, because I really like you."

I wipe my palms on my shirt, afraid of what'll come out of her mouth. "Okay."

"Archer might be your husband, but be careful thinking you're his wife."

I take a moment to process her words, mulling them over. "Am I that obvious?"

She smiles, something maternal in it that eases me. "Not to him. He's an incredibly intelligent man, but not when it comes to things like this. It's going to take a while for it to really sink in he's married, whether it's for show or not. And longer for the way you want to be married."

I trace circles on the counter in front of me with my finger. "Do you think that could happen? The way I want it to?"

She adds the tomato and spinach into my omelet, folding it over. "Be patient with him," she says, not really answering my question.

I can be patient, though. I have for this long.

I eat breakfast and head out to the animal shelter, where it's bath day for half the dogs. I help Sabrina wrangle them up and spray them down, laughing as Petey tries to catch the water in his mouth. I'm a stinking, soaking mess by the end, but that comes with the territory.

I stop by my desk upstairs, remembering I have a change of clothes tucked away for

situations like this. Oh, and it's a Michael Kors dress. Won't be telling Dad about this one.

Now that I have Archer's credit card, though, I could replenish my closet. I've exhausted all the gowns Dad allowed me to keep with the three events we attended this week. But I did take that trip for lingerie and sleepwear already...

I'll wait till we have another event we're attending to buy anything else. In the meantime, I should start on the benefit I want to plan for the shelter. Looks like we'll need those donations now.

Mackenzie's office isn't too far of a walk, but I'm still sweating slightly as I open the shop door, the fresh fragrance of flowers hitting my nose. The air conditioning feels heavenly as I pause to sniff a bouquet of roses, my favorite flower.

"Hi, can I help- Oh, it's you," the dark-haired woman from behind the register says, her face taking on a panicked expression. "Serena, right? What are you doing here?"

Am I not allowed to be here or something? "I wanted to book Mackenzie for a fundraising-"

I stop as I peer into her glass office, her head thrown back in laughter, the man in there with her smiling fondly at her. And it's not just any man.

It's my ex-fiancee.

"Is that Gabriel?"

"Um..." The woman trails off, clearly uncomfortable with whatever's going on.

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I walk over and knock on Mackenzie's office door, her eyes widening as she recognizes me. Gabriel looks over too, sobering when he sees me.

Mackenzie stands from behind her desk and calmly walks over, as put together as she always is, and gives me a wide smile as she opens the door for me. "Serena, what a surprise. How can I help you?"

Is no one going to address why Gabriel's here? The wedding was last week.

"That fundraiser I talked to you about a couple weeks ago. The one for my nonprofit. I, um... I'm sorry, am I interrupting something here?"

"No," she assures me, indicating for me to take a seat. "Gabriel works with me now."

My brows raise despite myself. He works here? At her event planning business?

"My dad disowned me," he explains. "And Mackenzie was nice enough to offer me a job."

She gives a small smile, rolling her eyes at him. "We're business partners now."

"Oh, wow. Archer never said anything about that."

Gabriel sticks his hands in his pockets, going over to stand by the window. "He doesn't know." He glances over at me wryly. "But don't worry about keeping it a secret. You can tell him."

Good. There's no way I could lie to Archer about something like that if it came up.

He rubs at the back of his neck, a sheepish expression crossing his face. "And, uh, I should apologize about what happened last week--"

"No, no. It's fine."

He arches a brow, clearly conveying his skepticism.

"I mean, the end result was fine." Better, actually. "And that op-ed you wrote helped too. Thank you."

He nods, studying me. What's with everyone doing that today?

"So things are going good between you and my brother? I haven't heard from him since Sunday."

"We're great." Well, as much as we can be.

Mackenzie watches us silently from her desk, thankfully keeping quiet about the confession I made to her weeks ago. She didn't tell Gabriel I wanted to marry his brother instead of him, did she?

"So you're happy?" His eyes, so similar to Archer's, narrow on me, like he's waiting for the least little sign to confirm or deny whatever he suspects. "Happier than you'd be with me at least?"

"Um, that's a loaded question."

"You don't have to spare my feelings," he grins.

“Yes. I’m happier.” And if I can get Archer on the same page as me, I’ll be ecstatic.

“Good.” He relaxes, his shoulders dropping. “You realize we’re in-laws now, right? I have to make sure my big brother is behaving.”

Oh God, I somehow didn’t make the connection he’s my brother-in-law. Talk about weird family reunions.

“So you wanted to discuss a fundraiser you’re hosting?” Mackenzie asks, steering us back to the reason I came here.

“Yes.” I gladly jump on the topic change and spend the next thirty minutes with them discussing a range of options for how the event can go, the atmosphere between the three of us infinitely easier than it was a month ago planning the wedding.

I leave with a plan to present to Wendy tomorrow after those interviews and focus my attention on what’s to come for tonight.

I hold the heavy glass tumbler in my hands as carefully as I can, trying not to let any of the alcohol slosh over the sides as I make my way to Archer’s home office. He closed himself off in here yet again, but I’m no longer letting that be a deterrent.

I was too nervous last time to study whether my skimpy outfit actually affected him, but I’m confident in his reception to my massages at least. The last two nights he turned to putty in my hands as soon as I started. It’s not exactly sexual, but I’ll take what I can get. And to be honest, it’s a bit of a power trip knowing I affect him like that.

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I knock on the door, his deep, “Come in,” from the other side sending a shiver through me. I concentrate on his face this time, his eyes widening the slightest bit as his gaze travels down my body, taking in my pale pink nightie, lingering on my legs.

Thanks, Victoria.

“You work late on weekends too?” I cross his office, bending over the massive desk to hand him his Scotch.

“It’s part of the job,” he replies, gaze now flicking between my face and the cleavage on display in front of him. Claire was definitely onto something with her advice.

I resist the urge to smile, my efforts finally bearing fruit. “Do you ever take a break?”

His lips twist wryly. “This week has been a break.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve been out more than I probably have in the last month. But there’s still the same workload. Well, even more now that we’re acquiring Montague Media.”

“Do you have a lot to do with that?”

“I’m the Chief Financial Officer. I’m ultimately responsible for making sure it’s in our best interest financially.”

“Haven’t you already done that, though? It must be serious if your father agreed to-”

Crap. Why am I bringing up that our whole relationship is only because of a business deal?

“Me marrying you? Yeah, Dad’s serious about it. He keeps going on about some proprietary algorithm Montague Media has that he wants. I don’t really understand it, to be honest.” Well, that makes two of us. “I’m a numbers guy, not a programmer.”

He taps at his keyboard. “Speaking of numbers, I saw you used the credit card I gave you.”

I gulp. “I’m sorry, it’s just so many of my clothes got taken away and-”

“Whoa, whoa. I wasn’t chastising. You’re allowed to use it. That’s why I- Wait. What do you mean your clothes got taken away?”

Double crap. Now I have to explain how Dad talked down to me like I was a simpleton? Tried to gaslight me so it seemed as if I was the one who was crazy for questioning why he was doing this? No thanks, I’ll pass.

Except, I can’t sweep this under the rug. I owe Archer an explanation, not only because I’m now living in his home thanks to his goodwill, but because he’s my husband. We’re supposed to be a team.

I sigh and sit on the edge of his desk, explaining everything that happened at my apartment a week ago, a wrinkle between his brows forming as I continue on.

“Does he regularly question your spending?”

“No. I have a lot of designer stuff, but that’s because he encouraged me to get those things. He wants me to look a certain way in public.”

“I get it.” And from the expression on his face, he does. His father has probably hounded him about the same thing. “Has he ever had money problems before?”

“What? No.” Dad’s always been rich.

“Then why’s he selling off your possessions? Real estate I can see, but used clothes?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t answer when I asked.”

He stares at me, but I get the sense his gaze is internally focused. “Hmm,” he finally says.

Does he suspect my father of something? That’s ridiculous. His company is doing great. It’s the whole reason Harold Bishop wanted to buy it to begin with. “What are you thinking?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“No, really.”

He holds his hands out in front of him in adon’t shoot the messengergesture. “Making you move out so fast? Selling your clothes? It’s just weird is all. But there’s nothing in his recent financial history to make me suspect anything. No major debts at least. He owns a majority stock in Montague Media, has the two apartments here in Manhattan, and the house in Brooklyn.”

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A house in Brooklyn? Why does he have a house there?

“A red flag like that is just something we usually look for when considering acquiring a company. Not only how the business itself is doing, but what the financial situation is like of the majority owner. If they’re selling it because of money troubles, Dad will lowball them on the price.”

“My dad has never mentioned anything about financial difficulties. But he doesn’t talk to me about any of that stuff.” Doesn’t talk to me at all normally.

“Do you have a trust fund? Has he tried to access that too?”

“No, he never set one up. He-” I pause, something occurring to me. “I think he’s always liked me being reliant on him. He holds it over my head if I need something.” Wow, how has it taken me this long to make that connection?

A flash of pity crosses over his face before it disappears. “Dad would always do the same thing with Gabriel to try and keep him in line. Look how that worked out.”

He leans back in his chair, taking a sip of the drink I brought him.

Right. That’s what I’m supposed to be here for. Not talking about my dad, the least sexy thing in the world.

“You know, if you’re tense from working, I could give you another massage.”

He looks up at me, and I swear the blue of his eyes burns bright for a moment. “Yeah,

okay.”

Is it my imagination or did his shoulders just tighten more?

I scoot off the desk and walk behind him, trailing my fingers up his arm, his bicep thick with muscle. I guess it'd have to be if he spends an hour working out every morning, though.

“Would you mind if I used your home gym?” Bishop Plaza has one, but the whole point is to be in there with him.

I lay my hands on his shoulders, squeezing, the slight sound of contentment he makes bringing a smile to my lips.

“Sure.” The heavy muscles of his upper back release as I begin to massage him, enjoying the opportunity to touch him so freely. “I use it from six to seven in the morning.”

Perfect. Now I just have to wake up that early.

My right hand works the tightness out of his neck, his head bending low to aid me.

“Have you had professional training for this?”

“No,” I laugh. “It’s just instinct.”

He groans as I return my attention to his shoulders, my belly dipping pleasantly in response to the deep sound. I’m fairly sure it’s simply reactive on his part, but I can’t help how it affects me.

The feel of him warm under my hands, even through his dress shirt. The breadth of

his shoulders, as powerful physically as he is in the boardroom. The musk of his cologne, masculine and sensual.

I sigh, wishing I could hug him from behind, run my palms over his chest, surrender to the hold he has over me.

Does he feel any kind of attraction toward me? That kiss last night seemed to indicate so, but what if that was merely an involuntary response? Not because of me specifically, but something biological, solely because he's a man and I'm a woman?

And would I really want to know if it was?

I continue massaging his shoulders until my hands ache and have to stop. Maybe I do need professional training. I step out from behind him, flexing my fingers to relieve the pressure. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

His eyes flutter open, seeming to come out of a trance. "Yeah, okay."

I walk to the door, turning back one last time to catch his gaze on me.

No matter the reason he's looking at me, I'll take it.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:20 am*

Archer

One more mile. Just one more mile. Then arms for ten minutes, abs for five, shower and breakfast, preparing for the meeting with Accounting tomorrow-

The door to my home gym opens and Serena walks in, form fitting leggings and a crop top gracing her lithe body.

“Good morning,” she says, covering her mouth to contain a yawn.

What is she doing here? I told her I’d be in here until seven. Wait, she didn’t take that as an invitation, did she?

I nod at her, too winded from my pace on the treadmill to comfortably talk.

“Can I use one of your mats?”

I gesture to the corner where I keep them, and she picks the thickest one, rolling it out in the center of the room. And after that, she starts... stretching. Ass in the air, directly toward me, touching her toes. Swaying side to side, loosening her hamstrings and calves, the action like a beacon to my unwitting eyes.

I lower my speed, half afraid I’ll trip over my feet with the added distraction.

“Do you ever do yoga?” she asks, transitioning up into some kind of backbend so I can see down her shirt, my shorts tightening in response.

Oh, it's yoga she's doing? I assumed she was trying to torture me.

I clear my throat, no idea how my voice will sound. "No."

"Just cardio and lifting weights?"

"Yeah."

I glance down at the readout on the treadmill. Three quarters of a mile to go.

"If you ever wanted to learn, I could teach you."

So she can put her hands on me, guiding me into the correct position? Those hands are already dangerous enough on my shoulders and neck at night. If I invite her to touch other places... no, not a good idea.

She moves into a plank position, then up into some kind of upside down V. What is that called - a downward dog? It definitely involves her pert ass facing me again.

I'm unable to look away as she continues, her body flowing through the poses, seemingly oblivious to me, and it's not until my treadmill beeps at me that I realize how much time has passed, so caught up in watching her.

It's okay to watch, though, right? She wouldn't have done all this in front of me if she didn't want me to see. Not that she asked me to check out her ass...

Fuck, this is too confusing.

I step off the treadmill, not bothering to cool down. "I'm taking a shower."

"Okay. Thanks for letting me join you."

I swear to God she wiggles as I leave, and I speed down the hallway to my room, not wanting Lori to spot me from the kitchen. Or more specifically, my shorts.

My hard-on bobs in front of me as I strip down in the bathroom, waiting for the shower to heat, and I deliberately avoid it as I get in and wash the sweat off me.

But I can't get the image of Serena bending over out of my head. Her ass pressed against my front, glancing over her shoulder with sultry eyes, begging me to take her. Gripping her hips, sinking into her wet heat, a low moan issuing from her as I hold her in place, giving her-

No, what the fuck am I thinking? I let go of my cock, not even realizing what I was doing, and shut the water off, bracing a hand against the tile. My chest pumps harshly, air suddenly hard to get in, and I take in a long inhale, exhaling slowly. But no matter what breathing exercises I do, my erection won't go down. And I can't go out there like this. Not with two women in the house, one of which I'm lusty after, apparently.

I cautiously grip myself, biting my lip to contain the moan that wants to escape at first contact. Did that kiss the other night addle my brain? Serena's playing a part, the same as I am. A happy couple in love. But in reality, we know nothing about one another.

That doesn't seem to matter to my dick, though, excited thinking about her once again, and I give in to the urge, only so I don't go back out there for breakfast with a raging hard-on and embarrass myself.

She visited my office last night, this time in a nightie that technically covered all the important bits, but designed to leave you wanting more. Or maybe it was just me feeling that way. Something about her touch both lit me up inside and soothed me. How is it possible to have two contradictory reactions?

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Her caresses gentle and assured, her sweet breaths on the back of my neck, perfume filling my nose. Those delicate hands stroking my shoulders...

What else could she stroke?

My movements speed up, lost in it now, remembering those photos we took kissing. I still can't believe how real they'd looked. Two lovers caught in a private moment, wanting each other. Her lips soft, waist trim as I gripped it tight. Her response had been so genuine, her mouth eagerly meeting mine, the brief touch of her tongue exhilarating.

It was only for pretend, right? Just to get the shot. Then why did it feel so real?

And why do I want it again?

I groan loudly, too far gone to care at this point, stroking myself madly, frantically, wishing it was her touching me. This enigmatic woman that's barrelled into my life, somehow both sweet and seductive, innocently tempting me.

Serena. My wife.

I gasp as I come, jetting on the shower tile, breath sawing in and out, shame immediately washing over me. If she knew I was thinking of her like this, doing this to thoughts of her, she'd be shocked. Horrified. Mortified.

I'm mortified. I shouldn't have done it. Shouldn't have opened this door that seems somehow... dangerous in where it may lead. She deserves my respect, not this

primitive slaverling over her.

I can't help my instinctive reaction to her, but I can control it at least. This won't be happening again.

I clean up and dry off, dressing for the day, glad now I cut my workout short since my shower took so long. When I walk into the kitchen, Serena's already at the counter eating an omelet, a matching plate next to her for me.

I avoid her eye, sitting down and shoveling the eggs in.

"Hungry?" Lori asks, washing out the pan in the sink.

I grunt, my mouth too full to respond. Serena's floral scent teases me once again, to the point where I'm wondering if I'm imagining it. I doubt she doused herself in perfume after waking just to exercise.

It's all in my head. Her response to the kiss. This attraction. We have a job to do, the public to convince. Just because there's a Mr. and Mrs. in front of our names doesn't mean there's anything more between us.

"What do you have planned today?" Serena asks, wiping at those luscious lips with a napkin.

No. Not luscious. Just normal lips.

"Work."

My one word answer doesn't seem to deter her, though. "Well, if you're free later, I'll be at the animal shelter. It could be a good photo op. Exposure for us and the animals."

“I’ll think about it,” I mumble, clearing my plate in record time and placing it in the sink.

The faint question, “What’s up his butt?” from Lori echoes in my ears as I hightail it to my office, shutting the door firmly. Nothing’s up my butt. I just need to concentrate.

But I can’t do that when all I’m envisioning is Serena perching on the edge of my desk, those slim thighs just within reach. Her standing behind my chair, smoothing her hands over my back, a comforting weight on my shoulders that incited as much as it soothed.

Damn it. When did I start waxing poetic? I didn’t do that a week ago.

I should be continuing my research on Greg Montague’s financial history. He downgraded from a ten million dollar condo earlier in the year to one valued at two million, but that isn’t necessarily suspicious by itself. And from the pictures online, Serena’s condo was nice, but won’t net him a fortune in its sale. And why does he need the house in Brooklyn? What’s going on there?

As far as records go, there are no outstanding loans, nothing crazy on his credit report, no reason to suspect anything.

But that tingle on the back of my neck hearing Serena describe the situation last night... it doesn’t add up. Why the hell is he selling off his daughter’s things? She said they’ve always gotten along civilly, as long as she did what he asked. And she did. She married into the Bishop family.

But the reason he had her do that to begin with... Dad said Greg wanted our connections. As an upwardly mobile thing or something else? Financial protection, perhaps?

But from what?

I push it out of my mind with no new information to go on and get started on preparing for the upcoming week, but I'm only an hour in before I'm interrupted by an email from Angelina going on about high engagement in our last post and striking while the iron's hot. Basically, what it boils down to is taking more lovey-dovey photos with Serena.

I run my hands through my hair, tugging at the strands. Logically, I know I need to head down to that animal shelter. Like she said, it's the perfect photo op. But after my slip-up in the shower, spending time with her seems... risky.

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Why?

I don't know. It just does.

What do you think will happen?

Nothing. We'll walk a dog, snap a photo, and that'll be it.

Then why are you worried?

Whose side are you on anyway?

I shut my laptop and stand, muttering to myself as I text James to come pick me up in fifteen.

I haven't talked to myself like this since-

Jesus Christ, can my brain give it a rest? Do I have no control over my thoughts today?

I breathe deeply on the way to the shelter, completely calm by the time I arrive. I'll take a photo and leave. Quick and painless. No need to get all worked up.

A bell rings over the door as I enter, a pair of women stopping their conversation as they look over at me.

"Hi, is-"

“She’s in there,” one of them interrupts with a knowing smile, pointing at a back area.  
“I’ll get her for you.”

The other woman eyes me carefully, not hostile by any means, but like she’s taking my measure. “How’s newlywed life treating you?”

“Well.”

“Good.” She sticks her hand out over the counter and I shake it. “I’m Wendy, the executive director here.”

I return my hands to my pockets, wondering how long it’ll take Serena to get out here. “Nice to meet you.”

“You married an amazing woman. She does a lot of good around here. Everyone loves her.”

I stay silent, sensing she’s not finished with whatever it is she wants to say.

“It hurt to see her so upset over the last month after getting engaged to your brother. Wouldn’t talk to any of us about it. And now she’s back to her usual self, married to you instead. Bit of a wild turn of events. Can you shed any light on the situation?”

Underneath the nosiness, there’s caring, but I’m not the person to answer her questions. “I won’t put words in Serena’s mouth. You’ll have to ask her.”

She gives me a level stare, but thankfully doesn’t have time to further interrogate me as Serena enters the room, her face stretching in a delighted smile.

“Archer.” She walks over and hugs me, my arm automatically snaking around her waist to return her embrace. “What brings you by?”

I breathe in deep before I even realize what I'm doing, the already familiar scent easing me. I'm aware of Wendy's gaze still on me as I bend down to whisper, "Angelina wants another picture."

Her smile isn't as wide as I lean back. "Okay. I can do that." She turns to Wendy. "I'm going to take a quick break."

"You take as long as you need, honey. It was certainly good to meet you, Archer."

I nod, nothing about her words or tone indicating any displeasure with me, but I sense it all the same. Like she's a mama bear and I'm messing too closely with her cub. But I'm not doing anything wrong with Serena.

And why do I even care?

"How about we take Petey for a walk?" Serena asks, letting go of me.

Who is Petey? "Uh, sure."

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She disappears in the back, returning a minute later with an energetic white dog with a big patch of brown over one eye. He strains at his leash to reach me, doing everything he can to lick my hand. I bend down and scratch behind his ears, his tail thumping the floor.

“Are you a dog person?” she asks, smiling normally again.

“I like them. But we never had any pets growing up. And I work so much now...”

“I understand.”

We head out into the warm sunshine, Petey sticking to Serena’s side once she tells him to heel.

“So you actually help out in the shelter? I thought you were on the board.”

“Oh, I am. But paperwork is my least favorite part. I’d rather be downstairs with the animals any day.”

Why did I think she was just a figurehead? “Why not hire someone to handle that stuff then?”

“Wendy does so much already. She’s our executive director. But we’re almost all volunteer based. We can’t afford anyone else.” She chuckles, but there’s little humor in it. “Actually, we can’t afford anything anymore. Dad cut all the funding.”

I’m careful not to show a reaction after our talk last night. She hadn’t been pleased

when I questioned her father's finances. But this is one more thing to feed that kernel of suspicion in my gut.

"Everything is budgeted through June - that's the end of our fiscal year - but after that, I need to figure out something else. Grants or donations, I guess."

I glance over, her mouth set in a frown that tugs at my chest for some reason.

"Bishop Industries donates to a number of charities. I'll add your shelter to the list."

"No, I can't ask you to do that."

"I'm offering."

Her lips tip up at the corners, but she keeps her gaze focused ahead. "Thank you. But only a partial amount. We need to be more self-sustaining so this issue doesn't happen again. I actually went to talk to Mackenzie about it yesterday and--"

She stops in the middle of the sidewalk, Petey tugging at the leash.

"What is it?"

"I forgot to mention I saw Gabriel there."

I can't keep my face neutral this time as my brows lift in surprise. "Mackenzie was the wedding planner, right?"

She nods, stepping to the side so someone can pass her.

"What was he doing there?"

“He said he works there now.”

Excuse me? “Gabriel’s planning weddings?”

“Well, Mackenzie plans other events too.”

My brain still can’t catch up with the fact he’s working on weddings when his was such a disaster. “That’s not the point. He- What the hell is he thinking?”

“Where else is he supposed to work?”

Her question gives me pause. My brother has a degree, true, but zero experience planning anything. “I don’t know, but... event planning?”

She shrugs. “I guess he’s lucky Mackenzie offered him a job.”

Yeah, lucky indeed. What, did he call her up and beg her or something? Why would she even hire someone with no experience?

We continue down the street, Petey’s tail wagging happily, tongue sticking out of his mouth, as my mind works through the situation.

Serena’s comment earlier this week that she felt like a third wheel when they were planning the wedding.

Gabriel placing his hand on Mackenzie’s lower back as they exited the rehearsal dinner.

Connor revealing that Gabriel fell in love with someone over the last month. Someone there’d be consequences for if people found out.

I suck in a breath, one potential answer hitting me square in the chest.

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Archer

Could it- No, he wouldn't do that. He isn't stupid enough.

We didn't mean for it to happen, but it did.

Damn it. How does Gabriel always end up putting me in the most awkward positions? If Dad finds out about this-

No, no. I don't know anything for sure. There's no concrete evidence. Even Serena didn't sound like she suspected something.

"So, tell me about your shelter." Anything to deflect from the very real possibility that my brother fell in love with his wedding planner.

I glance over as her eyes light up, the most animated I've seen her as she tells me about the dogs they find homes for, the volunteers that give their time and effort into running the place, how she wishes they had more room, more money, so they wouldn't have to turn some animals away when they're at capacity.

"I'd like to expand our fostering program, but I need more families to do that. The ones I do have will usually take puppies because they're so cute, but it's the older dogs I worry for. Once they're over five, it's harder to get people interested."

I don't have much to add to the conversation, but there's something about her voice that's nice to listen to. Not just the sweet cadence, but the passion behind her words. When was the last time I felt truly passionate about my work?

Don't get me wrong, I'm dedicated to Bishop Industries and my position there, but we don't actually do anything I care about. I'm not particularly attached to ThousandWords, our biggest holding, or the handful of other technology companies we own. The only other major assets we have in our portfolio are two prime pieces of real estate - the residential Bishop Plaza and the commercial Bishop Tower - but I don't take particular pride in either. I live in one and work in the other, but I could do those things anywhere.

Why does this even matter? Just because Serena has found something she enjoys doing doesn't mean there's anything wrong with my life.

"We still have to take a picture," I remind her as we turn a corner to loop back around to the shelter.

"Right."

She switches Petey's leash to her other hand to grab her phone out of her pocket, which the dog uses as an opportunity to dart between her legs, nearly tripping her in the process.

I instinctively catch her before she face plants on the sidewalk, and bring her back up, willing my heart to slow down. She could have broken a bone, scraped her face up, chipped a tooth, who knows what if I hadn't been here.

"Sit," I command Petey in a firm voice, his butt instantly hitting the pavement, and unwrap the leash from where it's tangled around her. "Are you all right? You hurt?" I run my palms down her arms, needing to check for myself she's okay. She was so close to seriously hurting herself.

"I'm fine. Embarrassed more than anything else."

I let go of her, keeping a tight hold on the leash.

She gives me a sheepish smile. “I can still walk him.”

“I’ll do it.” I’m not letting this dog trip her up again.

She holds up the phone she finally managed to extract from her pocket. “Then let me get a picture of the two of you.” I swear Petey sits up straighter, his tongue lolling out goofily. “And now one of all of us.”

She steps into my side, my free hand automatically going around her waist, her head fitting into the curve of my neck easily. When did this start to feel so natural?

The dog looks up at her as she idly scratches his ears, like she’s the answer to the universe, complete trust in his soulful eyes. You know, she never scolded him for tripping her, never got mad. She only showed him affection, gave him another chance. For a shelter dog, has he had many second chances?

Does anybody really?

I make a mental note to bring up our charitable donations to Dad at our next meeting and watch as she scrolls through the photos she just took.

“What about this one?” She leans in again, loose tendrils of her hair blowing against me, her perfume unidentifiable today among the other outside smells, and it takes me a minute to focus on the screen.

“It looks perfect.” A happy family. The way things were growing up before Mom-

My hand finds hers, gripping it tightly, surprising both of us. But rather than retreat, she grips it back, a smile spreading across her face as we continue walking, Petey

staying dutifully by my side.

I glance ahead, spotting two women pointing in our direction, and the reason for Serena's behavior washes over me. Of course. I keep forgetting it's not just enough to go out with her, but to sell it to everyone too. How does she stay in character like that so easily?

When we're nearly back to the shelter, we pause by a tree for Petey to take a leak, a jewelry shop window in front of us. Serena walks over to peer inside, her face wistful as she gazes at the rings on display.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. They’re just beautiful is all.”

I join her after Petey’s finished, her eye on an intricately set diamond front and center nestled in velvet. “I thought you didn’t want a ring.”

“What?”

“Gabriel said you just wanted a band.”

She dips her chin down. “Well, if you wanted to get me one, that’d be different.”

She wants a ring from me, but not Gabriel? What does that mean?

I’m silent, almost feeling like I’m walking into a trap. If I tell her I don’t understand, I’ll somehow disappoint her, but if I say I’ll buy her one, I’m reading too much into things.

Petey tugs at the leash, solving my dilemma for me, and noses at her hand.

“Okay, boy.” She bends down, giving his rump a quick pat. “Let’s get you back.”

I slow as we approach the front doors of the shelter, no wish for Wendy to interrogate me again, though I can’t even prove she did that to begin with.

“I’ll see you tonight?”

She takes the leash from me, wrapping it around her hand. “Yeah, I’ll be done here in a few hours.”

Good. That gives me plenty of time for my next stop.

Through the glass doors, Wendy’s gaze meets mine, and I’m suddenly hyper aware of our surroundings. The people pushing by us on the sidewalk, cars driving past on the street, everyone that potentially sees us. The world is our stage and we’re the actors.

I cup Serena’s chin gently, tipping her face up to give her a soft goodbye kiss. And despite needing to do it for appearance’s sake, that doesn’t explain why I linger over the sweetness of her lips. Why the urge to explore her mouth further eats at me. Why I almost wish we were alone, no one to witness this moment that should be private.

I step back, nearly tripping over the damn dog myself, and right myself before she can say anything. “Send me that picture and I’ll forward it to Angelina.”

She nods, my mind already blocking out that kiss and focusing on the next task as I walk the short distance from the shelter to the flower shop Google tells me Mackenzie’s office is located in.

And lo and behold, who should I see through the window but my brother, sitting at a desk doing something on a computer. I enter the shop and bypass the woman at the register, heading straight toward the enclosed office at the other end, rapping briskly on the door.

He glances up, his face slightly paling as he motions for me to come in.

I take a seat in a paisley print club chair in front of him, unsure where to even start.

“Serena told you?” he finally asks.

“Not the whole story. But I’m pretty sure I figured out why Mackenzie offered you a job to begin with. And it’s not because you’ve always dreamed of planning weddings.”

He pales further, standing swiftly, but I hold a hand up to stop him. “I won’t tell anyone. Not Connor. Not Serena. And especially not Dad.”

He returns to his seat, blowing out a long breath. “I’m not confirming anything.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. You’ve got a lot at stake.”

He nods cautiously.

“But seriously, you don’t think this is going to raise any suspicions?”

“I’m allowed to work here.” He crosses his arms over his chest, the defiant boy I remember. “I have to earn a living somehow.”

“I just don’t want either of you on his radar. Be careful.”

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His arms drop. “We are. And I’m... I’m good at this, okay?”

“I wasn’t saying you weren’t.”

“I know, but it’s like I’m finally where I’m supposed to be. I have a purpose, like you and Connor do.”

A purpose. Is that what he thinks I have?

“I look forward to it every day,” he continues. “There’s something different all the time. I’m challenged. And appreciated. I had no idea what any of this was like before.”

Am I those things too? I can’t tell anymore. “I’m happy for you then.”

Fulfillment. First with Serena, now with Gabriel. I’ve never questioned it, but am I fulfilled in the same way?

“Do you want to get lunch?” I ask, remembering the other part of Angelina’s email. “If we’re seen together...”

“It’ll show there are no hard feelings,” he finishes. “Yeah, I got it. But, uh, not one of your fancy restaurants.” He smirks. “I can’t afford it.”

And I can’t buy him lunch in case Dad finds out. “This is so ridiculous.”

“You’re telling me. I’m living it.” He scoots his chair away from the desk. “Come on.

There's a cafe about a block up from here someone might recognize us at."

Is that what our relationship has been reduced to? For appearance's sake only, like me and Serena? Even that seems to have become... something else.

I'm just not sure what, though.

The clock on the lower right hand corner of my screen flips over to five after ten, my brain anywhere but where it needs to be. The yearly budget analysis is coming up, not to mention my meeting with Accounting tomorrow I should prepare for.

Instead, I'm checking the door of my home office every few minutes, waiting for Serena to come in. What will she wear tonight? Another nightgown so sheer I swear I could see her nipples through it? Or lingerie underneath a sinfully short robe?

No, no. It doesn't matter what she wears. Doesn't matter if she comes in at all. I'm in here to work.

My eyes flick to the time. Only a minute has passed. Damn.

How many years have I been working in here fine without her showing up? And now I can't concentrate because she's come in and rubbed my shoulders a few times?

Pathetic.

I squint at the screen, but my mind just isn't there. I might as well accept I won't get anything done until this situation is resolved.

I shut my laptop and deliberate for another minute on what to do. I mean, it's only logical to check on her. She's made a habit the past few nights of checking in on me. There could be something wrong if she hasn't come in by now.

I step into the hallway, the kitchen and living room dark, but her bedroom door is open a crack, and as I get closer, it sounds like she's watching some kind of sitcom from the canned audience laughter.

I nudge the door the tiniest bit, discovering Serena lounging on her bed, foot propped on a pillow and a giant bowl of popcorn on her lap. Her eyes are closed, head thrown back in laughter, the image of her absolutely... gorgeous.

There's no other word for it. How alive she looks, raucously laughing at whatever's happening on the screen, so different from the other times I've seen her. Her hair up in a clip, not a stitch of makeup on, flannel pajama pants and an oversized sweatshirt gracing her form.

I clear my throat and her gaze immediately shifts over to me, her eyes widening. We're both silent for a beat and then she shrieks, popcorn flying in the air, somehow losing her balance in the process, and nearly tumbles off the bed.

She rights herself before I can get to her, placing her hand on her chest as she breathes in and out heavily. "Oh my God, you scared me."

"I'm sorry. I should have knocked-"

"No, it's fine, I just wasn't expecting you." She readjusts herself, setting her foot atop the pillow at the end once more.

"You didn't stop by tonight. I wanted to make sure everything was okay."

She bites her lip, failing to contain a smile. "Do you like it when I come to your office?"

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“I, uh...” I can’t admit to her how much I was looking forward to her nightwear, how my shoulders seemed to preemptively ache waiting for her to massage them, how parched my throat was expecting a glass of whiskey to soothe it. “I’ve gotten used to it.”

“I’ve only done it twice,” she smiles. Really? Only twice? It seems a lot longer than that. “But I’ll make sure to stop by tomorrow night.”

I nod, ignoring the burst of anticipation that races through me, instead motioning to her foot. “Is everything okay?”

She rolls her eyes good-naturedly. “You’re not going to believe it, but Petey tripped me again. I promise I’m not normally this clumsy.”

“That dog’s a menace.”

“He’s a sweetheart. And I didn’t even realize my ankle was hurting until I was standing at the stove making this popcorn.” She scoops the pieces that had fallen out of the bowl back in, seemingly unconcerned.

“Do you need to go to the doctor? I can call one in-”

“Archer, I’m fine. I took some Tylenol and should be good in the morning. It’s only a little sore. I’m just giving myself permission to relax and veg out in front of some mindless TV in the meantime.”

I turn toward the screen. “What are you watching?” There’s an unshaven messy

looking guy, another with ridiculously parted big hair, and a normal woman in a suit, all in some kind of office environment.

“The IT Crowd.” Her eyes widen at my look of incomprehension. “You’ve never heard of it?”

“No.” Was I supposed to?

“Here.” She scoots over and pats the spot next to her on the bed. “Watch an episode with me.”

No, I still have work to do. And I shouldn’t be laying in her bed with her. And I might accidentally jostle her ankle.

And yet, I find myself sitting down, slowly easing into the plush pillows she has propped behind her, listening to her explanation of what’s going on. She laughs at my questions about the incompetent boss and strange goth guy, telling me it’s not meant to be realistic, and I relax after that, letting the dry British humor wash over me.

I eat the popcorn she offers, some kind of addictive parmesan topping making my mouth water, and listen to her occasional laughter, leaning in to hear it better. When’s the last time anyone really laughed around me? And when did my life get to the point where I can’t remember something like that?

As the episode ends, neither of us say anything as the TV autoplays to the next one, and I stay equally silent as she moves closer while readjusting her foot on its pillow. This near, her perfume makes its appearance once again, wafting softly over me, comforting me.

“Did Angelina comment on the photo from this afternoon?” she asks, settling back into a reclining position.

“She approved. Especially adding the dog.” I take another bite of popcorn. “What did Wendy say?”

“About what?”

She’s going to make me say it? “When I kissed you.”

Her eyes dart over to me and back to the TV. “She said it was good to see me happy.”

I nod, focusing on the show again, but something niggles at the back of my mind. Good to see her happy. As if she wasn’t before. And Wendy mentioned Serena being upset last month after getting engaged to Gabriel.

But Serena’s a great actress. Why would she appear upset?

“Have you... not been happy?”

She sighs, keeping her gaze faced forward. “I didn’t want to marry your brother,” she replies bluntly. “But I’ve come around to the idea since then.”

Since she was still engaged to Gabriel? Or since marrying me?

Not that it matters.

“Are you happy now?”

She finally looks over at me, but for some reason, I can’t meet her eye. “Yeah, I am,” she says softly.

Warmth spreads through my chest unexpectedly before I tamp it down. She’s not happy because of me. It’s probably because she has her dad off her back now.

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It sounded more like he had cast her aside the last time she spoke of him. That's not something to be happy about.

Okay, then. She was afraid of the unknown with Gabriel. And now that she's actually living with me, she realizes it's not so bad.

Yeah, that's it.

We watch another episode, and I turn to her after it's over to ask if she wants to keep going, only to find her eyes shut, head turned awkwardly on her pillow. My gaze drifts down, one sleeve of her sweatshirt slipping off, her shoulder bare. Is she wearing anything underneath?

Jesus Christ. The sexy sleepwear I can understand provoking these thoughts, but oversized loungewear? What's wrong with me?

I turn off the TV and set the popcorn bowl on her nightstand, pulling a spare blanket from the closet to lie over her. She makes a soft snuffling sound as she curls into its warmth, and I quickly close the door behind me, needing to get out of there, to preserve my sanity if nothing else. Every day I spend with her uncovers yet another side of her, today being no different.

Nonprofit director beloved by her employees and animals alike.

Homebody who enjoys watching cheesy comedies, her soprano laughter sweet and inviting.

Unintentional seductress with yoga moves that make men fall to their knees.

She keeps pulling me in, something about her rendering me powerless against any will to fight.

But what exactly is she doing?

And what am I fighting?

Serena

Ispritz my Dior perfume on my wrists, rubbing them together to distribute the scent, and inhale deeply, loving the mixture of roses and peonies. It's always been a confidence booster for me, and I've been relying on it more than ever the past week. It's a shame my bottle's nearly run out.

Staring at myself in the bathroom mirror, I fuss with my hair for a few minutes and end up leaving it loose around my shoulders, unable to commit to a hairstyle. Butterflies dance in my stomach as I double check the sash on my silk robe, then wipe my sweaty palms on a hand towel. It's not nerves - just excitement.

Archer basically said he liked me visiting his office, right? That was the underlying message behind his words last night. And I promised to visit. I can't back out now.

I'm giddy as I head into the kitchen and fill one of the heavy tumblers with Scotch, willing my hands not to shake as I carry it to his office door.

There's no reason to be nervous. He practically invited me here.

I think.

I knock softly and enter, his gaze not focused on me but his laptop, squinting at the screen. Does he need glasses or something? Every time I see him at his computer, he's squinting.

"Hi."

He straightens in his chair, eyes catching mine. “You came.”

“I said I would, didn’t I?” I’ve been looking forward to it all day, only half paying attention to the board meeting I sat in on for a local museum.

I hand him his Scotch, but there’s no lingering this time on my cleavage. I’ve never been so disappointed to have a man not ogle me before.

He takes a long draw from the glass, pinching at the bridge of his nose afterward. “Thanks. I needed that.”

“If you ever need anything, just let me know.”

He sets the whiskey down, rubbing at the back of his neck, but otherwise stays silent.

“How was work?”

“Lots of meetings today.”

“And no breaks?”

His lips twist wryly. “No breaks.”

“Can you take one now?”

He watches me for a moment, his blue eyes holding me in place. If I could only figure out what’s going on in his head. He finally nods, shutting his laptop.

I circle around to the back of his chair, once again whispering my hands up his strong arms, all the way to those broad shoulders, massaging at the heavy muscles, his whole demeanor changing. He lets out a long breath, relaxing into his seat. “I’m

starting to get spoiled.”

If you think this is good, let me show you what I can really do.

No, I can’t actually say that. “I like doing it.” It’s the truth. And can be taken in a totally non-sexual way.

He chuckles lightly. “Why?”

Of course he’d ask me that. “I like helping you. There’s so little I can do otherwise.”

His shoulders tighten. “You don’t owe me anything.”

I dig my thumbs in until he relaxes again. “I know. But I’m saying I want to.” I close my eyes, immediately wishing I hadn’t phrased it like that. “Not owe you. I just mean it’s something easy for me to do, and you seem to enjoy it, so why not?”

Ugh, that’s just as bad, like I don’t care one way or the other.

I keep my mouth shut after that, not wanting to make things worse, and after I’ve done as much as I possibly can, my hands aching, I gradually stop, smoothing my palms along his shoulders. I linger for a moment longer, the ready made excuse to touch him dwindling, and eventually step back.

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He spins his chair around to face me, the first time he's done that, and looks up at me seriously. "Thank you."

"It's no trouble."

His gaze finally lowers on my choice of sleepwear for the night, a sapphire silk robe similar to the black one he's already seen. It dips low in the front, the lace balconette bra I'm wearing beneath peeking out the tiniest bit.

My breaths hasten under his watchful stare, waiting for... something.

"Do you normally wear stuff like this to bed?"

Oh God, I'm busted. No, obviously I don't sleep in skimpy robes and lingerie. "I, um, told you how I couldn't take all my clothes with me."

"I thought you bought more things."

Yeah. What you're looking at. Time to deflect. "Do you not like what I'm wearing?"

He reaches out, fingering the silk tie of the robe. "It's soft."

I bite my lip, wishing he'd tug the tiniest bit to loosen the sash. "Mmm hmm."

"You can use my card to buy whatever you need." He continues playing with the tie, looping it around his finger. "But I do like it. I mean, it looks good on you."

I smile, glad to have finally gotten something out of him. “Well, if you like it, I don’t need anything else.”

He glances up at me, his hand dropping, but with the tie still wrapped around his finger, it opens the robe, revealing my matched lingerie set.

His gaze drops to my breasts, traveling south over my bare midriff to the low-cut scrap of lace covering my bottom half, and back up, getting stuck on my chest.

My nipples bead under his stare, clearly visible in the bra meant purely for enjoyment rather than any kind of actual support, and his body sways toward me, eyes glazed over with a hunger that makes my belly dip low with excitement.

Have I put a spell on him? Is my plan actually working?

I move closer, his legs parting as I step in between them, his hand coming forward to wrap itself around my waist. He finally looks up, gaze burning fiercely, and I bend down, under a spell myself as our mouths meet in a hot kiss.

His other hand comes up to cup the back of my neck, his warmth sending shivers through me, and I brace my hands on his shoulders, his lips moving masterfully under mine. His grip on me tightens, urging me forward, until I can’t get any closer, his hand drifting down, guiding me to bring first one leg up, then the other, straddling his lap in his office chair, the leather cool under my shins.

I settle myself on him, both his hands palming my ass, and I let out a shaky moan, a flare of arousal coursing through me. I press into him, his cock hardening underneath me, and lick my way into his mouth, too far gone to care about appearances or whether he’ll think this is too forward. This is what I’ve wanted. What I’ve been craving.

And he's right there with me, his tongue tangling with mine, the taste of whiskey inciting me. I cup his jaw, changing the angle of our kiss, and grind on top of him, his gentle squeezes of my ass doing more than he knows to build me up.

I rub my chest against his, the friction against my nipples making me moan aloud again, and he breaks from my mouth to trail kisses down my neck and into the valley of my breasts, my breaths harsh as his tongue delves into my cleavage. He moves to my right breast, one hand coming up to gently shape its weight, his lips flirting with the edge of the bra cup, and my chest strains toward him, hoping he'll go further.

My hips continue to move reflexively on him, using the bulge in his pants to grind on, a rush running through me as his tongue makes contact with my nipple, swirling around it slowly. An unintelligible noise escapes me, my fingers digging at his shoulders once more, wishing his shirt was gone so I could touch the warmth of his skin.

He moves the bra cup down further, sucking gently at my breast, tingles spreading throughout me at how good it feels, how much I've wanted this, how long I've waited.

"Archer," I pant, the sensations overwhelming me, grinding harder against him, that elusive peak suddenly there. I hurtle over it, wild as I buck against him, unable to control myself.

And it's only as my breaths slow that the realization of what I just did sets in. Dry humped him like there's no tomorrow, chanting his name, tearing down all the carefully constructed walls I've built making it seem like I'm not completely gone for him already. Revealing how little sexual experience I actually have, as evidenced by how quickly I came on top of him, when he barely even touched me.

"I, uh..." I lean back, my cheeks burning hot, looking everywhere but him. He'll

realize my true intentions, how badly I've wanted him from the start.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this. I was going to be smooth, seductive. Not a red-faced mess who can't keep herself together.

I climb off his lap and close my robe, rushing out of his office, no clue what to say and no desire to stick around.

I make it to the safety of my bedroom and shut the door behind me, panting in the darkness of the room, my heart pounding. I'll figure it out tomorrow. Somehow, in my dreams tonight, the answer will come to me of how to perfectly explain away my ridiculous-

"Serena?"

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My eyes squeeze tight, heartbeat picking up even more, until I'm sure he can hear it through the door. If I stay quiet, will he give up and return to his room? Could I pretend like I'm not home?

"I just want to check that you're okay." He clears his throat, voice lowering. "I'm not sure what happened in there."

You married a crazy lady, that's what.

"I'm fine." It comes out higher pitched than I'd like, but there's nothing I can do about it.

There's silence on the other side, long enough for the heat in my cheeks to fade, for the squeezing sensation in my chest to loosen its grip, but my reprieve doesn't last forever.

"I think we should talk."

Crap. What man actually wants to talk?

I turn on the lamp and open the door, turning around to sit on my bed, angled away from him. I don't know what to say, how to explain myself, how to-

"I'm sorry."

I look over at him, his hair disheveled, as if he's been running his hands through it, a sober expression on his face.

“I completely overstepped the boundaries and I shouldn’t have done that.”

My lips part, unsure I’m hearing him correctly. Is he apologizing to me?

“You were right to leave,” he continues. “We never agreed on any-”

“Archer, no.” Guilt churns in my stomach. I can’t have him blaming himself, especially over something that was one hundred percent my doing. “I didn’t leave because I thought it was wrong. I left because I was... embarrassed.”

He blinks. “At what we did?”

“No, just... myself.”

“Why?”

Is he really going to make me say it?

“I haven’t- I’ve never-” I look down at my lap, stroking the silk tie of my robe that started it all. “I’ve never orgasmed from a guy before, okay? And I freaked out a little.”

There’s silence in the room, my face flooding with heat, and I let my hair fall down in a curtain to hide me from his view.

Yeah, I know how it sounds. This gorgeous, brilliant, noble man who could have any woman he wants is stuck with me - the twenty-seven year old wonder who’s been with a grand total of two guys. And I apparently didn’t inspire enough from either of them to do more than grunt on top of me for a while until they finished.

There’s a soft rustle, and then the mattress depresses down next to me, Archer filling

my vision.

“Hey.” He places a finger under my chin, lifting it up. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

My lips twist in an attempt not to cry - from his kindness or my own mortification, I’m not sure.

“I’m being serious. You were... glorious.”

My mouth dries at the earnest look on his face. What in the world is he talking about?

“Do you have, uh, any experience with guys?” he asks, then immediately shakes his head. “Wait, I shouldn’t have asked-”

“No, it’s fine. I-” I swallow, wishing I’d never started this whole thing. What did I think would happen when I played with fire? “I’ve been in two relationships. Neither lasted long. And they didn’t- Well, I guess they didn’t care enough to try-” Ugh, how do I say this?

“So you’ve just... by yourself...”

“Oh my God,” I mutter, another wave of heat washing over me. “Yes.”

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He nods, thankfully staying mature about it all. “I guess we haven’t talked about our... needs or anything.”

Our needs? What I need to do is have a black hole swallow me up right now. “I didn’t think we needed to.” A thought occurs to me. “Unless you have someone-”

“No, I don’t,” he interrupts. “There’s no one else.”

The knot in my stomach unclenches.

He stands, crossing over to the door again. “This whole situation, it seems to be affecting us a little. Everything’s getting a bit too real. It’s only natural we’d need to let off some steam.”

I jump on the out he offers me. “Right. That makes sense.”

“And now we have. So we’re good.”

“We’re good,” I agree, my head bobbing too fast to seem normal.

He nods too, the lengthy pause afterward excruciating.

“I meant to tell you earlier we were invited to a silent auction tomorrow night.”

“Perfect. Sounds great.” I’ll agree to anything to end this conversation.

“I’ll have Tracy forward you the details,” he murmurs. “Goodnight.”

“Night.”

I wait until he completely shuts the door before I flop on my bed, my back hitting the mattress with a soft thud. Maybe I should have thought about what would actually happen if he fell for my skimpy nightwear rather than just parading around in front of him. Did I think he'd see my cleavage and magically fall in love with me? No, there are steps to build on, and I almost failed this one. If Archer wasn't so kind and level-headed to seek me out and make some sense of it, I could have ruined everything.

But I didn't. And he's definitely attracted to me - there's no denying that. The way his mouth had moved over mine, his lips soft, tongue skilled. The way his hips had gently thrust up into me, cock hard against his fly, rubbing me exactly right. The way he'd sucked my breast with just enough pressure to tease, making me want more, craving him.

My body breaks out in full goosebumps at the remembrance of how high I'd crested, no thought to anything but how he makes me feel.

Desired. Wanted. Needed.

I've never been those things before. Not with those past two relationships. Not with my family.

And though I may have bungled it tonight, I'll regroup and be better prepared for next time.

Because I want it again.

Archer

Serena's hand squeezes mine tightly as we walk into the ballroom of the silent auction, but there's no hint on her face that something's amiss. If anything, she appears almost bored.

At least things seem to be normal between us. I was half afraid I'd fucked everything up last night.

"Are you okay?"

She seems to startle, looking over at me questioningly. "Yes."

I nod, recalling our lunch with Harlan and Courtney last week and how she'd retreated into herself then too. "You see anyone you know?"

She takes a cursory glance of the room. "No."

"I'll be with you the whole time."

Her thumb brushes against my palm, a gentle acknowledgment of my offer. "Thank you."

We head toward the draped tables in the center, grabbing champagne glasses along the way, and study the offerings. A trip to Paris, season tickets to the Yankees, a New York Harbor sunset cruise. It's all the standard fare, nothing I haven't seen before. And nothing I couldn't buy already.

I put in a bid on a few random things, not caring if I win or not. It's more the gesture than anything else.

"Did you want to take a weekend getaway to Vermont?"

"What?"

She motions to the sheet I wrote on. "You bid on it. Two nights at the-" She bends down to inspect the paper. "Woodstock Inn."

"Oh. It's just so people see my name."

"Would you even take off work if you won this?" she asks, her lips tilted up, amused.

For a weekend alone with her in a hotel room? Nothing to do but lie in some giant king-sized bed together, a fireplace crackling in the corner, maybe with one of those buckets of strawberries and champagne? This time not so cramped in an office chair, plenty of room to lay her out and show her what a man can really do to-

What? No. What am I thinking? That's not happening.

Last night was a fluke. Like I said, just releasing some steam. It happened so quick, I was barely even cognizant of what I was doing, reacting on pure instinct. Not considering the ramifications, the consequences. I have to live with her, get along, play a part. And introducing a sexual side to the tentative partnership we've already formed? That could get messy fast.

"I haven't taken a vacation in a long time."

"That's why your shoulders are always so tight." She smiles, letting go of my hand to briefly caress the back of my neck. I sway toward her, unable to help myself as the

pads of her fingers dig in the slightest bit, releasing the tension there. “You need to take more breaks.”

“I’m here tonight, aren’t I?”

She rolls her eyes. “This isn’t a break. This is more work.”

I grin to myself. Gabriel never understood that when I complained the same thing to him about these events. “Well, how about we find something we actually want then?”

“Challenge accepted.” She studies the next few stations, triumphantly pointing to one a couple of feet down. “A professional masseuse to come in your home for a private massage. You need it.”

“But I have you.”

The words slip out, but she doesn’t seem to take them seriously, laughing instead. “I’m not a professional.”

“I... I don’t want a stranger touching me.” Sure, I considered hiring one last week, but the idea of it now doesn’t hold the same appeal.

She takes a step closer, a sultry look entering her eye. “But it’s okay when I touch you?”

I stare at her, unsure for the first time if what she’s doing is an act or real. We’re in public, but no one’s outright paying attention to us. And no one was watching last night either...

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I shake my head. Of course it's an act. Even if others aren't close enough to hear us, they can still read our body language. And she's on her A-game, signaling her interest.

I mimic her pose, getting closer, reaching out a hand to brush the backs of her fingers. "That's different. You're my wife."

A smile curves over her lips, and I find myself leaning in, actually wishing all these people weren't surrounding us. Small amounts of PDA are acceptable, sure, but what I want to do to her right now shouldn't have any witnesses.

"Archer," a nasally voice sounds from a man approaching us. "Just the man I wanted to see."

I lean back, tugging at the lapels of my suit jacket, thankful for the interruption. Why is my mind going to such extremes lately?

As the man gets closer, I recognize him as some lower level executive in our advertising department at Bishop Industries. Michael? Miles? There are too many managers in the company to keep them all straight.

I give him a nod, wrapping my arm around Serena's waist. "Good to see you. This is my wife, Serena."

He gives her a perfunctory shake of the hand. "Micah Keating." Micah, that's right. "Could I have a word with you, Archer?" He motions behind him, expectant for me to follow.

Serena's body stiffens next to me, though her face remains impassive.

"Regarding..." I prompt, needing a damn good reason if he expects me to leave.

"The budget meeting yesterday. I wasn't invited, but I wanted to pitch you-"

"If it's work related, schedule a meeting with my assistant."

He blinks at me. "You can't talk about it now?"

"I'm here with my wife."

The tension slowly releases from her, and she hides a smile as she takes a sip of her champagne.

"Right." His gaze flicks between us, finally seeming to recognize the position he's in. Lower level manager trying to dictate to the Chief Financial Officer? Yeah, I don't think so. And if no one invited you to a meeting, there's probably a valid reason for that. "My apologies. Have a good night."

He makes an awkward bow and leaves us, Serena curling further into my side. "Thank you," she whispers in my ear, her breath warm on my neck.

"I promised I wouldn't leave you."

"I can't believe you turned down the chance to work," she teases.

"I'd rather spend the night with you." It takes me a moment to realize how my comment sounds. "I mean, like you said, this is also work." I gulp down the last of my champagne and set it on a passing server's tray. "Our job is to play a part. It defeats the purpose of coming here if I leave you."

Her eyes lose their playful edge and I immediately regret these words too. “Wait, that came out wrong.” Somehow, in just over a week, she’s crept her way under my skin. I’ve never put so much thought into how others interpret me. “Forget about the act we’re putting on. You said you have trouble talking to people you don’t know well. So I’m obviously not going to leave you to fend for yourself in here.”

Her face takes on a panicked edge and she backs up, bumping the table behind her.

What? I thought I said the right thing that time.

She grabs my arm, steering me over to the east side of the room. “Come on. Let’s go over here.”

Okay, then. “Where are we going?”

“The, um-” She points ahead, waving her hand aimlessly. “There’s more stuff to bid on here.”

She stops in front of an all expenses paid trip to Bora Bora, her breaths a touch faster than they should be. I glance behind us, but I can’t tell what I’m looking for.

“Are we running from something?”

She swallows, picking up the pen on the table, hand shaking slightly.

I reach out to cover her hand with my own. “Serena, talk to me.”

“It’s so stupid,” she mutters.

“Not if it’s making you act like this.”

“It’s my mom and my... ex.”

My brows raise. “Together?”

“No, not together. But standing near each other.” She holds a palm against her stomach, her nails digging into her dress. “I don’t want to speak to either of them.”

Her ex I can understand, but her mother? “Okay, where are they?”

“By the front table,” she says, turning away. “The one with that trip to Paris.”

I make a show of appearing to casually glance around, my eyes locking on a tall, willowy blonde who looks to be in her early fifties. The resemblance is too similar to mistake her for anyone else. She’s on the arm of a man with a thick head of silver hair who’s very clearly not Greg Montague.

“Who’s that she’s with?”

She glances down, picking at her nails. “Her husband.”

Interesting choice of words. So she doesn’t consider him her step-father? Wait. “She wasn’t at the wedding, was she?”

“No.”

There’s a clear finality in her tone, and I make a mental note to talk to her later about it. If she’s estranged from her mother, I need to know in case someone brings her up.

I search next for who this ex could be, but there’s no one else around them. “I don’t see anyone-”

“Serena. How are you?”

She looks over my shoulder and steps in close to me, almost like she’s seeking my protection. “Fine.”

I turn, discovering a familiar face. “Parker.” I just saw him the other week at Gabriel’s bachelor party going wild for the girls on the stage.

He shakes my hand, giving us an easy smile. “Congratulations on the wedding. Craziest one I’ve ever been to.”

That’s right, he was there. His dad is a member of the Metropolitan Club along with my own. “Thanks.”

Next to me, Serena is silent, that bored expression back on her face from when we walked in.

“You bid on anything good?”

“A few things. Nothing too important.”

She shrinks further into my side, and that’s when it dawns on me. Parker is the ex. I didn’t realize I would actually know him. I went to high school with the guy. Well, I

guess she did too. I keep forgetting she remembers me from back then.

But if she's uncomfortable around him, we're not staying. "If you'll excuse us, I just saw someone we need to speak with."

His brows lift faintly as he watches us walk off. "Another time then."

Yeah, I don't think so.

"That was him, right?" I whisper as we cross the room, avoiding the area her mother's in.

"Yes." Her hand finds mine, gripping it firmly, and I squeeze it back, a secret part of me reveling in being the strength she draws from.

I lead her out of the ballroom and into the hallway, plenty of people still mingling about. Too public.

We keep going till there's an offshoot corridor, and I pull her down it, turning to face her once we come to a stop. "Are you okay?"

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She crosses her arms over her chest, shoulders hunched forward. “Yeah.”

Not one of her more convincing performances.

She peeks up at me and just as quickly brings her gaze back down. “I told you, it’s stupid. Seeing him brought up some old memories is all. Especially after-” She pauses, swallowing heavily. “Last night.”

An electric thrill passes through me at her reminder of our encounter. Not at the part where she was upset, but where she basically said I was the only guy to ever get her off.

Not that we should have been doing anything like that, I remind myself. But with how sensual she is, how responsive, how is it possible I was her first?

“Thank you for getting us away.” She rubs at her arms, still not meeting my gaze. “I think the last time I was out with him, it was at an event like this actually.”

“Was it serious between you two?”

“No.”

My fists unclench before I even realize what I was doing. What do I care if she had a serious relationship before?

“But I’m guessing it ended badly? If you don’t want to see him?”

“No one likes getting dumped,” she replies softly. “But it’s in the past. Whatever.” Her back hunches further, at odds with her words.

“What happened?”

She shrugs, but I wait her out, needing to know for some reason.

“He wanted someone on his arm for events,” she eventually says. “And when that got old, I wasn’t needed anymore. It happens.”

My mind makes the connection instantly. “Is that what you think will happen? That I’ll dump you when I get what I need from you?”

She shrugs again, tightening her hold on her arms, but she’s not getting out of answering the question.

“Serena, please.”

She finally looks up at me, tears swimming in her eyes. Oh, fuck. I had no idea it was as bad as that.

“I know you didn’t ask for this,” she whispers hoarsely, like she can’t get anything louder out. “Getting stuck with me and all.”

“I’m not stuck with you.” I reach forward and wipe under her eye where a tear has dropped. What happened to the girl from earlier teasing me about working too much? “You’re my wife.”

“In public.”

My gaze narrows. What is she saying?

“When does this end?” she asks. “What’s the point where we say we’ve done enough to convince everyone?”

I don’t have an answer for her. I have no idea myself. But telling her that will only make things worse.

“Listen, I’m not worried about that right now. We’re in this together. You said that yourself last week.”

She nods, but I’m not convinced.

I take hold of her shoulders as gently as I can, the urge to soothe her the only thing on my mind. “You don’t have to worry about me dumping you. That’s not happening.”

She studies me, gaze darting back and forth between my eyes. Who’s hurt her to make it so hard for her to trust?

On second thought, who hasn’t? Her dad pawned her off on me and took her things, something bad enough must have happened with her mom that she actively avoids her, not to mention these ex-boyfriends that didn’t measure up.

“I promise.”

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She sniffs and nods once more, giving me a shaky smile. Maybe she can trust me at least. “Okay. I believe you.”

Some unidentifiable emotion bursts in my chest and I wipe under her eyes again, cradling her jaw afterward, unwilling to let go just yet. She parts her lips and my thumb instinctively sweeps over the bottom one as I step closer, unsure what I’m doing, but wanting to do it all the same.

She leans in, and I meet her halfway, both of us silent as our mouths join, my hand traveling to the back of her neck to hold her more securely, her palm coming up to rest on my chest. This isn’t merely a kiss of comfort, though. Even I can’t convince myself of that.

The only thing is, I’m not sure exactly what it is.

And why it keeps happening.

“Will all bidders please rejoin us in Ballroom A at this time?” a voice announces over an intercom system. “We’re announcing winners in five minutes.”

We break apart, her gaze focused on my lips for a moment before she looks up.

“We should get back in there,” I say, closing my eyes briefly. If she studies them too carefully, she might see something I don’t want her to.

“Maybe you won that trip to Vermont.” She smiles hesitantly at me, sounding more like her normal self.

“Maybe.”

And again, my mind is back to where it shouldn't be. The single bed, a cozy fireplace, champagne and strawberries. But this time the image goes farther. Me and her up until the wee hours of the morning, talking and connecting. About our families, our jobs, anything and everything. I want to know everything about her.

And I want her to know about me.

I take a step back, holding my arm out to guide her into the ballroom, loosening my tie the slightest bit from where it's gone too tight, ignoring the strange fluttering sensation in my stomach.

It doesn't mean anything. It's just leftover adrenaline from getting her away from her ex, talking about her situation, coming to a better understanding between us.

That's all it is.

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Serena

We get home late with no more incidents, the proud owner of a wine and cheese gift basket Archer has no recollection of bidding on.

“Are you going to bed?” I ask, setting the basket on the kitchen counter.

He loosens his tie, rolling those big shoulders back. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Okay, goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

There’s a pause as neither of us move to leave, staring at each other.

“I’m not really tired,” I say eventually.

He scratches at the back of his neck. “Me either.”

“We could watch another episode of The IT Crowd.”

He gives me a half smile, one side of his mouth quirking up adorably. “All right.”

I suppress the urge to do a happy dance and head toward my room, an odd smell filling my nose the closer I get. Maybe Lori forgot to take out the trash?

As I open my door, there’s the faint sound of water from the bathroom and my foot

squishes on the carpet.

“What the hell?” Archer mutters, squeezing past me in the doorway to enter the ensuite bathroom. “Oh, fuck.”

I gasp as I look over his shoulder to find the room flooded, water trickling from a busted pipe in the shower.

He holds an arm in front of me, blocking my way. “Don’t go in.”

I try to push past him anyway, but he’s too bulky. “We need to turn the shower off.”

“The shower’s not on. It’s coming from the wall.”

What? But that shower shares a wall with my closet.

I cross the bedroom, discovering a spreading stain on the closet wall, right behind my hanging dresses. The carpet’s also saturated where I keep all my shoes.

No, no, no. Is everything ruined? Can I dry clean the dirty water smell out of them or something?

I step back into the bedroom, Archer on his phone already with what sounds like the building superintendent asking him to shut the water off and get someone out here.

I sit on the bed and take off my heels, the bottom of them along with the hem of my dress soaked. I barely have anything, and now this?

Archer hangs up a minute later and holds a hand out to me, signaling to me to get up. “Come on. They’re coming by soon to inspect the damage and clean up what they can. They’ll start repairs in the morning.”

I take his hand and let him guide me into the hallway. “Where are we going?”

“My room.”

His room? “Until the plumber leaves tonight?”

He turns to me, eyes narrowing slightly. “You’re not going back in there. We don’t know what kind of damage there is, if your things are contaminated, if it’s even safe. That wall could completely bust out anytime.”

Okay, that sounds a little far-fetched. “But all my stuff-”

“We’ll check it out after the super clears it. And I’ll replace everything. But you’re sleeping with me tonight.”

I am?

I keep quiet as he continues on to the end of the hall and flicks on the light in his room. I haven't been in here since that first day exploring.

"I have anything you need. Extra toothbrush. Clothes. Well, maybe not the stuff you usually wear."

A huff of laughter escapes me. "I'd be a little concerned if you did."

He rummages in his closet for a minute and comes out with a faded blue Columbia University t-shirt and a pair of boxers. "I don't wear pajamas to bed, but I have these."

If he doesn't wear pajamas, does that mean he wears... nothing? Oh Lord, help me. "This is great. Thanks."

There's a knock on the front door and he leaves to deal with the super, his room imposing without him in it. Twice the size of my guest room with floor to ceiling blackout curtains, it gives off strong masculine vibes with its black and steel king bed and matching seating area in the corner, everything else in shades of gray.

I duck into the bathroom and change clothes, scrubbing my makeup off with a spare washcloth under the sink, finding a new toothbrush too while searching under there.

When I come back out, he's sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing at his temples.

“Is it bad?”

“Yeah,” he sighs. “I want it all redone, just to be safe. The pipes, the wall, the floor. It may take a while.”

I twist the hem of my t-shirt around my finger. “Should I get a hotel in the meantime?”

“No.” We’re both startled by the intensity of his voice, and he quickly clears his throat. “I mean, you can stay in here. If you’re comfortable with that arrangement.”

“And you’ll be in here too?”

He hesitates for a moment. “Yes. It’s a big room.”

With one bed.

“That’s fine with me.” I step in closer, squeezing his arm as I sit beside him. “Thank you for everything.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t thank me. My apartment just ruined your-”

“It’s not your fault.” I place my hand in his, enjoying the heat of his body this close, this sense of togetherness. “You’ve been so incredibly giving. Offering your room to me, a place to live to begin with. You were understanding earlier at the auction. And last night too. Basically all the time.”

His fingers tense around mine. “Don’t make me out to be some saint. I’m not.”

He stands, letting go of my hand, and makes his way into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

Did I say something wrong? I just wanted to tell him how much I appreciate him. This man who's willing to work with me. Take the time to try and understand me. Put up with my ridiculous tendency to run away.

I pull back the dark bedspread and crawl under the covers, calming myself until he returns. He removes the oversized watch at his wrist and sets it on his nightstand, unbuttoning his dress shirt quickly. A sliver of tan skin gives way to heavy pecs and toned abs as he slides the shirt from his shoulders, starting in on his belt buckle next. I gape at him, utterly fascinated, and that's when he seems to realize what he's doing. "Oh, shit. I was on autopilot--"

"No, it's fine." More than fine. Seriously, I could look at him shirtless all day. "Do whatever you normally do. This is your room."

He nods, unconvinced, and shuts the lamp off, plunging us into darkness. With the blackout curtains over the windows, not an ounce of light gets in.

There's the quiet shucking of his pants, and then he climbs in next to me. With the size of this bed, though, there's more than enough space for both of us. Why couldn't he sleep in some narrow twin bed?

I wait until he's settled to say, "I'm sorry if I said the wrong thing earlier. I know you're not perfect. No one is. But you've been so good to me. And I really appreciate it."

The sheets rustle and I imagine him turning on his side to face me. "I've barely done anything."

"You have," I insist, reaching out for him and finding his arm. I soothe my hand across his warm skin, his muscles flexing under my fingers.

There's a companionable silence for half a minute until he whispers, "I- I don't know what I'm doing with you."

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My hand stops. “What do you mean?”

He’s quiet again for a moment before he responds. “I feel like the script keeps flipping and I don’t know how to keep up. There’s suddenly all this change and I’m—God, I can’t believe I’m telling you this.”

“You can talk to me.”

It takes him a little bit to continue. “I’m not ahead of things like I usually am. I’m just reacting.”

For a man in his position, that has to be discomfiting. “It’s okay not to have everything figured out all the time. Remember how I said we would have to wing it?”

“Yeah, and I didn’t like it then either.”

I smile, glad he can’t see me. “I think you’re doing great. Things have changed a lot for both of us.”

“You seem better at adapting than I am.”

I shrug, not that he can tell in the dark. “This seems to be coming easier to me compared to other situations I’ve been in.” Because it’s a wanted change. I’ve ignored my fair share of circumstances in the past, hoping things would magically resolve themselves. Sometimes it worked.

And sometimes it didn’t.

“Do you want to tell me about your mom?”

I sigh, returning my hand to my side. It was only a matter of time before he brought that up. Not that I blame him after the way I acted at the auction. “A question for a question?”

“Okay.”

How to even start with her? There’s a reason I don’t think about Jacqueline Cushing if I can help it.

I tuck my hands under my chin, fiddling with the edge of my pillowcase. “I was a fun accessory for her when I was little,” I tell him, just getting it out there. “But then I actually started, you know, growing. Having my own thoughts and opinions. And then I wasn’t as fun anymore.” I smooth a hand over the sheets, luxuriating in the softness. These must be like a million thread count or something. “She met this other guy, my parents divorced, she didn’t ask for custody, and that’s the end. I haven’t spoken to her in years.”

“So your dad raised you?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t say raised. He provided for me. He did what he could. But he was busy.”

“I know what that’s like.”

“I’m guessing your dad was busy too?”

“That’s an understatement.”

“What about your mom?”

He's silent for so long I almost think he didn't hear me until he answers, "She was nothing like him." He turns over, voice distant now. "Goodnight, Serena."

Are we done then? "Oh, um, goodnight."

I turn over too, only an arm's length away from him, and yet, it's a distance I can't quite seem to cross.

I snuggle further into the warmth at my back, my bottom encountering something hard. Mmm, that feels good. So does the tight hold around my chest, the soft breath at the back of my neck-

Wait. Breath at my neck?

I keep as still as possible as I open my eyes, not that I can see anything in the pitch blackness. I'm in Archer's room. In his bed. With him. And he's draped around me, my own personal furnace, his arm slung across my torso, curling me into his hard body. Knowing him, I can't imagine he consciously positioned himself like this, but I revel in it all the same.

I finally register the gentle beeping that woke me, assuming it's his alarm clock, and as it continues, it gradually increases in volume until he stirs. I stifle a groan as he moves against me, his cock nudging my ass.

His arm leaves me as he reaches behind him to shut it off, but soon returns, pulling me even tighter to him. "You smell so good," he murmurs, voice rough with sleep. "Like flowers."

My mouth drops. Is he sleep talking or something?

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“It’s Dior,” I whisper, afraid to fully wake him. “A rose and peony blend.”

“You should wear it more. All the time.” He presses a soft kiss to the back of my neck, tingles running rampant down my spine.

“My bottle’s almost out, actually.”

He lets out a drowsy yawn. “I’ll buy you more. Anything you want. And more lingerie. Definitely more of that.” He shifts again, caressing his palm over my stomach. “Although I like seeing you in my clothes too.”

I grin, wondering how long I have until he fully wakes up. “I’ll wear whatever you want me to.” I press back further into him, the pressure turning me on even more. “I like the way you look at me when I do.”

“How’s that?”

I rub my ass up and down his length, his harsh intake of air spurring me on. “Like you want me.”

He stills, his fingers tightening on me for a moment before he lets go, rolling to the other edge of the bed. “Serena-”

“You owe me a question from last night,” I interrupt, mourning the loss of his body. I knew it was too good to last.

“What is it?” His voice is hesitant, weary, and unfortunately, fully awake.

“What did you mean before bed when you said you weren’t a saint?”

I turn over to face him, squinting in the darkness to try and make him out, but it’s still too dark.

“I’m sorry I was touching you. I was asleep. I didn’t realize what I was-”

“You’re not answering the question.”

I can’t imagine speaking to him like this a week ago, but things are different now. I’m not so worried he’ll shut me down anymore.

He lets out a heavy sigh, the sheets rustling. “I’ve been trying to be respectful of you, I promise. A minute ago not being the best example.”

“Why aren’t you a saint?” I ask again when he doesn’t elaborate further.

More silence until he finally admits, “I’m having trouble... separating everything. What’s real and what’s not. I keep having these thoughts I shouldn’t. I can’t turn it on and off the way you can. And like I said last night, I keep reacting.”

“To me?”

“Yes.”

I chew on my lip, debating how to respond. If I tell him I haven’t been acting, that if anything, I’ve been purposely provoking him, will he feel deceived?

Or relieved?

He’s attracted to me, reacting to me. Is it only his sense of honor getting in the way?

“It’s okay to touch me, Archer. There’s nothing wrong about it. I’m your wife after all.”

A fake wife. In a sham marriage. Please don’t let him bring up that fact.

“Do you want me to touch you?” he asks in a low voice, sending a shiver through me.

I thought that was fairly obvious when I was grinding on top of him in his office. But maybe I muddied the waters when I ran away afterward.

I close my eyes as I make a leap of faith, deciding not to flee and instead put myself out there. “Yes. I want you to touch me.”

I wait for him to reach out, to grab me, anything, but he doesn’t, still motionless on his side of the bed for what seems an endless stretch of time.

My face heats the longer the silence continues, until it’s impossibly hot, practically scorching the pillowcase. “Please say something,” I whisper.

“Serena, I’m holding myself back over here.” His voice is even lower, if that’s possible. “I don’t think you realize what you’re asking for.”

My heart lifts, a pleasant thrill running through me. “I do.”

He reaches out a hand and finds mine, our fingers entwining. “This would change things.”

“Things are already changing.” I pull his hand up to kiss his knuckles, unable to help myself.

He tugs me toward him and I gladly comply, letting out a soft sound of need as my

lips find his in the darkness, his body still achingly warm as it presses flush against mine.

And this time, I'm not running away.

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Archer

My body relaxes as she opens her mouth further, inviting me to lick my way in, her taste already necessary. I cup her jaw, changing the angle of our kiss, restraining myself so I don't overwhelm her, though I'm dying to discover every secret part of her.

My wife.

Does she know how much of a turn on it was to hear her refer to herself that way? The rush of possession that ran through me? The trail of goosebumps that chased over my skin? But why would hearing it from her lips cause that level of reaction within me?

I don't remember exactly what I said to her while half asleep, but as my morning wood pressed into her ass, her sweet voice telling me I'd been looking at her like I wanted her, the fog lifted from my mind.

What she said was true. I just thought I'd hidden it better.

It still feels like I'm in a dream as she runs her hand over my chest, dipping down to my abs, flirting over the waistband of my boxers, her fingers light but purposeful as she finds the flap, stroking me softly.

I suck in a breath, her touch on me everything I've imagined. Not that I've been imagining this exact scenario. Not that the tiniest part of me hoped this might happen when I invited her in my bed. I swear the overwhelming part was only thinking of

keeping her out of her room where God knows what else could go wrong. And if she's in here with me, I know she's safe.

Her hand moves over me steadily, gripping just right, and I'm helpless to do anything but accept her touch, groaning aloud at how good it is. How does she have this kind of power over me already?

"Do you like it when I touch you too?" she asks against my lips, still eagerly kissing me.

"I think you can tell how much I do." I thrust into her hand, her fingers velvety soft over me, my hips pumping instinctively as she gives me more than I was ever expecting.

She gives me.

Oh, shit. I'm no better than those other assholes, am I? Taking from her without giving in return.

My hand sneaks under her shirt, trailing up her stomach to find her breast, shaping the weight gently, a thrill running through me at finally having my hands on her.

Her fingers fumble in their stroking as she releases a sound of pleasure, and I position her on her back, lifting her shirt to better access what's underneath, wanting to taste her next. She lets go of me to thread her hands in my hair as I bend down and tenderly nuzzle her, taking my time, capturing a nipple in my mouth to gently suck her.

"Archer," she pants, just like she did the other night in my office, her hips lifting, seeking relief.

I tease the edge of the boxers she's wearing, sneaking a hand inside to pull her lace panties aside, her pussy already wet for me.

She makes an unintelligible sound as I enter a finger slowly, giving her time to adjust around me before I move in and out, building her up.

"Has a guy ever fingered you?" I add a second finger, gliding easily, her arousal coating me.

"No," she moans, tugging at my hair, turning frantic. "You're the only one. The only one who's ever made me feel this way."

Pride bursts in my chest, my mouth returning to hers, giving her a deep kiss that goes on and on, the two of us desperate for one another. She makes these tiny sounds of encouragement in the back of her throat, ratcheting my desire higher, and I can't help but brush my dick along her inner thigh, needing relief.

She takes hold of me again, pumping me roughly, the pressure making me groan as we continue on for long minutes, our breaths turning harsher as we work each other up. A tingle races down my spine, but I don't want to come without her. I just need to get her there too.

My thumb finds her clit, massaging it gently, and she lets out a keening cry, toppling over the edge, and I follow right behind, taking her hand and angling myself up so I jet on my stomach, a heavy sense of satisfaction filling me. I slowly withdraw my fingers from her as she twitches with aftershocks and I grab a tissue off the nightstand, wiping myself clean.

She lets out a satisfied sigh and curls herself into my side, her body soft and relaxed. I inhale, trying to get more of her scent, but there's only a heavy musk in the air from our interlude.

“That was amazing,” she whispers. “Even better than the other night.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her all the other things on my mind to do. Her spread wide for me as I hungrily eat her out. Her riding atop me as I suck those sweet nipples, her pleading cries spurring me on. Me thrusting inside her as I tease her clit again, wanting to hear her come for me once more. We’ve barely scratched the surface.

But I stay quiet, still coming to terms with this atypical behavior on my part. I can’t remember craving another person this badly, the sense of possession that had flooded me knowing I was the only one to do this for her.

She said things are already changing, and that’s true, but how much? What does this mean for this... relationship we’ve found ourselves in?

She rubs a hand over my chest, drawing small circles over my pectorals, and my body relaxes again into the mattress, my mind taking her advice and letting go of the urge to solve this right away.

I turn over and find my phone on the nightstand, the display nearly blinding me with its brightness. Quarter to seven. There goes my morning workout.

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Not that I regret the time spent otherwise.

“I need to get ready.”

She presses a kiss into my shoulder. “What do you want for breakfast? I can ask Lori to start it.”

Oh, shit. How could I forget about Lori? Did she catch the tail end of our activities? I’ve never tested whether you can hear anything in here from the kitchen.

“Um, whatever is easy. Eggs and toast or something.”

“Okay.” She sits up and pauses. “I’m blind,” she laughs. “Can you turn on a light?”

“Sure.” I press the button on the wall that retracts the curtains, daylight filling the room.

She climbs off the bed and heads toward the window, staring out. “Wow, this is the best view in the house.”

I prop myself up against the headboard and watch her, my old college shirt and boxers looking just as good on her today as they did last night. “I agree.”

She turns around, ducking her head down with a shy smile as she sees where my gaze is focused. God, she’s so beautiful. And right now, this smile is all for me. No parts to play. No one watching us. No pictures.

Oh, that's right. Angelina still wants those.

I hold up my phone, raising my brows at her. "For ThousandWords?"

She nods, a secret flirting along her lips as she poses for me.

I send it to Angelina, and even this early in the morning, she fires a response back right away.

In your alma mater shirt and boxers? Awfully suggestive of you. I love it.

"PR approves."

"Do I get to see it?"

She walks over and looks at the screen, then covers her mouth. "Why didn't you tell me I have bedhead?"

"What? No, you don't."

"I do," she says, smoothing down her hair. "And no makeup either."

"You look beautiful."

She stops, lowering her hands in front of her. "Do you really think that?" Her fingers twist at the bottom of her shirt and I reach over and grip her hand.

"Serena, you're gorgeous." And it's more than just her looks. Everything about her is.

She bites her lip, trying to hide a grin. "I think you're gorgeous too. Handsome, I mean." She peeks over at me shyly. "And very sexy."

My dick twitches, prepared for another round, and I put my hand on my lap to keep it at bay. “I really do have to get ready for work.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” She bounds off the bed, heading toward the door at a clipped pace.

I scrub a hand down my jaw, waiting till she leaves to let out a long sigh.

What the hell kind of can of worms did I open?

“Late night, Archer?”

I cover my yawn, but it was impossible falling asleep with Serena right next to me. Her body soft and warm less than a foot from me. Her scent drifting over, impossible to escape. You’d think our tryst this morning would have energized me more, but without my workout, I’m dragging.

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“Something like that.” I’m not explaining to our Chief of Operations what’s going on at home.

“I’ve been looking at the list of employees Montague Media sent over trying to decide which departments to combine, who’ll be made redundant, all that kind of stuff. Can you crunch some numbers and figure out who we can afford to keep?”

“Will do.”

While I’d normally pass that off to someone lower on the chain, I have a newfound interest in this buyout and Montague Media’s finances in particular. I can’t get over the fact that Greg Montague is selling off his daughter’s designer clothes. The net proceeds would have to be miniscule compared to what he’ll make from the sale of his company.

There’s more idle chitchat around the boardroom table as we wait for Dad, who’s usually last to arrive at these monthly chief meetings, but as the most important man here, I guess he can come whenever he wants.

It still seems rude to make everyone wait.

He enters a few minutes later, the mood of the room shifting as he settles at the head of the table and the meeting commences. Legal has their presentation first, and I find my mind drifting to what I might discover tonight when I return home. Will she visit my office again for a massage, or is that over now that the dynamic between us has changed? I’ve actually been looking forward to them. And what she wears along with it.

Something niggles at the edge of my conscience from this morning, something about...

Oh God, I told her I'd buy her more lingerie, didn't I? No wonder she said I could touch her if I was coming on to her like that.

"Archer?"

I glance up, finding everyone's eyes on me. I didn't say that part out loud, did I?

I clear my throat, sitting up straighter in my seat. "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" I don't even know who asked the question.

"Give him a break," our Chief of Communications says kindly. "He's still in his honeymoon phase."

There's a quiet ripple of good-natured laughter, and my eyes flick to Dad, who's very decidedly not laughing, his ice-blue gaze zeroed on me. "Dave requested next quarter's projected numbers."

"Right."

I answer the question and stay attentive for the remainder of the meeting, not letting my mind wander to anywhere it's not supposed to be.

"Archer, a word," Dad commands as everyone takes their leave at the end. I linger behind, receiving a few sympathetic glances from the others. That tone of voice is never good.

He steeples his hands. "You can't be off your game in front of the other chiefs. You need to show leadership and initiative, not ineptitude."

My teeth grind. “I missed one question and then answered it after Dave repeated it.”

“You’re the future leader of Bishop Industries. Don’t make them doubt your place at this table. Don’t make me doubt it.”

Maybe it’s the lack of sleep or the fact that all I’ve done the last week and a half is bust my ass for this company, but instead of keeping my mouth shut like I should, I argue back. “I’ve been with Bishop Industries for ten years. I’ve worked every position within my department on my way up the ladder. Everyone here knows how hard I work. That I’m more than capable of performing my job, regardless of being your son. And besides that, I just saved the deal you wanted so bad. I deserve credit, not chastisement.”

I’d questioned my level of fulfillment the other day, but I can at least say with no qualms that I do my job admirably.

He stares at me, silent, but I hold my ground, refusing to apologize for my outburst. If he wants me to be a leader, I’ll damn well act like one.

“Why were you yawning?”

What? Why does that matter? “Serena kept me up.”

I realize my mistake as soon as the words leave my mouth,

“Do you know why I picked Gabriel for her to marry?” His icy gaze narrows on me. “Because I didn’t care what happened afterward. But I don’t need you distracted by this girl. Remember, it’s a business arrangement.”

“I’m not distracted. Just tired. I’m allowed to be tired every once in a while.”

“Then go to bed earlier,” he snaps. “And don’t let her affect your work.”

He stands and walks out of the room, leaving me silently fuming. That’s it? He couldn’t say anything about my past decade of performance within the company? The level of respect I’ve gained from the people here? A belated thank you for keeping the buyout of Montague Media in play?

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Nope. Just a scolding because I'm actually spending time with the woman I married for him.

Does he have any idea how much I've done this past week? The extra events, the pictures? Angelina copied him on the last email she sent about my profile's significant bump in traffic. Whether he read it or not is a different story.

I pull out my phone and open ThousandWords, discovering that, yes, I do have considerably more engagement on my photos than normal. I scroll through, Serena's face gazing back at me, so incredibly sexy in the one from today. In all of them, really. How is it we've only been together for a little over a week? It seems like so much longer than that.

Talking to her last night at the benefit, hearing her open up, and then the same way she had drawn things out of me this morning... is it normal to feel this sense of closeness already? To think about someone all the time?

Not that I'm distracted. I just swore up and down to Dad I'm not.

And I meant it. I can do my usual workload and continue this thing with Serena. She doesn't have to... affect me.

Even though I admitted to her last night that I don't know what I'm doing with her. That I can't keep up with all these changes. That things were beginning to feel real.

Fuck.

I rest my head in my hands, no idea how to proceed. I can't pretend this is solely a fake relationship anymore. Not after what we did in bed this morning. But what was it to her? She said she wanted me to touch her, but not why. Was it an in the moment thing? Both of us horny and needing a release? She'd agreed with the bullshit excuse I made the other night about letting off some steam, but is the idea really such a bad one?

What am I thinking? Of course it is. This isn't a woman I could avoid if things don't work out. I'm married to her.

Then again, who better to do this with? There's obvious chemistry between us. Attraction. If I can't fool around with my wife, then who else can I do it with?

I tug at my hair, the answer not any clearer, and return to my office, stopping at Tracy's desk outside for her to give me my messages.

"All right, here we go," she says, picking up a stack of post-it notes. Jesus, how many messages did I get? "Your next meeting with Finance is in twenty minutes, just as a reminder."

Yes, I know.

"And Charles wants to reschedule his one-on-one with you this afternoon because his son's school called and he has to go pick him up."

"Okay, fine." I didn't particularly care about it anyway.

"Some guy in Advertising wants to set up a meeting with you." She squints at her paper. "A Micah Keating? Never heard of him."

Ugh, that guy. "Tell him I don't have availability for a few weeks."

She blinks at me. “But you do.”

“I know, but I don’t want to meet with him.”

“Oh, gotcha. How about I set it up for June thirty-first?”

A laugh escapes me, despite myself. It’s never good to encourage Tracy too much. “Do it and see what he says.”

She flips to the next page. “Harlan Nash called to remind you about a dinner party.”

Oh, crap, I forgot about that. The idea had little appeal to begin with, but after Serena shared her story about Courtney harassing her in high school, we’re definitely not appearing on their reality show now. “Call him back and say I’m not interested.”

She nods and runs through the rest of the stack, then sets her papers down. “Oh, and one more thing. Your wife visited you.”

What? Why didn’t she lead with that?

She points to the closed doors of my office. “She’s in there.”

I nearly growl. “Next time, tell me first if Serena’s waiting for me.”

Her eyes widen, a picture of contriteness. “Sorry.”

She may act like that now, but she’ll forget in a week. “And get me the contact for Research and Development at Montague Media.” From glancing over the list of employees and departments the COO gave me, that’s the one I have the most questions for.

“Yes, Mr. Bishop.”

I enter my office, finding Serena seated on the couch against the window, doing something on her phone. She looks up as I shut the door, her smile nearly knocking me back with how genuine it is. Has anyone ever smiled at me like that before?

She stands and walks across the room to greet me, her lips soft and inviting as she presses them to mine. There’s no one around to observe us this time, no one to pretend for, and for some reason, that makes it even better. I cup the back of her head, deepening the kiss briefly before remembering myself. “What brings you by?”

“I have some bad news.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:20 am*

Archer

My heart stops, despite my resolution less than ten minutes ago to not be distracted by her. “What is it?”

Does she regret what we did this morning? Does she want a hotel room after all? Did I fuck everything up?

“I was in my closet today salvaging what I could and I talked to the contractor the super sent out. He said it might be a couple of months before they finish.”

My heart resumes normal speed. Oh, that. “Yeah, I know.”

“Oh.” She gives a soft laugh. “I thought it would take a lot less time for some reason.”

I swallow heavily, not wanting to say this next thing, even though I should. “If that’s too long of a time frame to share a room, I can still get you that hotel.”

“No.” She grabs my hand, squeezing softly. “I liked sharing a room with you.”

Especially the sharing a bed part. What will it be like tonight?

No, no. I’m not even sure it’s a good idea to share a bed at all. What if it ends up ruining everything we’ve built so far?

“Anyway,” she continues, “I just wanted to let you know that and also double check

it's okay to buy some more things with your card. A few of my dresses and most of my shoes got ruined-"

"Of course you can. You don't have to ask my permission."

"Well, I feel a little guilty. It's your money."

"Money's no object. Seriously." I earn a ridiculous salary and hardly touch it. Dad pays for all my living expenses, the same as he does for Gabriel and Connor.

Oh, that's right. Not Gabriel anymore.

"It was my apartment that did the damage to begin with. I told you I'd replace it all. And you're my wife." Those words sound different to me now than they did even a few days ago. "You can get whatever you want."

Her mouth tilts up at the corners and she leans in to kiss me again, whispering, "Thank you," against my lips. It's not a big deal at all, but I won't say no to this.

She doesn't pull away and I don't either, unable to help myself, the kiss playing out, minutes ticking by as our bodies gravitate toward one another. She presses herself flush against me, my tongue deep in her mouth, her hands running through my hair. Her nails scrape lightly against my scalp, and I involuntarily let out a low groan.

"You like that?"

"Yes." There's no other answer for her, not with how good it feels.

She does it again, slower, and a rush of goosebumps breaks out along the back of my neck and down my arms, my dick twitching. How is it that she can affect me this much?

The intercom on my phone buzzes and Tracy's voice fills the room. "Mr. Bishop? Your meeting with Finance is in five minutes."

And it'll take me that long just to get down to the fortieth floor. I pull away from her, straightening my tie and suit jacket. "I'm sorry, I have to go."

"That's okay," She fixes my hair, a smirk playing about her deliciously swollen lips. Hopefully, mine aren't as obvious. "You're a very in demand man. Mr. Bishop."

"You don't have to call me that." Every time I hear it, a part of me thinks someone is referring to my dad.

"What should I call you then?"

"Your husband," I reply without thinking, going still as I realize what I said.

The air charges between us, heat filling her gaze as she bites her lip. Apparently, she likes that name.

And it turns out I do too.

"Mr. Bishop?" Tracy calls again.

Right. The meeting.

“Oh, before I forget, I got you something.” She digs in her purse and hands me a plastic bag from a drugstore down the street.

I reach in, withdrawing a pair of black reading glasses.

“You’re always squinting at your computer,” she explains. “I thought these might help.”

I blink, taken aback by her gesture, and walk around my desk, pulling a spreadsheet out of the folder I’m bringing to the meeting with Finance. I put on the glasses and study the sheet, the tiny figures noticeably easier to read.

I look back up at her, speechless.

“Do they help?”

“Yeah, they do. Thank you, I-” I clear my throat, a strange swooping sensation going on in my chest. “That’s really thoughtful.”

She beams at me, the pressure inside me increasing the longer I stare at her. “I’ll see you tonight?”

She nods, but neither of us makes a move to kiss the other goodbye. If we do, we might not stop.

How is this happening so quickly?

I leave while I still have the willpower, and I'm only a few minutes late as I meet with the heads of the Finance department. At least in this case, I'm the man they have to wait for.

Serena's gone when I return to my office an hour later, which is for the best. Dad's accusation of her being a distraction wasn't totally uncalled for. If that kind of temptation was in here all day, I'd never get any work done. It's becoming increasingly harder at home too.

And what I have planned for this afternoon requires all my attention.

Investigating.

Morally it seems iffy to examine Serena's father's company for possible wrongdoing, but this is purely business. If Montague is hiding something from us, we need to know before the buyout. And it still doesn't make sense why a supposed millionaire is strapped for cash.

There's only so much digging I can do on him personally, but I should have more access to his company's financials. I've done my due diligence already, before we even considered the deal, but a second look won't harm anything. And something might have changed between now and then.

Plus, I have a legitimate reason to examine things closer if Operations is concerned about redundancy.

According to my paperwork, Montague Media created a Research and Development department six months ago with a suspiciously large budget. And after some further investigating of my own, I've discovered that every employee in it has a higher than

average salary compared to industry standards. Exorbitantly higher. Added to that, the number of employees inexplicably tripled as of three months ago.

Right around the time Greg Montague downgraded his apartment. Coincidence? Honestly, I don't know. I'm not even sure what the connection could be.

At the very least, if all these people were hired recently, they may not have even passed their probationary status. We could get rid of them without worrying about all these extra salaries.

I press the intercom button to Tracy's desk. "Tracy? Did you get that number I asked for?"

My office door opens a second later, not that I said it was okay to enter, Tracy's head poking through. "So, um, I couldn't really figure out your request."

How much simpler did I need to ask it? Yes, she's flighty, but come on. "Why?"

"Well, I called over there, but they didn't know what I was talking about. They've never had a department with that name."

I frown. "Get me Greg Montague on the line. No, wait. Don't." It would be better to go in under the radar.

I flip the pages of the report in my hand until I find the name at the end. Christopher Lassiter, Senior Accountant.

Looks like I'll be paying Chris a visit.

"Hi, welcome to Montague-" The receptionist pauses, her eyes widening slightly. "Media," she finishes, straightening in her seat. "Do you have an appointment?"

“I’m looking for the Research and Development department.”

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She blinks at me for a few moments. “We don’t have a department with that title.”

“I have it on good authority you do.” As in, official documents sent over from this company.

She shrugs helplessly. “I’m sorry, I’ve never heard of it. It’s weird, we just had someone earlier ask about it too.”

That’d be Tracy. “Then I’d like to see Christopher Lassiter.”

She fumbles with her computer mouse and starts clicking. “I’ll look at his calendar and check what his availability is for an appointment.”

“Listen, you recognize me, right?”

“Yes,” she says warily, as if she’s already in trouble for not knowing about the department.

“Then you know I’m not going to wait around to meet with him a week from now. I need to see him today.”

She hesitates briefly before giving in. “Okay.” She pulls a keycard out of her desk drawer and hands it to me. “This will get you to the fourth floor. Accounting is on the left as you exit the elevator.”

“Thanks.” At least she didn’t hassle me. Sometimes it pays to be Harold Bishop’s son.

As I exit the elevator four floors up, there's a middle-aged balding man waiting for me, ready to shake my hand. So she gave him a heads-up then. Good on her. She's loyal to her company.

"Mr. Bishop. This is an unexpected pleasure." Yeah, I doubt it. "How can I help you?"

"Mr. Lassiter, I presume?" He nods. "Could we meet in private?"

He visibly swallows. "Oh, of course. Would you like Greg here as well?"

"No." Not yet, at least.

"My office is just in here." He holds a door open for me, and the workers in their cubicles on the main floor quickly return their attention to their computers, as if they weren't all blatantly staring a second ago.

I know what it looks like. Bigwig from the company who's set to buy you out shows up unannounced. They have to be worried about their jobs, but that's out of my hands. I can at least make sure we offer a nice severance package for those we can't keep on.

He thankfully has an office with a door that shuts, although anyone can still see us through the floor to ceiling glass window.

I set my attaché case down on his desk and pull out a sheaf of papers, handing them to him.

"What's this?"

I take the seat across from him, crossing an ankle over my knee. "Well, I was doing

my due diligence and found something a little off. If you wouldn't mind turning to that page sticky-noted there?"

I observe him carefully as he does so, his face paling the longer he looks at the paper. Interesting.

"What's your question exactly?"

"What does Research and Development do?"

He tugs at his red striped tie. "I don't work in that department, so I'm not sure."

"But it does exist?"

He glances down at the page he's holding that clearly says it does. "Yes."

"You know, it's funny. On the way over here, I looked up the people that work there on LinkedIn, but not one of them has a profile."

"Huh." He clears his throat noisily. "Maybe they're not all that social."

I shrug, humoring him. "A few I could understand, maybe even half. But every single one isn't interested in professional networking or listing their resumes? Especially considering most of them were recently hired?"

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:20 am*

He compulsively smooths down his tie, staring at the paper. “I’m not sure what you want me to say.”

“Why does that department have such a big budget? What are they doing? And why is everyone paid higher than comparable companies?”

“You’ll have to ask Greg. He makes the decisions.”

“Can you tell me where Research and Development is located in the building?”

He won’t look up to meet my eye. “I’m not sure,” he says in a small voice.

My lips twist. A few minutes’ worth of looking at his own LinkedIn profile told me this man has been at Montague Media for thirteen years, working his way up to Head of Accounting. I’m fairly sure he knows where everything is.

“I know you’re a smaller company than Bishop Industries. You guys don’t have the ridiculous number of executives we do, but you and I aren’t all that different. Being the most senior accountant, you’re kind of like Montague Media’s CFO. Now, whose signature is at the end of this report?”

He doesn’t bother turning to the last page. “Mine.”

“Right. And I know I wouldn’t put my name on something I couldn’t stand by or at least justify. Whether or not you wrote this, you’re responsible for everything in it. And if it’s not true, that’s fraud. So are you willing to take responsibility for the contents of this?”

I don't particularly enjoy throwing my weight around, but I warned Serena I wasn't a saint. In business, you can't be.

The silence in the room stretches until he finally says, "I'm just doing my job."

"Under whose orders?"

He stands, handing me back the papers. "I'm sorry, I can't answer your questions."

I stand too, grabbing my bag. "So if I went and asked Greg the same things, he'd have some answers?"

He nods soberly. Well, if he's encouraging me to talk to the CEO, he's probably not pocketing any money then.

But that just makes the case against Greg even stronger.

"Thanks for your time, Mr. Lassiter."

He doesn't respond as I let myself out, but I'm not ready to confront Serena's father yet. Her and I have recently entered new territory and shitting all over that by accusing her dad of something I don't have definitive proof of feels wrong. Not that it sounds like she's close to him after the way she described their relationship at the silent auction, but he's still her closest relative. Estranged from her mother, no siblings... Who else does she have?

But I also owe it to Bishop Industries to report this if I find out any more. My job could be at stake if it turns out my gut feeling is right, Harold Bishop's son or not. Like I told Christopher, I'm ultimately responsible for anything that happens in any of the financial departments.

I head back to the office and finish up my day, leaving earlier than usual. Well, it's the time I'm supposed to leave, but I always stay later.

And coming home now was the right decision because as I enter the apartment, a heady aroma greets me from the kitchen. I watch Serena unobserved for a moment as she sautes garlic at the stove, her hair falling in soft waves down her back, nothing particularly immodest about the sundress she's wearing, but I still appreciate the way it highlights her toned legs, the curve of her ass, her trim waist-

"You're home early."

My eyes snap up to meet hers, a smirk playing about her lips. This time, though, it doesn't seem so wrong for her to catch me looking.

"Yeah, I decided to actually leave on time today."

"Good. You need more of a balance." She turns the burner off and comes over to greet me, slipping her arms over my shoulders and tugging my head down for a hot kiss.

A man could get used to a greeting like this.

And besides that, there's something about it that feels natural. Right. Easy.

The two paths I thought about earlier in my office unfurl themselves before me. Keeping things as they're meant to be - a business arrangement. Friendly to one another, but platonic in private. It'll preserve the peace, ensure there are no hard feelings, nothing that leads to the usual kinds of breakups in couples.

But now there's this new path. The one where we're attracted to each other, exploring this physical side between us. The path that was never part of the original agreement.

Wasn't supposed to be here at all.

The path that's becoming more and more enticing.

But Dad's already on my back, labeling her as a distraction. And knowing him, he'll probably send me some email tonight just to see if I respond, to make sure I'm on top of my game like always.

I pull away from her kiss, smiling to soften the blow. "What's for dinner?"

She returns my smile, enthusiasm in her voice as she tells me about the garlic parmesan pasta she's making for us, and I let her words wash over me, half my mind on the paths, unsure which one to take. To be responsible, the way I've been for so long, or to give in to this newfound desire, even knowing it could end badly.

Maybe the right answer will reveal itself to me in time, the decision clear. Or maybe I'll have to dive in headfirst, unsure what's on the other side.

And I think that's the part that worries me the most.

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Serena

I reach for my phone and shut the alarm off, turning over in bed and snuggling further under the covers. Archer has the softest sheets.

I just need five more minutes of sleep. Then I'll get up and join him in the home gym.

Wait. Didn't I already say that?

I crack an eyelid open and look at the screen, seeing it's half an hour past six. How many times did I hit snooze?

I stifle a yawn as I roll out of bed and head into the walk-in closet, slipping on a tank and shorts. I need to get on the same schedule as him, but it's hard when he wakes so ridiculously early. Yesterday morning he woke me in the best possible way, curled up against my back, holding me securely, but no such luck today.

He was perfectly polite all last night. Eating dinner together, bringing him his whiskey later, giving him a massage. He obviously enjoyed it, but he didn't initiate anything more. Even when he came to bed, he said a quick goodnight and rolled over to face away from me. Not rudely, but like he actually needed to sleep. And it's not as if I can blame him for sleeping in his own bed.

I just wish he wanted to do more with me in it.

I need to capture that closeness between us again. If we keep spending time together, maybe it'll spark something. Maybe he'll kiss me again. Maybe he'll do more.

And maybe he'll fall in love with you and you'll have ten babies and life will be magical.

I chuckle to myself as I exit the bedroom and head down the hallway to the home gym, opening the door to find him lifting weights, his biceps flexing and releasing as he brings the heavy dumbbells up and back down. Mmm, yes, please.

He doesn't notice me, and I take the opportunity to watch him unobserved. Those full lips inhaling and exhaling in a steady rhythm as he lifts. The barest hint of sweat at his temples. His dark brows narrowed over his eyes, fully focused on his task. If only he'd concentrate on me like that.

The last time I was here, I'd felt his attention on me some, but today, I want more. Not politeness, not friendliness, but a genuine reaction from him.

"Is it okay if I join you?" I ask, his gaze cutting to me.

He falters in his rhythm as he gives me a once-over, lingering on my legs. I'll take that as a win.

"Have at it," he says. "You doing yoga again?"

I nod, unrolling a mat. Now that he's not on the treadmill, there's less space between us. Perfect. "My offer still stands to teach you." Not that I expect him to take me up on that. I wouldn't even know where to start teaching someone else.

"I'm good."

He switches weights and transitions into shoulder presses, and I step on the mat, going through a few sun salutations until my leg cramps up, not used to this kind of stretching first thing in the morning. When I do practice, it's usually at night when

my body is looser from moving all day.

“Ugh.” I drop down on one side, massaging my left calf.

He sets his weights down, kneeling next to me. “You okay?”

My heart melts at the concern on his face. “Yeah, just give me a second.”

“Is it your ankle?”

My ankle? What- Oh, that’s right. When Petey kept tripping me on Sunday. “No, my calf. It seized up.”

“Here.” He brushes my hands away, replacing them with his own, the pressure from his fingers doing wonders to release the knot that’s formed.

A groan escapes me, his gaze flicking up to my face. Yeah, there’s no way he could mistake that as anything other than a sexual sound.

I bite my lip, muttering, “Sorry,” as he continues to work his magic on my leg.

“Usually, it’s the other way around,” he says softly. He’s right. And there’s nothing I love more than hearing him groan in delight when my hands are on him. “Any better?”

“Yeah, but maybe, um, a little higher?”

I swear I only meant higher on my calf, but he moves instead to my thigh, and I’m definitely not going to tell him to go back down. I keep biting my lip so as not to release any more sounds, the area hypersensitive where he massages, and I grip the mat so I don’t reach out for him. He’s not touching me anywhere technically wrong,

but with it being so close to where I really want him, it's hard not to imagine his hand shifting a little further north and around.

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“Your skin is so soft,” he whispers, his movements slowing, caressing more than massaging now.

I stay quiet, not wanting to interrupt this moment, not with his hands finally on me. And it turns out all I had to do was be an idiot and get a leg cramp.

He seems lost in a trance as his hand flexes higher now, nearly on my ass, my teeth digging into my lip so I don't do anything to break the spell. I bask in the simple pleasure of his touch, starved for him, even though the last time he touched me was... one day ago.

Wow, I am really hard up.

But when it comes to this man, there's no way I'll ever have enough.

He admitted yesterday he's reacting to me, and that much is obvious from his actions now, but it seems he still needs a bit of a push. Maybe he forgot the part where I told him I wanted him to touch me.

“Higher,” I whisper, needing more.

His gaze meets mine, almost seeming surprised at the position he's found himself in, glancing back and forth between my face and where his hand lays. His movements slow, but he keeps his palm where it is. “Do you know what you're asking for?” His other hand runs through his hair, tugging at the ends. “We've already pushed the limits so far.”

The way he says it... it's almost like he's talking to himself rather than me.

"The limits are only what we make them," I tell him, watching closely for his reaction.

His eyes fully focus on me, holding me in place with their intensity. He mouths the words I just said to himself, as if they're a revelation. "What's your limit?" he finally asks.

"I don't have one."

The blue of his gaze darkens, a thrill running through me from my breastbone to navel. "You don't have a limit?"

"No. You can do whatever you want to me." The words may be wanton, but they come from a deep well of truth within me. Seriously, I'm ready for anything with him. It only took one time being caught off guard to prepare myself.

A wicked glint enters his eye as his grip on my upper leg tightens fractionally. "You can't tell a man that. He'll get dangerous ideas."

"What kind of ideas?"

His gaze drops to where his palm rests on my thigh. "Serena, I've been trying to be good."

It's the same as he said yesterday morning, that he was trying to be respectful. Well, I don't want good or respectful. I want him. All of him.

"What kind of ideas, Archer?" I repeat.

His breathing picks up, still focused on his hand on my leg, but doesn't answer.

I take matters into my own hands, covering his palm with my own, inching it higher until he's gripping my ass. "Will you show me?"

He hesitates for just a second, as if there's an internal struggle, then gives in, rolling me on my back until his big body presses me against the yoga mat. I relish his weight atop me as he brings his mouth down to meet mine, the moment our lips touch like a firework, the attraction alive and strong between us. He kisses me as if it's necessary, each kiss stoking the fires higher, setting us ablaze, his mouth insistent upon mine, a deep ache developing within me as the minutes tick by.

My hands burrow in his thick hair, sliding through the silky strands, cupping the back of his head to bring him even closer, needing him desperately. I revel in the freedom to touch him like this now, to kiss him wildly, to feel his answering desire in the way he presses his lower half against me, his dick hard against my core.

"Yes," I moan, that spot aching, wanting him to do it again.

"You like that?" he murmurs against my lips, hitching my leg over his hip to grind further into me.

"I like it," I pant. "I love it. I want more of you." Everything. Give me everything you have.

"I don't have a condom in here."

I open my eyes, somehow forgetting where we are. On a mat in the middle of his home gym, making out like teenagers who may never get the chance to do this again.

"But I have something in mind for you," he smirks, that devilish gleam I love in his

eyes.

A rush of arousal runs through me as he brings my arms above my head, flat against the floor, and presses soft lips to my neck and down my throat, pausing to attend to my chest. I suck in a breath as he lifts my tank and sports bra to caress first one breast then the other, my nipples beading as he uses his tongue to lick me.

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I strain toward him, wanting more, but he doesn't stay for long, heading further south, toying with the edge of my shorts.

He looks up, the blue of his eyes electric as they meet mine, and bends down to press a soft kiss over my core, holding eye contact with me all the while. Even with clothing in the way, the action is indescribably sexy, lust running rampant through me.

“You ever had a guy go down on you?” The desire in his voice is unmistakable, all throaty, husky seductiveness.

I shake my head, afraid to open my mouth and let loose the string of nonsense that wants to escape. Words of needing and love and keeping him forever. I can't say those things. Not yet.

“Do you want me to?”

I nod frantically, my hips lifting off the floor in their eagerness.

He grins, slipping my shorts and panties off, parting my thighs slowly, a shaky moan escaping me as he settles himself in, pressing kisses up my left inner thigh. My legs tremble with the effort to stay still, anticipating his next move, wanting to both sigh in relief and scream at the first touch of his tongue on me.

He lets out a low groan as he does it again, the sound setting off something primal within me. I fondle my bare chest, pinching my nipples lightly, that pull in my lower belly deepening.

His eyes widen as he realizes what I'm doing, stopping his ministrations as he lifts his head in wonder, and I reach down with one hand to tug him back in place.

"So fucking sexy," he murmurs before licking me again, using his hands to part me wider.

I've touched myself plenty of times alone in bed, but it's never been like this. Intense. Desperate. Necessary. The sensation of his tongue on me, now giving little sucks in between the licks, is like nothing I've experienced. And on top of that, just knowing it's Archer puts it on a whole other level.

I run a hand through his hair again, his eyes meeting mine, the connection making the ache within me rise higher. I tilt my hips up, my mouth opening in silent wonder as the rush overtakes me, deeper than I've ever known, my breaths harsh as I crest the edge, never letting go of him, needing that contact. He stays with me throughout, encouraging me, spurring me on until I can't take any more, a hazy warmth spreading from limb to limb.

He moves up my body and I give him a lazy kiss, every part of me relaxed. "I can taste me on your lips," I murmur, my normal filter apparently gone. "I really like it."

He groans, kissing me more deeply, his tongue briefly meeting mine. "I could eat you out every day. You're so responsive."

Oh, I definitely like the sound of that.

He shifts atop me, his erection hard against my thigh, and I snake a hand between us, his rough moan as I gently grip him everything I need to hear right now.

"Let me get you off too."

He thrusts into my palm, even as he says, "I'll be late to work."

"Then be late." I grin, stroking him through his workout shorts.

He acquiesces, not that he put up much of a fight, rolling so he's underneath me, and I drag his shorts and boxers down, his dick popping out to greet me. I give him a few light strokes, bending down to envelop the head between my lips, a rumble of approval emanating from him. I suck him gently, his thighs tensing beneath me, and swirl my tongue, his hand reaching up to hold the back of my neck.

"Like that, baby," he murmurs, the pressure of his grip warm and reassuring. "That feels amazing."

He gives subtle thrusts of his hips as I continue, his desire evident, and I delight in making him twitch as I lightly scratch at his abdomen, then trail my fingers up his inner thighs.

"More," he says, inhaling a shaky breath as I stroke him again, up and down, the softness of his skin such a contrast to how hard he is.

And when I take him all the way in my mouth, I revel in the loud exclamation of, "Fuck," he makes in the silence of the room.

I work him up, using my hands and lips and tongue until he's pumping beneath me, panting roughly, his hold on me still gentle but secure.

"You get me so fucking hard," he moans, his eyes squeezed shut, looking like he's doing everything he can to keep himself together. "I'm so close. If you don't want me to come in your mouth, you have to let go now."

I suck him harder, humming low in my throat to tell him it's okay, wanting to

experience this with him.

“Oh, fuck. Oh, God. I’m coming,” he shouts, the sight of him losing control like this worth everything. This man at my mercy, eyes rolled back in his head, hips lifted off the floor... yeah, I could get used to this.

I swallow him down, savoring him, taken aback as he soon after lifts me up to kiss me, wrapping himself tight around me, his kisses greedy, like he can’t get enough of me. I quickly get with the program, matching his level of enthusiasm, loving this closeness between us. If we could start every morning like this, I’d die a happy woman.

“What is it?” he murmurs against my lips. “You’re smiling.”

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“I was just thinking I want to start every morning like this.”

He kisses me one last time, a slow smile forming over his face. “In a perfect world.”

“What’s stopping us?”

His mouth opens and closes a few times before he answers. “Nothing, I guess.”

“So it’s a date tomorrow morning?” Again, where is my filter?

His gaze flicks between my eyes. “You would want that?”

I nod, leaning in to kiss him, loving the taste of his lips.

He cups my head, deepening the kiss briefly. “Okay.”

I bite my lip, not that it does much to contain my smile. “Okay.”

I savor his answering smile, grinning goofily at him for a few moments until a noise sounds from out in the main area.

“Lori must be starting breakfast.” He untangles his legs from mine and slips his boxers and shorts back on. “I need to get ready.”

He leisurely dresses me next, his hands warm on me, and helps me up, staying close by me as we head out to the kitchen.

Lori gives us a knowing look, but wisely doesn't comment on the way his arm is wrapped around my waist. "Hungry?"

"I need something I can eat in the car."

"You got it." She pretends not to notice the kiss on the cheek he gives me before disappearing back down the hallway to get ready. "Same for you?"

"I have time to eat." I don't have to be at the shelter until later.

"How about an egg and veggie scramble? I'll put his in a burrito."

I nod, taking a seat at the breakfast bar, catching my reflection in the microwave as I shift. Oh God, my hair. I've been rolling around on the floor for who knows how long. I surreptitiously finger comb it, giving up after a minute.

"You know, I have to apologize to you," Lori says, her back turned away from me as she chops a red pepper to put in. "You got him quicker than I thought you would."

I frown, not sure how to interpret her words. It makes me sound mercenary or something.

"Oh God, no, I didn't mean it like that," she says, glancing over her shoulder and spotting my face. "I meant you got through to him. I'd have bet money he'd be more resistant."

"Why?"

"In all the years I've worked for him, he's had a set routine. A schedule. And then you come in here and blow it wide open. I expected him to push back a little more, but I was wrong." She sets the peppers to the side, chopping scallions next. "You're

good for him. You loosen him up.”

I duck my head down, basking in her praise.

“No, no. Don’t get shy. You wanted this.”

“I did,” I grin.

And now that I seem to have him, I only want more.

Archer

I step off the elevator, turning the corner to walk down the long corridor to my office, catching Tracy's eye from a distance. She stands and hurries toward me, her too tight skirt hindering her movements. What's she worked up about now?

"Mr. Bishop's in there," she whispers as she reaches me. "He's been waiting for fifteen minutes."

Shit. The one time I'm late.

It was worth it, though. God, the way she'd come for me. The way she sucked me. The happiness radiating from her as we'd agreed to do it again tomorrow. It seems my path is clearer. Even if I'm not sure what'll happen next, the unknown isn't daunting so much as... exciting.

"Did he say what he wants?"

"No."

There's no need to describe his mood. She wouldn't have warned me if he was happy.

And he's never happy.

"Do you have any gum?"

She gives me a funny look, and rightly so because I've never asked her for anything like that. "I have mints in my purse."

"Perfect." I'm not going in there with breakfast burrito breath.

I suck the spearmint she offers me, crunching it as fast as I can, and calmly open my office doors, finding Dad seated behind my desk. Talk about a power move.

"So now you're leaving early and coming in late?" he asks, steepling his fingers in front of him. It's never bothered me much before, but today it irks me for some reason.

I set my attaché case on my desk. "What?"

"I stopped by last night a little after six, but you'd already left for the day."

"Everyone else leaves then." I remove my suit jacket, hanging it on the hook behind my desk, but he doesn't seem to get the hint to vacate my chair.

"You're not everyone else. Did Serena keep you up late again? Is that why you're waltzing in here twenty minutes late?"

"No. There was traffic," I lie. A plausible excuse in this city. What's he going to do? Go look at the crash reports? He hasn't had to worry about traffic in years. He had the top floor of the office converted into a massive private apartment for him. He just has to take an elevator to work.

"Don't make it a habit."

Again, I'm late one time. I doubt he's scrutinizing the other chiefs this closely. "Will do," I say, trying to stay neutral.

He stays seated in my chair, and I give up waiting for him to leave, taking a seat on the couch nearby. “Is there something you wanted to talk about?” I’m assuming he wouldn’t be in here otherwise.

“Why is Greg Montague pestering me about the buyout?”

Word got back to him that soon? It’s been one day. “I haven’t spoken to him.” Which is technically true.

“Apparently, you’ve been over there sniffing around. Any reason?”

I sigh, wishing I had more definitive proof to put a case together rather than this gut feeling and details that don’t add up.

I explain what happened yesterday along with what Serena’s told me, his silence afterward unnerving. I know he wants this deal to go through, but if it turns out Montague is deceiving him in some way, I’ll never hear the end of it.

“I’ll get a P.I. on him,” he says finally. “I have a guy I’ve worked with for years.”

For what? Who is he looking into?

Will that be me one day once I’m head of the company? I’ve never had a reason to hire a private investigator in my life, but Dad and I lead very different lives. How can he talk about investigating someone so casually? I’d think it’d be a more serious undertaking.

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“If you judge it necessary, then by all means,” I tell him noncommittally.

“We’ll see what comes of it.”

“Okay.” So that warranted an in-person trip? It’s usually him summoning me to his office.

“I spoke with Angelina. She said you and Serena are doing a great job convincing everyone about the marriage.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to thank him for the praise, but based on his expression, he didn’t intend it as a compliment.

“What do you know about her?” he asks casually. With Dad, though, nothing’s casual.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Why’s he asking about Serena?

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think she could have anything to do with what you suspect her father of?”

My jaw tightens. “No. She has nothing to do with Greg’s business.”

“But she’s after money.”

I stay silent, waiting for him to elaborate. He wouldn’t have made a statement like that if he didn’t have a reason.

“You put in a requisition yesterday to donate to the Montague Animal Foundation. A pretty sizable donation.”

“It’s a good cause. We contribute to charitable organizations all the time.”

“When it gets us seen. When we have a front row table or our name is on it. I’m not funding something that has Montague’s name on it.”

“We’ll send a notice to the media about it then. Make sure we get credit.” He stares at me, silent. “I’ll see if she’s willing to change the name of her nonprofit too.” Even though it’s her last name.

“What else has she asked you to pay for?”

What’s his problem? “Nothing.”

“Then what about these pricey renovations to your apartment?”

I clench my teeth harder. Does he have cameras on me or something? Shouldn’t he trust my judgment? “A pipe burst in the bathroom. Everything needs to be replaced.”

He nods, unimpressed with my explanation. Even though it’s the truth. “Nothing else then?”

I shrug. “Some clothes and other things that got damaged by water. She’s not high maintenance. She’s barely asked for anything. And also, she’s my wife. I’d think you’d want her to spend money. Look a certain way. She reflects on the Bishops.”

“Well, if this thing with Montague Media turns out to be serious, you should start distancing yourself from her now.”

I stare at him, unable to believe what I'm hearing. "I just spent the last week and a half getting closer to her."

His narrowed eyes don't bode well for me. "You mean making it look that way."

"Right. But I'm not going to shun her. She's my wife."

"Archer, it's a fake marriage. You don't owe her anything."

But I do. Even if we hadn't recently embarked on this new physical side to our relationship, I still promised to take care of her. Promised not to leave her. And I don't go back on my promises. I value my word meaning something.

"We'll have to agree to disagree," I say as diplomatically as I can.

His brows furrow, that vein in his forehead popping, the one only Gabriel makes appear. "Have you fucked her?"

Jesus. "No." Technically. Though it's only a matter of time at this rate. "Not that it's any of your business."

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His lips thin, cold ice in his gaze. “It is my business. Especially when you’re thinking with your dick. Don’t forget what she married you for. It had nothing to do with you.”

No, it may not have started that way, but it’s turned into something more.

“She’s got you funding her little animal project,” he continues. “But don’t give her anything else. And if her father’s trying to pull one over on me, she’s guilty by association.” He stands, pointing a finger at me as if I’m a child he’s scolding. “No more photos together, no more events. Lay low until we figure out what’s going on with Montague. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” I grit out, knowing any defense of Serena will only anger him more.

“You’re getting as bad as your brother,” he mutters as he exits my office.

He meant it as an insult, but I don’t take it that way. Gabriel stood up for what he believed in and got out from under Dad’s thumb. There’s something to be said for that I’m coming to realize.

I stand at the window looking out at the city for a while after he leaves, his presence lingering in the room. If I’d known about the mess I’d create relaying my discovery about Montague Media’s financial discrepancies, I might never have gotten involved to begin with. I was considering it from a business standpoint, not a personal one.

I guess that was my first mistake. Everything is so intertwined now.

He didn't outright say it, but if he feels slighted by Greg and calls this buyout off, does he expect me to call the marriage off too? This isn't as simple as breaking up. We're legally tied together.

I've never gone against Dad, but this...

There's no truth to his ridiculousness, right? She's not with me for my money. She didn't even plan on marrying me. She was supposed to marry Gabriel.

My chest twinges, and I rub at it absentmindedly, pulling my cell out of my pocket and answering without looking, closing my eyes in relief as Connor's warm voice comes through the line.

"Hey, I meant to call you last week," he says, "but time got away from me. You holding up okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You sound tired."

Well, the good mood Serena put me in this morning is definitely gone now. "Just dealing with Dad."

He chuckles softly. "I know how that is."

"He's not usually this bad. Ever since the wedding, he's got a bug up his ass about everything."

"He doesn't have Gabriel to take it out on anymore. Guess he's splitting it between me and you now."

I didn't think of that. That's one more thing I need to apologize to Gabriel for. I never realized how much he took the brunt of Dad's moods until recently.

"So he's on your case too?"

He sighs. "Yeah. Some major stuff's been going on over here."

"Like what?"

"So I'm working on getting this call center up and running, right? Building's finished, we've hired workers, I've got the import license to bring all the equipment in, but customs won't release our stuff to us. I assumed by the time I came back from your wedding it'd be cleared, but no."

"Dad hasn't mentioned any of this to me." If he wants me to be a leader so badly, shouldn't he be sharing problems like this about the company with me?

"Well, he doesn't come off looking too hot in the rest of the story."

"What happened?"

"I went down there and they told me I need to make a facilitating payment if I want priority treatment. Basically, bribe them. And the way the guy said it, I admit, it really got my blood boiling."

Wow, it must have been serious to rile Connor up.

"So I decide I won't pay it out of principle. I'm not rewarding bad behavior, you know? The only problem is, we can't wait too much longer if we're going to open the building in time. Our contract with our current call center runs out at the end of the month and everything is supposed to transfer over here."

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“So Dad’s on your back about that?”

“Yeah. And then he tells the project manager to go ahead and pay it anyway. I mean, just completely undermines my authority. He only cares that we meet the deadline, not how we make it happen. And apparently, he doesn’t care that bribery is illegal.”

Knowing Dad, no, he wouldn’t care about that little fact.

“Well, today we get served from the U.S. Department of Justice with a violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, and now Dad’s yelling at me on the phone an hour ago about how I need to clean up this mess. Even though it’s his fault.”

“Oh, shit, Connor. I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“No. It’s just been a clusterfuck of a day.”

Well, that must have been why Dad was in such a pissy mood.

“Tell me what he yelled at you about,” he requests. “Maybe that’ll make me feel better.”

A laugh escapes me, despite the seriousness of the situation. I explain to him what happened during my reconnaissance mission at Montague Media yesterday and how Dad wants me to distance myself from Serena, even though she has nothing to do with any business stuff.

“And now you don’t want to? You didn’t seem to care much about it at lunch last

week.”

God, that seems like a lifetime ago. “A lot has changed since then. We’ve been getting along really well.” Scarily well. Almost like things between us are... real.

“That’s a good thing, right? I’ll be honest, the pictures you’ve been posting are convincing.”

“The PR team handles my profile.”

“Yeah, but you’re still in them. I, um- Okay, I have to know. Your last photo, the one from yesterday. She’s in your bedroom, right? Did you take that?”

My mind flashes to Serena giving me that secretive smile, my old t-shirt hanging off her slender frame, the waistband of my boxers rolled up several times to fit her. “Yeah.”

“Was that staged? The other ones I can see, but that one... there was something different about it.”

“It was real,” I admit. There’s that word again.

“So when you say things have changed, that you’re getting along well, you’re what? Actually married now?”

“No, we haven’t- We’ve never discussed...” The closest we’ve gotten to talking about anything like that was when I told her I was having trouble separating what was acting and what was real, but we never came to an answer. We kind of got distracted with touching each other. “I don’t know.”

“Uh, maybe you should talk about that? Even if she’s your fake wife.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Absolutely.” We’ll sit down and discuss it. Without touching this time. No getting distracted. By her sensuality. Her scent. Her smiles. Her massages. Her thoughtfulness. Her passion.

I swear to God, I’ve never thought so much about how I’m feeling in my life, but this thing with her just feels... right.

We talk for another ten minutes or so until Tracy buzzes in, reminding me of a meeting at nine. I get back to work, something within me lighter after talking with him. I’ve spent too long apart from both my brothers-

It suddenly clicks. Dad has purposely kept us separated. How have I never realized that before? He had all of us go to different colleges. Never let Gabriel join the business. Shipped Connor off to work on international projects soon after he got his MBA.

But why? So we wouldn’t band against him or something?

I’ve never had cause to do that before, but there’s been no reason to go against him. I’ve done what he’s wanted, followed the path he’s set for me.

But how long am I going to keep doing that? When do I get to live the life I want?

Not that I’m even sure what that is exactly.

Well, there’s one thing I’m discovering I want more and more.

Serena.

And though he told me to distance myself, there’s no way I’m actually doing that. The situation’s reversed now. We’ll keep this budding relationship away from the

public eye. But in private?

It's only going to heat up.

Serena

“Serena, you have someone downstairs who’s asking for you.”

I rub at my eyes, the hours of searching for shelter grants on the computer getting to me. “Thanks, Wendy.” I stretch my arms above my head, my back making an audible pop. Now’s as good a time as any to take a break.

I follow her down to the first floor, smiling as I spot Claire and a young girl hanging around the front desk.

“Please tell me you still have Sandy,” Claire says in her typical no-nonsense way. “If you don’t, this one might riot.” She points to the girl, who merely grins in response.

“She’s here. I promised to give you a heads up if someone else was interested in her, didn’t I?”

“Can we see her?” the girl asks, bouncing on the balls of her feet, raring to go.

“Oh, Serena, this is my stepdaughter, Ava.” Claire waves her hand back and forth between us making the introductions. “And she’s desperate to meet this dog.”

“Give me a second. I’ll bring her out.”

I walk in the kennel area and get Sandy out of her stall, clipping on a recently donated sparkly pink leash I have a feeling Ava will like.

The girl squeals at the sight of the dog as we return up front, holding her hands up to her cheeks. “Oh my God, she’s so cute.”

Claire lets out a sigh of relief.

“Would you like to take her for a walk? Get to know her a bit?” I hold the leash out to Ava, who nods and immediately grabs it, bending down to give gentle pets and behind the ear scratches to the preening dog.

“Thank God,” Claire mutters, soft enough for my ears only. “Suddenly this girl’s been my best friend once I mentioned it. I actually had to pull her out of school to come here today just to get her off my back.”

We make the same loop around the block I did with Archer and Petey on Sunday, Ava already a pro at handling the dog. We give her some distance up ahead to bond with Sandy while keeping an eye on the two of them, and I bask in the warm sunshine, still buoyant from this morning. I can’t believe how well it went. And all I had to do was actually ask for what I wanted to get it. What a novel concept.

“You install that swing yet?” Claire asks, her gaze focused on Ava.

“What?”

She chuckles to herself. “Never mind.”

Swing? What is she- Oh. The sex swing. Very funny. “No, we’re doing fine without it.”

“So the advice I gave you worked?”

“It was extremely helpful.” My face heats, but maybe she’ll attribute it to the sun.

“Good. Glad someone’s getting some action. There are some nights lately I don’t even see my husband. Leaving me on my own is never a good idea.” Well, that doesn’t really surprise me.

“Is he working late?”

“Yeah, some big project at his job.”

“What is it he does?”

We pause as Ava and Sandy stop ahead for the dog to sniff a tree. “He’s an executive at RealityTV.”

Oh God, I hate that channel. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve been known to indulge in my fair share of reality shows, but that network seems to greenlight the worst of them.

“Actually, your name came up recently at one of his meetings.”

I squint at her. Come again?

“The show the Nash brothers are putting on,” she elaborates. “They said you and Archer would be a regular feature. Surprised me, to be honest.”

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Whoa, now. “We ran into Harlan and Courtney last week and they invited us to a dinner party, but that was it. We never confirmed we’d do it.”

“Hmm.” She twists her lips. “That’s not what they told Jerome.”

So they’re trying to use our names to get their show on the air?

“I’ll let Archer know.” Maybe he can put a stop to it. I have no desire to be on RealityTV.

“I think Sandy has to go to the bathroom,” Ava calls back to us. “I’m going to take her to that tree across the street.”

“Okay, be careful.” Claire turns to me. “This is turning out better than I expected. If you couldn’t tell, we’re taking that dog home.”

“Good. Sandy’s a sweet girl.”

“How often do your animals get adopted?”

“Usually a few a week. We try to make sure the family will be a good fit, so sometimes we have to reject an application. But it’s just so they don’t end up returning them later or abandoning them somewhere else.”

She nods. “Totally understandable. You know, I happened to find this place on Google because I was looking anyway, but I had no idea this shelter was even here. If you want, I could get Jerome to post a feature on their social media or something.”

“Wow, that’s really nice of you.” RealityTV or not, exposure is still exposure.  
“Thanks.”

She laughs. “I’m not a total bitch all the time.”

“I never said-”

“Relax, I’m teasing.”

I don’t think I’ll ever get used to her version of teasing. But now that she mentions it, maybe I could ask for her help with something else too. “I’m actually planning a benefit soon for the shelter. Our funding will run out starting in about a month and a half. Archer’s company might donate some in the interim, but I want to diversify our income sources. Would your husband be able to post about a fundraiser once I lock in a date and venue?”

“Sure. Better yet, add me, him, and Ava to your guest list. We’d love to come.”

“Where are we going?” Ava asks, joining us once again. By her side, Sandy stands happily, her tail wagging back and forth.

“A benefit for the shelter. You’ll get to dress up fancy and stay up late.”

Ava’s eyes widen. “Awesome. This is the best day ever.” She rushes forward and hugs Claire around the middle, a tentative smile creeping over Claire’s face as she reaches down and gently strokes her stepdaughter’s hair.

Ava bounds away soon after with Sandy prancing by her side, and Claire touches her fingers to her lips, watching her.

I stay silent, giving her a moment, until she glances over, remembering I’m there.

“Sorry.” She wipes discreetly at her eye, pink touching her cheeks. “That was the first time she’s hugged me.”

“I bet there’s a lot more of that to come.”

“I hope,” she says quietly. “Jerome works so much, it ends up being me that’s the disciplinarian. I never get to be the fun guy.”

“Well, you definitely scored some major points with this.”

We turn the last corner to loop back to the shelter, Ava still far in front of us. Speaking of fundraisers, I need to go visit Mackenzie again. And Gabriel too, I guess. Archer never told me if he ever talked to his brother about his new career path.

We pass by the same jewelry store I peered into Sunday, but I don’t spy in the window this time. My thumb touches the bottom of the slim band encircling my ring finger now, taking comfort in having this at least. It may not be extravagant, but it’s something.

Claire fills out the last of the paperwork when we get back as Ava plays with Sandy, and I gift them the sparkly pink leash as they leave, waving goodbye. Warmth radiates in my chest as the girl and dog look at each other adoringly. This is why I started this nonprofit. For moments like this.

I return to my desk upstairs, my heart still overflowing as I pick up my phone, discovering I have three missed calls.

And they’re all from Dad.

What does he want? I haven’t spoken to him since he practically evicted me from my apartment. After seeing where I really stand, I don’t have all that much to say to him.

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I sigh as I press the return call button, hoping it's a simple conversation.

"Serena, sweetheart," he answers, all friendliness. He must want me to cooperate with something then. "How's married life treating you?"

What's he talking about? He knows it's not a real marriage. "Well, a pipe busted in Archer's apartment, and now my bedroom is unusable."

"Good, good," he says, his voice distracted, obviously not listening to a thing I'm saying. "Listen, I got word from some people here that Archer stopped by yesterday and paid a visit. You know anything about that?"

What? "Your work or your house?"

"Work. He had a meeting with my senior accountant, but didn't bother to tell me about it. Why?"

"I don't know. We don't talk about his work."

"You can't think of a reason?" he snaps. His patience must be thin today.

Archer questioned my father's money problems to me last week, not that I had an answer for him. But if I bring that up to Dad, it'll only make him angry.

"No. I can't." My loyalty to him has been fading for a while now, ever since he denied my pleading with him to call off the wedding to Gabriel. Throwing me out of my apartment and withdrawing the shelter's funding sealed the deal.

He wanted to pawn me off on the Bishops? Well, that means I'm not under his thumb anymore.

"Let me know if you find out anything."

Yeah, I'll get right on that.

He hangs up without saying goodbye in his typical fashion, but I'm not letting it bother me. I did my part in marrying into the Bishop family like he wanted. But from what I can see, he miscalculated the value of the connections he'd gain. Archer isn't a fan.

My phone buzzes again, but thankfully it's not Dad.

"Archer, hi." I smile just remembering this morning, how close I'd felt to him, the lingering kiss he'd given me as he'd grabbed his breakfast to go from Lori and headed out the door.

"Hey, are you free for lunch?"

"Yeah, of course." I'd normally do a little happy dance if he asked me out, but something about his tone seems off. "Is everything okay?"

He's silent for a moment. "How'd you know?"

"Your voice. You only sound like that when you're stressed." Oh, crap. I shouldn't have told him that. I'm basically admitting the stalker-like level of attention I've been paying him.

He sighs. "Work's been rough today. I need to get out of here for a bit. And I want to talk to you about a few things. Can I send James over to pick you up in about half an

hour?”

“Yeah.” A nervous bubble forms in my belly. What does he want to talk about? He’s never asked to randomly meet in the middle of the day for something like this.

We hang up, but I’m hardly able to focus on continuing my grant research for the next thirty minutes until his driver arrives.

I stare out the window of the town car silently as I travel uptown, picking at my nails and looping a loose thread from the hem of my dress around my finger until we pull up in front of Capital West. I’ve never been to this restaurant, but it certainly seems nice as I walk in, the dim lighting and dark furniture whispering of luxury.

The hostess greets me, her black uniform impeccable, asking, “Do you have a reservation?”

“I’m meeting my husband, Archer Bishop.”

Her eyes widen momentarily. “Oh, Mrs. Bishop. If you’ll just follow me.”

She leads me to a door marked Private Dining along the back wall and opens it for me, ushering me inside. Archer stands from his seat at the head of a long table and walks over to join me, laying a light kiss on my lips. Once the hostess leaves, he guides me over to the table, holding out the chair next to him for me to sit in.

“I’m surprised you booked a private room,” I say as I arrange the bottom of my dress out around my lap. “Don’t we want people to see us?”

“Actually, that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.” He takes his seat, a serious expression on his face. Right. Like I could forget about that. I just pray it’s not a weird need to talk kind of situation.

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“Okay.” I place the cloth napkin on my lap, stalling for time. “What’s going on?”

“Well, according to Dad, it looks like we’ve finished our job of convincing everyone we’re happily married. We don’t need to go anywhere else or take more pictures.”

“Oh.” He had me meet him out here to tell me it’s over? What am I going to do now?

A wrinkle forms between his brows. “I thought you’d be happy.”

I nod, but it’s too shaky to be believable.

“You didn’t even like attending those events,” he says, clearly at a loss for why my lower lip is suddenly trembling.

“You’re right,” I manage to choke out, a tightness settling in my chest.

“Am I missing something here?”

A fat tear rolls down my cheek and I hastily sweep it away before he sees it. I need to get myself under control. I knew in my gut this day was coming, despite his reassurances otherwise. “Everything’s fine.”

He grabs hold of my wrist before I can wipe the next tear away. “Serena, you’re scaring me. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to leave,” I whisper.

“What?”

I swallow hard, little knives already inside my throat. “I want to stay with you.”

He stares at me, his brows furrowed down, and just as he opens his mouth, another woman enters the room, presumably our server.

“Can you give us five minutes?” he asks her before she even approaches the table.

She glances between us and nods, backing out without a word.

He moves his hand up to cover mine, and I grasp onto the lifeline he offers, not caring if it’s only a temporary comfort. “What else do you want?” His voice is soft, soothing, but I can’t tell if it’s meant merely to placate me or because he genuinely wants to know.

I set aside the churning of my stomach, the tight band across my ribs, focusing on his question. What do I want? There’s a pull inside me to confess, to tell him everything. I’m tired of hiding it. And at this point, what do I have to lose?

“I want to keep bringing you your Scotch every night.” To feel needed, appreciated by someone. “And watch funny shows with you again and hear you laugh. It’s so rare.” I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of hearing his deep chuckle.

“What else?”

I brush the back of my free hand across my cheeks, the wetness there mortifying. I close my eyes so I don’t have to look at his serious face anymore. “I want to have dinner together every night and go to sleep in your bed.” It’s like the words are being ripped from me somehow, needing to come out. “I want to wake up wrapped up in your arms. I want to see the way you look at me when I wear sexy lingerie for you.”

His grip on my hand tightens, but he stays silent. Every part of me is screaming to run out of here right now and stop making a fool of myself, but how will he know how I feel if I never tell him?

“I want to belong somewhere. With you. I want us to be together. For real.”

His hand slides up my arm until it’s cupping my jaw, and I cautiously open my eyes, finding him watching me, an unreadable look in his eyes.

“Did you think I was telling you I wanted to end things?”

“You said we’re finished.”

“With the pictures and pointless events. Not with each other.” His thumb sweeps across my cheek and over my lower lip, a rush of longing running through me. “I’m not finished with you. Not even close.”

“Really?”

He nods seriously.

“I want a dog too,” I blurt out, the thought coming from nowhere.

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He blinks at me a few times, then smiles. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah, I want all of that. Everything you said.”

“Even the dog?” I sniff.

He nods again, his beautiful blue eyes crinkling at the corners, as he brings me in closer, his lips still smiling as he kisses me softly at first, then more deeply, his hand moving around to cup the back of my head in a gentle hold.

What’s happening right now? Did I just confess I wanted a real relationship and he... agreed?

There’s a knock at the door and the server enters once more. “Are you ready to order?”

I lean back in my seat, flustered, as she pours water for us and Archer orders a balsamic steak salad. When she asks me, it takes me a moment to focus on the menu, my mind still racing. “Um...”

“What do you have that’s vegetarian?” Archer asks.

“Oh, we have a great beet salad with arugula and goat cheese.”

“That good?” he asks me.

“Yeah, that sounds delicious. Thanks.” I hand her my menu, waiting till she leaves before turning to him. “I never told you I’m a vegetarian. Did Lori tell you?”

“No, I just noticed you never eat meat.”

A delighted smile creeps over my face. “You noticed that about me?”

“I notice a lot about you.” He glances down, straightening his knife and fork. “How generous you are, always doing things for me.” He looks at me again, warmth in the beautiful blue of his eyes. “How passionate you are about your shelter. I admire that. How brave you’ve been with all the shitty stuff your parents have put you through.”

He reaches out and grips my hand. “But I didn’t see all the obvious stuff, apparently. That you wanted all those things, that you felt so strongly about it. I don’t know how I missed it.”

I shake my head before he’s even finished talking. “No, it’s not your fault.” My palms dampen, a fluttering sensation in my stomach threatening to escape. “I haven’t been entirely truthful.”

Serena

“What do you mean?”

“I, um, I told you I remembered you from high school, right?”

He nods, appearing confused at my change in topic. “You said I helped you up off the floor.”

“Mmm hmm.” I smooth out the fabric of my dress, surreptitiously wiping the sweat off my palms. “But what I didn’t tell you was after that, I had this massive crush on you.”

He blinks rapidly. “What?”

Heat licks my cheeks, my legs trembling with the need to flee, but I keep going. “I never completely forgot you after that. And when Dad said he was working on this deal and wanted me to marry into the Bishop family, I agreed because I thought he meant... you.” Now that I’m confessing, the urge to get it all out overcomes me. “How I feel about you has always been real. It was never acting.”

“So at the wedding...”

He would bring that up, wouldn’t he? “I was an idiot.” A naive fool. At least he didn’t realize it then.

“Oh God, Serena.” He turns his chair toward mine, running careful hands along my

arms, looking at me like I just told him I have a terminal illness or something. “I had no idea. I wouldn’t have- I was a jerk, wasn’t I?”

“No, no.” I laugh, because otherwise, I might cry hysterically at the remembered embarrassment. “There’s no way you could have known. We didn’t know each other. Not really. And though it hasn’t been that long since then, I like what we’ve built together so far.”

He studies me, his face serious, reaching out to join our hands. “I like it too. It’s more than I ever expected in my life.”

I tilt my head, not sure what he means. “You never expected, what? A relationship?”

He shrugs. “No. I’ve never had time. Never met anyone. Didn’t want to meet anyone actually.”

“Why not?”

He looks down at our joined hands, blowing out a long breath. It’s like we’re on the edge of some kind of precipice.

“A question for a question?” I ask.

A ghost of a smile crosses his lips. “Your questions are hard.”

“I just admitted I’ve had a crush on you since high school. That deserves some reciprocity.”

His lips tilt up more. “Touché.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to meet anyone?”

“I’d have to let them close,” he says after a minute.

“What’s wrong with that?”

His fingers flex and release. “They leave you. Whether or not they mean to.”

“You said you’ve never been in a serious relationship, right?” He nods, still not looking at me. “So does this have something to do with your mom?”

His head jerks up, gaze sharp as it roams my face. “Why would you ask that?”

“You shut down the other night when I asked about her. I- I know she died, Archer. I’m so sorry.”

His hands tighten around mine, but he stays silent.

“I can’t imagine how painful that must have been. You obviously loved her a lot.” I release one of my hands from his hold to stroke it softly through his hair, and he leans into my touch.

“I did. I never want something like that to happen again.”

“Will you tell me about her?”

His thumb brushes over the back of my hand. “She’d love you,” he whispers. “She was soft spoken, like you. And her big thing was gardening. Especially flowers. They were always all over the house.” He pauses, leaning in closer to sniff. “Your perfume. That’s what it is.”

“What?”

“It reminded me of something, but I never made the connection. It’s the flowers.”

I hold a hand up to my neck. “It reminds you of your mom?”

He shakes his head. “No, not her specifically. Just a better time. Before she got sick.”

Our food arrives then and he thankfully continues talking without more prompting on my end. Things about her, about his childhood, an untapped reserve within him I greedily soak up, wanting to know everything about him. His stories naturally involve his brothers a lot, and it only calls to mind how little I’ve heard about them from him.

“You haven’t mentioned your brothers much before. Are you still close?”

He picks at his salad for a moment before responding. “I haven’t been a good brother to them.”

What’s he talking about? “I’m sure that’s not true.”

A look of defeat crosses his face, so dejected it makes my heart ache. “Mom was the one who brought us all together. And after she was gone, I... well, it was hard to face them. All they did was remind me of her.”

“You were grieving.”

He sets his fork down and rubs at his temples. “I promised her I’d take care of them. And I didn’t.”

“You’re only a year older than Gabriel. I’m sure you didn’t actually need to-”

“I said I would. I failed her.”

I set my own silverware down. “Archer, have you ever seen a therapist?”

His brow furrows. “No.”

I take a moment to collect my thoughts, wanting to tread lightly over what seems a personal, painful matter. “It sounds like you have a lot of unresolved grief about the situation. Talking to someone might help you sort that out so you can forgive yourself.”

He stares at me, his gaze piercing, the lines bracketing his mouth so deep, I’m afraid they’ll stay there permanently.

“Seeing you in pain hurts me,” I say softly. “And honestly, I could probably use some therapy about my parents too.”

“Maybe we could go together,” he whispers roughly, as if there’s something stuck in his throat.

I reach out and squeeze his hand. “I’d like that.”

“I don’t deserve you, Serena.”

A wave of warmth rushes over me at the earnestness in his voice. “Yes, you do. We’re a team, remember? We’re in this together.”

He lifts our joined hands to press a soft kiss to the inner side of my wrist. “I’m really glad Gabriel pulled his stunt at the wedding.”

My answering smile is so wide, my cheeks ache. “I am too.”

We finish lunch, relaxing further, his rare smiles coming easier now, and I delight in finally breaking through what feels like the last barrier. After, he walks me outside to where his driver is waiting to take me to the animal shelter, the kiss he gives me at the curb making my toes curl.

“I meant to talk to you about a couple other things, but it can wait till tonight,” he says, wrapping his hands around my lower back to pull me tight into his body.

“We usually get sidetracked, don’t we?”

“In good ways, though.”

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“Was today a good way?” We only scratched the surface about our new relationship, his brothers, his mom. There’s still so much I want to know.

His gaze flicks between my eyes, seeming to choose his words carefully. “It seems like every time I’m with you, I end up discovering something. About you, about myself. Today more than any other time, I think. In a very good way.”

I hide a smile behind my hand, thinking about all the different sides of him I’ve discovered. The ones I’m fairly sure he doesn’t let anyone else see.

The relaxed and happy side watching a sitcom together.

The vulnerable and unsure side embarking on this new relationship.

The caring and protective side who’s made sure I’m okay repeatedly. Welcoming me in his home. Working things out after I ran away from his office. Assuring me he wouldn’t leave me at the silent auction.

And the incredibly sexy side, our encounters together hotter than anything I’ve ever imagined. And if it’s this good before we’ve even had sex, what will it be like when it actually happens?

He kisses me again, ignoring the people passing by on the sidewalk, those waiting outside the restaurant to get in, the cars behind us in line angling for James’s spot. “I’ll see you tonight?”

I nod, already looking forward to what this evening brings. With everything out in the

open now, there's no reason to pretend like I'm not dying to be with him. "Tonight."

There's a quick flash of heat in his eye, and he gives me a devilish grin as he opens the car door for me. God, I love seeing that look on him.

I watch him as the car pulls away from the curb until he disappears from sight, so handsome in his tailored suit, a relaxed lightness to him I rarely see. He said he wanted to talk about other things, but it couldn't have been that important if it never came up, right?

I don't bother fighting the smile that seems permanently etched on my face the rest of the day as I apply for grants, have a quick meeting with Wendy about a couple of staffing issues, and then sit down and seriously make a list of what I want this fundraiser to accomplish. That was so generous of Claire to offer to help too.

Lori's gone when I return home, and despite the leftovers still in the fridge, I prepare a spiced vegetable stew for dinner, wanting to do something for Archer. I also spend a fair amount of time in the shower, scrubbing and shaving until I'm ready for what tonight holds.

I pour myself a glass of wine as I wait for him and give myself a refill at seven when he still hasn't shown. At eight, I finally serve myself a bowl of the now cold stew and check my phone for the umpteenth time, but there's no response to the two texts I sent asking where he is. I don't want to come across as clingy, but he said he'd see me tonight and here it is nearly half past eight. He's always home by now, even on the days he works late.

Thirty minutes later, my phone finally rings and the peeved part of me wants to let it go to voicemail, giving him a taste of his own medicine, but the bigger part answers it in a hurry, wanting to make sure he's okay.

“I’m so sorry,” he says immediately, his voice weary. “I’ve been in meetings since I came back from lunch. We have a big legal issue on the project Connor’s working on and it’s all hands on deck.”

“Are you headed home soon?”

“No,” he sighs. “It’s morning there for them in the Philippines, so now we’re starting conference calls with the team there. I have no idea how late I’ll be tonight.”

My heart sinks, but it sounds like he doesn’t have much choice in the matter. “I understand.”

“I promise I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have to. My department’s involved because some illegal bribes took place.” There’s a pause as he lets out a long breath. “I’d rather be home with you.”

A reluctant smile creeps over my lips. “I’d rather you be here too. I, um-” I waver for a second on whether I should add more, then decide to just go for it. “I have some new lingerie you haven’t seen.”

“Fuck,” he groans. “You can’t say stuff like that to me right now. Dad thinks I’m taking a quick bathroom break. He doesn’t allow any phones in boardroom meetings.”

“Sorry,” I grin.

“No, you’re not,” he chuckles.

My grin spreads wider. “No, I’m not.”

“Raincheck for tomorrow?”

“Of course. I-” I draw a swift breath, the notion that I can say anything I want so new.  
“I’ll miss you.”

“Miss you.”

They’re simple words, but they still make my heart flutter. How did I get so lucky as to finally be on the same page with him?

I stay up until my eyelids are drooping and call it quits, heading to bed with plans to save my sexy nightie for another time. I should be thankful for what the day brought me, and really, I am. But as I lie alone, all I can think about is how much I miss his warmth, his comforting presence, the solid bulk of his body. I inhale the faint scent of his cologne lingering on his pillow, not caring it makes me look like a stalker.

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We have plenty of time in store. Everything doesn't have to happen exactly this minute, no matter that my body says otherwise. And despite the tiredness of my eyes, sleep is still out of reach for a long while.

"Shit."

The muffled whisper wakes me, and my first instinctive thought is that it's an intruder until I register the deep voice. "Archer?"

"Sorry," he whispers from somewhere near the foot of the bed. "Go back to sleep."

I rub my eyes, but it's always impossible to see anything in here once the blackout shades are in place. "What time is it?"

"Two."

And he's just now getting home? "Have you been at work this whole time?"

The mattress depresses next to me and I reach out, the fabric of his dress shirt soft against my fingertips. "Yeah. I had to fight with Dad to let everyone go. We weren't accomplishing anything else this late."

There's the quiet clink of his watch as he places it on his nightstand, then the rustle of his shirt as he unbuttons it, his skin warm as I help him remove it.

"Seriously, go back to sleep. I didn't mean to wake you."

“It’s fine,” I yawn, so wide my jaw cracks.

He finishes undressing and slips under the covers, scooting toward me. “Come here.” He wraps an arm around my middle and spoons me, his delicious warmth permeating me, his big body against mine reassuring on every level. He presses a chaste kiss against the back of my neck, sighing deeply, something about the way he does it making it seem like he finds comfort in me too.

As much as I was looking forward to being in bed with him, my eyes can’t stay open, and I snuggle into his warmth, drifting back to sleep.

What seems like moments later, a steady beeping wakes me, loud in the quiet of the room. What the hell is that?

I go to sit up, but an iron bar is holding me down against the mattress, and it’s not till I run a hand over it that I realize it’s Archer’s arm. How much does muscle weigh?

“Archer.”

He’s dead weight, unmoving, even as the alarm increases in volume over by his side of the bed.

“Archer,” I repeat, trying to shift out from under him, but he only constricts tighter around me in response.

Okay, as much as I love being wrapped in his embrace, I can’t stand that alarm. It’s the kind that only gets more annoying the longer it goes on.

I somehow maneuver myself across his chest and reach my arm out as far as it’ll go to press the red X on the screen. The sound ceases, and his phone exits out of the alarm app to whatever he must have last had open, my breath catching as I stare at it.

It's a picture of... us. The one from last week where we were kissing. The one that wasn't at all appropriate to post on social media. Was he looking at that on his way home or something? I'd assumed he'd deleted it since we couldn't send it to Angelina.

But he kept it. Even a week ago.

Joy bubbles within me and I turn my head to look at him, just able to make out his outline in the dim light from his lit phone screen.

I trace a hand down his jaw, his stubble prickly, and he shifts slightly under me, releasing a sleepy sigh. I should let him sleep a little longer. It's only been four hours since he came in. He must be exhausted. There's no way I'm letting him get up to exercise for an hour.

I wiggle over to my side of the bed, his arm still dead weight atop me, and reach for my own phone, setting an alarm for seven, then drift off and back awake in cycles, unable to truly rest for fear I'll oversleep.

I eventually give up and simply savor this moment lying here with his body wrapped around mine, safe and secure in his hold. I run a hand along the light dusting of hair on his forearm, traveling up to shape the defined muscles of his bicep, loving the freedom to touch him however I want.

Turning in his arms, I face him, his bare chest right there, and caress him, starting at the broad shoulders and heavy pectorals, working my way down to the flat ridge of his abs, his body radiating heat.

He lets out a deepmmmsound, but I can't tell in the darkness if he's awake yet or not. I whisper his name, the only response I receive being a slight shift of his hips, pressing further against me. I press back for just a moment, imagining what it'll be

like the first time we're truly together, our bodies intertwined, exploring each other, free to do things in a way we haven't before. Him sinking into me, his hands roaming my body, bringing me to those heights only he's capable of.

My alarm goes off and he finally loosens his grip on me enough for me to easily roll over and shut it off.

"Is it six?" he asks, his voice hoarse.

“Seven.”

He groans and presses the button on the wall that opens the curtains just a bit before he stops it, a ray of light coming in for us to see without it being overwhelming.

“Thanks for letting me sleep,” he says, shifting up on one elbow to face me.

“Can you go in later today?” I reach out a hand to run down his chest, enjoying the view. I still don’t think we’ve seen each other fully naked. And his bare torso is really tempting me.

“No. We’re back at it at eight.”

“I’ll see you tonight?”

He brushes a few strands of hair from my face, tucking them behind my ear. “I don’t want to make any promises I can’t keep, but I’ll try my best.”

I nod, leaning in close to give him a light kiss, heat sparking between us the moment our lips touch.

He cups the back of my head, my mouth opening under his as he rolls over so he’s on top of me, braced on his elbows, all that delicious weight just above me pressing me down into the mattress. His kisses are intoxicating, each one putting me further under his spell.

“I wish I could stay here all day with you,” he whispers against my lips.

I smooth my hands up over his shoulders and down his broad back, reveling in the feel of him. “And what would you want to do?” I move my mouth to his neck, reaching up to nip at his earlobe.

“Don’t tease me,” he groans, even as he arches his neck to give me better access. He lifts himself off me after a moment, his breaths coming faster. “You know exactly what I’d want to do to you.”

My breath catches at the blatant lust in his tone, but there’s something else lurking there too. Tenderness? Affection?

I tug him back down, cupping his jaw, kissing him wholeheartedly, wanting him even though it’s not the right time.

He stops reluctantly, panting now, a wince crossing his face. “I can’t. I’m already on Dad’s shit list. If I’m late again...”

My heart races as I work to get myself under control, inhaling and exhaling in a steady rhythm. “I understand. As long as you make it up to me later.” I grin, the flash of heat in his eyes sending shivers throughout me.

“It may not be tonight, but that I can promise.” He bends down to nuzzle my neck briefly, his lips like heaven on the tender skin. “Our first time won’t be a quickie before work. I want a whole night with you.”

A rush of arousal fills me, so strong I nearly wrap my legs around him so he won’t leave. But he’s right. The thought of uninterrupted hours with him is incredibly appealing.

“I’ll be waiting then.”

A small smile flirts along his lips. “I’ve never had a problem with self-control before I met you.”

I can’t help my answering smile as he leans down to give me one last kiss before getting off the bed and heading into his closet.

I really affect him that much?

Good to know.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:21 am*

Archer

Irub at the back of my neck, wishing like hell I had Serena here to give me a massage. The stress of the last day and a half combined with the lack of sleep has given me a tension headache to rival all others. Her fingers could knock this out with no problem, though. I swear she has magic imbued in them or something.

I attempt to refocus on what our head of legal is saying, but it's clear I'm not the only one who's having trouble paying attention. Most everyone currently in the meeting was here with me through the middle of the night, and there are more than a few stifled yawns and drooping eyes around the boardroom table.

To my left, Dad surveys the group impassively, but the tic under his right eye tells a different story.

He's majorly displeased.

When the head of legal herself yawns widely mid sentence, Dad stands up, everyone suddenly fully awake. "Let's break for lunch and meet back here in an hour. For those of you who need a nap, take one." His lip curls the slightest bit, which for him in a room full of people is tantamount to screaming in rage. He usually only leaves the actual screaming for Gabriel. Although now that he's disowned him, it seems I've taken on that role.

"Archer, you can stay here," he says as everyone files out.

Damn. I was actually contemplating a nap in my office.

He drums his fingers on the table as we wait for the room to clear, sighing as the door shuts behind the last person. “All right. There’s no easy way to say it, but you’re going to the Philippines. Connor can’t handle this on his own.”

My mouth opens and I immediately shut it, afraid of how I’ll instinctively respond, hell no being the first thing that comes to mind.

“I need boots on the ground,” he continues, “and it’s a good opportunity for you to showcase your leadership skills.”

This isn’t leading. This is cleaning up his mess. There’s a big difference. As a leader, he shouldn’t have gotten us in it to begin with.

“With all due respect, I’m not sure what I can do over there that I can’t from here in New York. I’m unfamiliar with the project, the local authorities, or the intricacies of the legal issues. My background is in finance.”

“And now the SEC is involved. You know about them.”

What the- “Yeah, how to stay off their radar. By not bribing people.”

His lips thin. “I expected that kind of talk from Connor. Not from you.”

I stare at him, unsure how to take his comment. He wouldn’t expect me to call him out because I usually know better than to argue with him? Because he thinks I’m like him? Because I have shadier morals than my brother?

“Dad, I-”

“You’re going, okay? You’re supposed to be my number one and a chief of this company. End of discussion.”

My jaw clenches, but I nod, accepting it. “I’ll see if Serena can take time off from-”

“She’s not going with you.”

My hands grip each other tightly under the table, nails digging into knuckles. “She’s my wife.”

“This is a business trip. And I said I want you distanced from her. Speaking of-” He pulls out his phone, navigating on the screen until he finds what he’s looking for. “What’s this?” He turns it toward me to show some paparazzi shot of me outside Capital West with Serena, my mouth on hers, cradling her face tenderly before she got in the car.

I clear my throat, trying to find the right way to phrase I’m not ignoring my wife just because you said so. “We had lunch in the private dining room there. I was kissing her goodbye.”

His phone clatters onto the table loudly. “You two aren’t playing house. This marriage is part of a business deal. And more importantly, the agreement was meant for your brother, not you.”

“Well, it’s mine now. I’m taking responsibility for it.”

He squints closely at me. “Don’t tell me you think it’s real?”

I grit my teeth, silent. Does he realize how much I’ve given up for him? Any kind of say at my own choice of career, a stronger relationship with my brothers, a chance to live outside his shadow. And now that I’ve somehow miraculously found something for myself, he’s trying to take it from me?

I’ll admit, Serena and I haven’t known each other long, but she’s already proven

herself to be on my side over and over. Looking out for me, doing things for me, encouraging me. Showing genuine interest in me, not just what I can do for her. When was the last time Dad did something for me that didn't benefit him in some way?

The silence stretches on, but when it's obvious he's not talking first, I admit, "We have real feelings for each other."

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“Well, unfeel them. There’s no room for feelings in business.”

“It’s not just business anymore.” I touch my thumb to the band encircling my ring finger, recalling the minister’s words. These rings are a symbol of your union. “She’s my wife.”

“And she’s not accompanying you to the Philippines. You’re traveling for work, not a tropical vacation. Moving on.”

I’m obviously not getting anywhere with him. I only hope Serena understands. “When am I leaving?”

“The sooner, the better. I was going to charter a plane, but Vivian found a commercial one taking off at five.”

I check my watch. “That’s in four hours.” My mind immediately goes into planning mode. I’ll need to be at the airport two hours before the flight departs, plus I have to go home and pack, say goodbye to Serena, drive there...

“Then I suggest you leave now. You’re wasting time arguing with me.”

What the hell is his problem? Has he always been this bad? Or did I never notice? “And how long will I be there?”

“Until the problem’s fixed,” he replies icily.

I stand and nod, leaving before I blow up at him. He’s still my boss, I remind myself,

not only my dad. People have issues with their bosses all the time.

I just haven't before now.

I make a few quick calls as I walk back to my office, first to James to pick me up, then to Lori to pack me a bag for a week. I meet with Tracy briefly to coordinate the logistics of how I'll work remotely from halfway across the world in an opposite time zone, then grab my things out of my office.

My headache lessens slightly as I ride in the back of the town car to my apartment to collect my suitcase, but the next call I have to make is a little harder.

"Hey, I was just thinking about you," Serena answers, her sweet voice already sending a pang through my chest for the news I'm about to give her. The muscles in my upper back and neck tighten more, and I do my best to consciously relax them. How am I supposed to tell her I'm leaving for who knows how long?

"Can I see you?" I ask instead of spitting it out. Maybe it'll be easier in person.

"Sure, do you want to meet for lunch again?"

"No, I don't have time. Are you at your shelter?"

"Yeah."

"I'll stop by in forty minutes, okay?"

She agrees and I welcome the brief reprieve. I mean, it's not like she can be mad I'm leaving. It's for work.

But she's not invited. And Dad doesn't want us linked until we get to the bottom of

the investigation of her father. Which I also forgot to tell her about. I promised to make things up to her this morning and here I am leaving the country in a few hours.

Fuck.

She greets me enthusiastically at the front entrance of the shelter, and I close my eyes as she hugs me, breathing her in, savoring the feel of her. How is it that someone can come to affect you so soon?

When I open my eyes, I catch Wendy's gaze from across the room, who this time gives me a small smile. Does she sense the change in me since I last visited? "Can we talk in private?" I whisper. "Just for a few minutes."

"Sure." Serena walks over to the front desk to speak to Wendy, then indicates for me to follow her upstairs. "She said she won't bother us."

A few desks fill the open area, with a meeting room off to the side and a view of the street beyond that. She leads me to a desk in the back, papers piled high on top precariously close to the edge. A small photo frame sits on one clear spot, a bride and groom walking down the aisle in it. Her parents? No, that doesn't make sense.

I lean in closer, realizing it's the two of us.

"Oh, um, the wedding photos came in. I forgot to tell you."

I look over, her fingers twisting together in front of her, and back at the picture, her arm looped in mine as she gazes up at me, a radiant smile on her face.

"Were you really that happy?"

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She stills, her green eyes darting between mine, like I caught her doing something wrong. “Yes,” she admits.

I cross the short distance to her, cradling her face, my fingers rough against the smoothness of her skin. “I wish I didn’t have to leave.”

A wrinkle forms between her brows as she looks up at me. “You just got here.”

I did just get here, didn’t I? To this place where I finally see what could be between us. “I have to go to the Philippines.”

“What?” She braces a hand on her desk chair. “When?”

“Today. Right now, actually. I found out less than an hour ago.”

“Oh.” Her other hand grips the back of her neck, and my heart tugs at how disconcerted she looks. “For work?”

I nod. “The company is facing some serious penalties and Dad wants me over there to manage it.” Even though we have other people better trained to handle a situation like this.

“Okay, well, um...” She trails off, such disappointment on her face, it’s hard to look at.

“I promise I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She nods, the slightest sheen of tears forming in her eyes. She steps back, wiping at them, and gives me a rueful smile. “Sorry. This is so stupid. It’s not even that big of a deal. People travel for work all the time.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“I’m not sure,” I hedge, reaching out to bring her closer, my hands settling around her waist. “But I had to see you before I leave.”

While it still feels strange to be this openly affectionate, the soft smile that graces her face makes it worth it.

“I’m glad you did.” She lifts on her tiptoes, not as tall today with no heels on, and kisses me, her lips sweet. “I’ll miss you.”

It’s the same as she said last night on the phone, but the words punch me in the gut just as hard. When was the last time someone said something as simple as they would miss me? And how did it take till now for me to realize how much I wanted that?

I lean down and kiss her again, drawing from her, taking my fill. This kiss will have to last me for who knows how long. I deepen it, cupping the back of her neck, bringing her closer with my other hand until she’s flush against my body, her softness inciting me.

She lets out a small sound of satisfaction, eagerly kissing me back, and it only serves to remind me how clueless I’ve apparently been this whole time. She wanted me from the beginning. In hindsight, it seems so obvious. That was the reason I couldn’t separate what was real from acting. There was no acting. And when I think about it, there hasn’t been a lot of acting lately on my part either. It was only an excuse to do

more with her.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I reluctantly pull away from her, needing to get a move on if I'm going to make it to the airport in time. "I have to go."

She nods, her lips deliciously swollen, and I nearly kiss her again just so I can feel the shape of them. If I do, though, I'll never leave.

"I'll miss you too," I tell her, trying to infuse as much meaning as I can into the words, trying to tell her what I can't actually say aloud. Missing others isn't a normal part of my life. I haven't let myself be close to anyone in a long time. She hit the nail on the head when she suggested therapy at lunch yesterday. And if she's there with me, maybe it won't be quite so terrifying.

She opens her mouth as if she's going to say something, then closes it, twisting her lips instead. "Have a safe flight."

My heart is suddenly pounding, but I'm not sure why. Was she going to say something else? Would I even want her to say something else? No, it's way too soon for... something else.

I leave, my heart not returning to its normal rhythm until I'm in the car and on my way to La Guardia. She wasn't even going to say anything. Why am I freaking out over nothing?

And why does a part of me wish she would have said it anyway?

Archer

“I got the flowers you sent me. They’re beautiful.”

I prop another pillow behind me on the hotel bed, closing my eyes in relief as the dulcet tones of Serena’s voice come through the line. I don’t think she realizes just how much I need to hear her right now.

“They reminded me of you.”

Sentiments I would have never believed myself capable of a few weeks ago seem natural now, something about her willingness to open up and be honest with me unlocking a similar vein within myself.

“Mmm.” She inhales, and I can only assume she has them there next to her. “Roses and peonies. You remembered my perfume.”

“Of course I did.” I still can’t get the scent out of my head. I swear I woke up smelling it this morning before I realized I was alone in my hotel room.

“How’s work going?”

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. “It’s going.” I have a newfound respect for Connor and all the bullshit he has to deal with daily. There’s a reason I didn’t go into project management. “Mostly I was looking forward to talking to you tonight.” This whole being in opposite time zones has already proved to be difficult, and I only left her a few days ago.

“You’re sweet.” There’s a smile in her voice, and I wish I was there myself to see it, to lean in and kiss the curve of her lips, to taste her the way I’ve been imagining all day. Could this separation have come at a worse time? “You know, I was having a dream about you,” she continues, yawning.

“Did I wake you?” I check the alarm clock by my bedside. It’s eight-thirty p.m. here, which means it’s seven-thirty in the morning there.

“Yes, you woke me,” she laughs. “I don’t understand how you willingly wake up at such an ungodly hour every morning.”

“But you’ve woken early plenty of times.”

“To be with you,” she says softly. “I wanted to spend some time with you before you left all day for work.”

I roll my lips between my teeth, glad she can’t see the smile trying to break free. I’m pretty sure I’ve smiled more in the last two weeks than the last two years. “What was your dream about?”

“Where are you right now?”

I glance around, as if I’m supposed to be somewhere else. “My hotel room.”

“Are you alone?”

The slight tease in her voice finally clues me in, a surge of arousal racing through me. “Yeah. Completely alone.” Is she going to tell me about it? “Was it a, uh, naughty dream?”

“Maybe.”

My dick perks up. “Stuff we’ve already done? Or haven’t done?”

“Haven’t done.”

“And was it something you want to do?”

“Mmm hmm.” Is it my imagination or is she breathing faster?

There’s a pause, and I blurt out, “Describe it to me.”

“Over the phone? Like... phone sex?”

Oh, shit. She had to call it that, didn’t she? I look down at my pants, my dick pressing uncomfortably against my fly now. “Have you ever done that before?”

“No. Have you?”

“No,” I admit. “We don’t have to, I just thought-”

“I want to,” she interrupts. “I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page.”

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“Yeah, we are.” Finally, it seems like.

“Okay, should we set the mood or something?”

What, like light candles? Lay rose petals on the bed? I’m in a hotel room alone after a twelve hour work day in a foreign country. “What do you mean?”

“Like setting the scene. Describe what you’re wearing.”

I look down at myself. “A shirt and pants.”

She laughs lightly. “You’re supposed to be sexy.”

How do I make a shirt and pants sexy? “How about you go first?”

“Well, I’m wearing a new negligee you haven’t seen yet.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmm hmm. And the bodice is very sheer. You can practically see through it.”

Oh, fuck. I see what she means by setting the mood now. “Anything underneath?”

“I’m sliding my panties off right now.”

I close my eyes, remembering her in my office that first night I’d got her off, my hand catching on the tie of her robe, and that sinfully sexy lingerie set she’d had on.

“Lace ones?”

“Yes.”

I unbutton my pants, sliding down the zipper till my cock pops free. “Tell me about your dream.”

“Well, it kind of started out the way we woke the other morning. My back against your front.”

You mean the morning I was half asleep and out of my goddamn mind to be doing that stuff to her? I can’t regret it, though. Not if it led to where we are now. “Yeah, I remember.”

“And you were... thrusting against me.”

I grin, imagining the spreading blush on her cheeks. She’s such the perfect mixture of siren and innocent. “How’d it feel?”

“Amazing,” she sighs, like she’s reliving the experience. “So hard. And I was really wet.”

I groan, clutching the phone tighter to my ear as I grasp myself, pumping slowly. “Are you wet now?”

“I’m getting there. Tell me what you’re wearing.”

My hand pauses. “Serena, I- I don’t know what to say about me. I want to talk about you.”

“You have to give me something,” she insists. “You didn’t have a problem the last

time we were together in your gym.”

“That was in the moment. You had me so hot, I barely knew what I was saying.”

“Then let’s get in the moment,” she says, all seductive teasing. “Are you unbuttoning your shirt? Unzipping your pants?”

“I unzipped them as soon as you told me you were undressing.”

She makes ammmnoise. “And then what did you do?”

I take a deep breath, just going for it. “I started getting myself off when you said how wet you were in your dream.”

“That’s what I want to hear. See, you’re good at this.”

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I shake my head. “Not like you. You’re always sexy.”

“That’s only because I’m with you. Trust me, I’d be a stuttering mess with anyone else. But with you, it’s natural. You can say anything to me. I promise I’ll love it.”

An unexpected warmth spreads through my chest, her words both soothing and inciting me. She’s right. If I can’t say anything to her, who can I say it to? “I’m imagining you’re here with me. That your hand is on me, stroking me from base to tip. That I can see your nipples through your negligee. That I’m pulling the straps down so I can suck on them.”

She moans, the sound spurring me on. “I’m running my tongue over you, tasting your sweet skin, bringing a hand down to find you bare for me. I enter two fingers and you are so fucking wet. Are you wet for me now, Serena?”

“I’m so wet,” she pants. “I’m touching myself right now.”

My mouth dries. “You are?”

“Uh huh. It’s your fingers touching me. Your fingers playing with my clit.”

Oh, fuck. My hand returns to my dick, gripping myself roughly. “Tell me more.”

“It’s your fingers pumping in and out of me. Your other hand squeezing my breast.”

“What about the rest of the dream?”

Her voice is featherlight, her attention clearly elsewhere as she says, “You pulled my panties aside and slipped inside me from behind. I’ve never done it in that position, but it was like you completely filled me. I couldn’t get enough.”

“We’ll do it one day,” I promise. “As soon as I get back.”

“I want that,” she says shakily. “I want you in every way imaginable.”

“However you want me.” I’m not sure where the words are coming from, but like I said before, once she gets me this hot, I hardly recognize what I’m saying. It’s purely instinctual. “I’m yours in any way you want.”

“Yes,” she breathes, the throaty way she says it urging me faster, a bead of precum releasing. I spread it around the head, imagining her licking it off, goosebumps racing across my skin at the notion.

“So you liked it when I fucked you?”

“Mmm hmm. You were so big, filling me up. The way your body surrounded me, it was like you were consuming me. I never wanted it to end.”

“And what about now? If I was there now, how would you want me?”

Her breaths are harsh over the phone line, and I wish more than anything I was there to witness her getting herself off. “Your mouth on my breasts first, fingers in my pussy, working me up.”

A full body shudder runs through me. “Say pussy again.”

She makes a noise of satisfaction. “You like when I talk about my pussy? The way it’s wet for you? How I want your mouth on it next? Please, Archer, I want you to

lick my pussy.”

“Fuck,” I shout, my thighs shaking with the effort it takes to hold myself back, even as my fist flies furiously over my cock, unable to help myself. “Please tell me you’re close. I can’t control it much longer.”

“I don’t want you to control it. I want to hear you come for me so bad.”

I let go then, groaning into the phone, letting myself revel in the sensation as I come for her, something about the request incredibly hot.

“That’s it,” she murmurs. “You’re so sexy. I can’t believe I’m married to you. That you’re mine.”

I bask in her words, closer to her than ever before. How is it that being apart can draw you further together?

“I’m so close.” Her voice is strained, on the verge of tipping. “Tell me- Tell me what you’d do to me.”

“I’m there between your legs, holding your thighs open, parting you with my thumbs, licking that pussy, flicking your clit. Your back bows, screaming my name as you come for me. I hold you open, licking up every last drop you give me, wanting everything from you.”

She makes a gasping sound, her breath hitching. “Oh- Oh God, Archer. I’m-” She moans, the sound making my dick twitch again despite the workout I just gave it. “I- Oh God, I love you. I love you.”

I go still, listening to her continued moans as she comes down from her high, her breaths gradually easing. My heart’s in my throat, the phone pressed so tightly to my

ear, it's a wonder I don't break it.

“Archer?”

“I- I’m here.” And completely unsure how to respond. It’s too soon to say that, right? It’s only been two weeks. Some of the most intense two weeks of my life, sure. And I’ve spent more time with her than any other woman, opening myself up in ways I never imagined, put in situations I never dreamed of. But that doesn’t mean it’s... love. It can’t be. Marriage was never in the cards for me, let alone love.

“You don’t have to say anything back,” she whispers.

“No, no. It’s fine. I-” I suck in a breath, holding it for a count of five before I exhale. “I’m not ready to say anything like that.”

“I understand. Completely. No pressure.”

I nod, not that she can see me, and I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out, the silence between us extending.

“Did I ruin everything?” she eventually asks in a voice so small, my chest flares with a sickening pull. God, I’m an idiot.

“Of course not. I’m sorry if that was too honest.”

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. It just kind of... happened.”

“Did you mean it?” I squeeze my eyes shut, immediately regretting the question. Why am I hellbent on prolonging this? It shouldn’t even matter if I’m not ready to

say it myself. I care about her, yes, but how do you even know you're in love? When you can't stop thinking about someone? When you want to be with them all the time? When their happiness is your own? What's the criteria?

"Yes. I know this is all brand new to you, but like I said, I've had a thing for you for a long time. And being with you the past couple weeks has only strengthened my feelings. I've been falling for you since day one."

I swallow, my heartbeat pounding in my ears again. "I- I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. I just wanted you to know."

"Thank you," I murmur. Jesus, that sounds lame, doesn't it?

There's silence again and I blurt out, "I should go. I have to get up early and I'm still jet lagged..." That's a lie. I adjusted days ago.

"Yeah, of course. I'll talk to you later. I- I miss you, Archer."

I place a hand over my sternum, rubbing at the sudden tightness. "I miss you too." There's no guilt in saying that at least.

I disconnect the call and look down, my dick still hanging out of my pants, cum all over the bottom of my shirt. After a phone call like that, I should be riding high, body relaxed, endorphins flowing. Instead, I might as well be back to square one with Serena.

Fuck.

I strip out of my clothes and hop in the shower, the tub miniscule compared to my walk-in shower at home. But the size of the tub doesn't occupy my thoughts as much

as the disappointing way she'd told me I didn't have to repeat those three words back to her, the remorse in her voice as she'd thought she'd ruined our relationship, the hesitancy as she'd told me she missed me.

It's not like I could lie to her and tell her I loved her back. It's too soon. It has to be too soon. I've never been in love. I don't know how it's supposed to be, what I'm doing, why-

I brace my hands on the tile wall of the shower, drawing in great lungfuls of air until I can take a proper breath. I nearly choke on the steam, but continue breathing in and out until I'm calm.

What I need to focus on is helping Connor out of this bind Dad's put him in, and then I can figure out how to salvage things back in New York. Maybe the answer will be clearer in the light of day. Maybe I'll come up with a way to explain myself more eloquently.

Or maybe I'll find out I was the one who just ruined everything.

Serena

I turn off the stovetop burner and pour the melted butter over my popcorn, then sprinkle it liberally with parmesan. If I can't have Archer right now, I can gorge myself with snacks at any rate.

And after that phone call yesterday morning, maybe it's better to have some breathing room. This way, I have privacy to wallow in my mortification. At least everything up to the very end had been amazing. If he can get me going like that from halfway around the world, how much hotter will it be once he's finally back home?

Assuming he'll want anything to do with me.

Ugh.

I walk over to the couch and bring up Netflix on the TV, checking my phone for the millionth time, but he still hasn't called or responded to the text I sent earlier. From what it sounded like a few days ago, his father has him busy all day, and it doesn't help that we're on opposite schedules, but has he really not had a chance to reach out to me?

Or does he just not want to?

I queue up *The IT Crowd*, but before the intro can finish, there's a knock at the door. Crap, this is the thing I always hated about living alone. There's no one else to answer the door.

I press pause and get up, freezing halfway there as something occurs to me. This is the penthouse. You can't even take the elevator up without permission from the lobby attendant. Lori's already gone home for the day, as well as the contractors still working on my old bedroom and bathroom. So who's on the other side?

Wait, could it be... Archer? Is that why I haven't heard from him? Is he here to surprise me?

I rush to the entryway, biting my lip to contain my smile, but as I open the door, I sober immediately. It's not Archer.

It's two police officers.

"Serena Montague?" the taller one asks, his hands settled on his belt, perilously close to his gun.

I go still, swallowing hard. "Yes?"

"We've received notice that you're trespassing. We're here to escort you off the premises."

I blink stupidly, the words not registering. "What?"

He repeats his spiel, but it doesn't make any more sense upon repeating.

"No, there must be some kind of mistake. This is my husband's apartment."

The second officer grabs a paper out of his back pocket and unfolds it. "We have the owner here listed as Harold Bishop. Is that your husband?"

"No, that's my father-in-law." My heart pounds, practically a death knell in my ears,

and I grab onto the door frame for balance. “I- I don’t understand. I live here.”

The two exchange glances, the taller one narrowing his eyes. “Ma’am, do you have any kind of claim of residency here? A lease agreement? Bills? Anything with your name on it?”

I shake my head, my throat closing up. What’s going on right now?

“Eviction laws are different, but if you can’t prove you’re a tenant, we can’t help you.”

“But I have permission to be here. From his son.”

“Well, where is he?”

My lower lip trembles. “He’s out of the country.”

The second office makes ahmmnoise in the back of his throat. “That’s convenient.”

“No, no. I’ll call him. You can talk to him. He’ll tell you this is a mistake.”

I turn around and make a mad dash for the coffee table, my hands shaking so badly, I nearly drop my phone.

“Ma’am, if you’re not calling the owner, it doesn’t really mean anything.”

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My fingers stab at the phone screen, a part of me sure that if they just speak to Archer, he can get this all sorted out, but it's like the call function's been disabled or something. It won't let me make any calls.

I return it to the table, looking back up at them slowly. The taller officer's eyes are a bit kinder, but both appear set in their mission.

"You can't just kick me out," I sniffle, tears forming in my eyes. "This is my home. I have nowhere else to go."

"Listen, this call came to our captain from the commissioner himself," the first officer says. "We don't have much leeway here, and if you leave now, we won't formally charge you with anything."

I glance between the two, my mind racing, but what choice do I have? They're cops and I have nothing to prove I live here, apparently. I nod, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. "Let me just get my things."

The shorter officer goes to shake his head and the other one stops him, laying a hand on his upper arm. "We don't know what's yours and what belongs to the owner of this apartment," he says kindly.

The owner of this apartment doesn't live here, I want to scream. Seriously, why does Archer's dad want me gone? There's no way it could be Archer himself. I couldn't have messed things up that bad by admitting I love him.

Right?

I scrub at my eyes, trying to clear the tears away. “So you’re kicking me out without any of my belongings?”

The taller guy has the grace to look somewhat ashamed, but the other one has no such sympathy. “We’ve given you notice of your trespass. So are we doing this the easy way or the hard way?”

I firm up my jaw as best I can, and grab my purse and phone, praying they don’t tell me I can’t take those either. At least I hadn’t changed into pajamas yet. That would have been awkward.

The elevator car is silent as we ride back down all fifty floors, the lobby attendant’s face impassive as we exit. How do they always manage to be so expressionless?

“Miss Montague,” he says as I pass by. “Your key, please.”

I turn to him, the two officers at my side waiting patiently. “What?”

“I’ve just been informed I’ll need your key.”

Who informed him? Is this a conspiracy or something?

I fish my keys out of my purse, willing my hands not to shake again as I take my key off. “You always called me Mrs. Bishop,” I murmur as I hand it to him.

He nods in acknowledgment but stays silent as he accepts the key and places it in his desk drawer.

The shorter police officer indicates for me to keep walking, sticking by me until we’re fully out of the building. He walks around to the driver’s side of the patrol car at the curb, but the taller guy lingers for a second by me. “Do you have someone you

can call? Money for a hotel room?”

The last ten minutes feel like a dream. Is this actually happening? “I- I’ll figure something out.”

“We can give you a ride if you need one.”

Where? Where do I have to go? I find my phone once more in my purse and dial Archer’s number, but it won’t do anything. Is it disconnected or something?

“I, um-” As much as I don’t want to hang around them any longer, I can’t afford to be picky right now. I give them the address of the shelter, ignoring their muted chatter from the front seat as we drive. God, if anyone saw me in this, I’d absolutely die. At least I’m not handcuffed.

I refuse to thank them for the ride as they let me out, and walk up and unlock the shelter doors, heading straight upstairs so the overnight worker doesn’t see me. At night, with no one else around, my desk is smaller looking than usual, and I set my bag down on it gingerly, sinking down into my chair.

I don’t even know how to begin processing everything. Seriously, what just happened? I pick up my desk phone, the dial tone reassuring, and look up Archer’s number on my cell since I still don’t have it memorized. Oh, crap. I didn’t get my phone charger at home. Like that was the main thing on my mind, though.

I punch in the digits, exhaling a long breath, praying he has some kind of reasonable explanation for me. A jolt of relief floods through me as he picks up, but my stomach drops as I recognize it for what it is. The number you have dialed has been disconnected, an automated voice informs me. I hang up and try again, but it’s no different this time.

There's no way Archer's phone is actually disconnected. He's an important guy in his company. The freaking CFO. People have to call him. He didn't... block me or something, did he?

I slam the phone down in its cradle, my jaw quivering before the floodgates open, tears pouring down my cheeks. What happened? We were doing so good. He said he wanted me, that we would make a real go of this relationship.

And then he skipped out of town after things started getting serious.

No, no. That was a coincidence. He had to leave for work.

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That's what he told you. And yet, here you are, kicked out of your apartment by the police.

I push aside the sick voice in my head, but it returns with a vengeance.

First your mother, then your father, and now Archer. Everyone that gets close gives up on you. Why'd you think this time would be different?

I bury my face in my hands, letting the tears overtake me. It's not true. Archer hasn't given up on me. He cares about me somewhat, right? Even though he doesn't love me, I know he cares. He has to.

I'll- I'll figure things out tomorrow. I'll go visit Archer's dad and get some answers.

But for now... I'll cry.

"Hi, I'd like to see Harold Bishop."

The woman at the reception area looks at me over the rim of her glasses, giving me a yeah, rightface. Okay, so my hair is a little frizzy. And my dress is a bit wrinkled. And my eyes are still pretty puffy and red. Turns out that credit card Archer gave me was canceled too. I ended up sleeping at my desk last night after I couldn't book a hotel and it very much shows today.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asks, her nails clicking on her keyboard.

"No." I lift my chin, trying my best to fool her with confidence. "But I'm sure he'll

see me.”

“Mr. Bishop is the head of an international, billion dollar organization. He doesn’t take walk-in appointments.” Her tone is matter of fact, but the snideness still comes through loud and clear. Under normal circumstances, I’d absolutely agree with her, but I don’t have time for it right now.

“I’m his daughter-in-law. He’ll see me.”

She blinks, startled at my forcefulness, then squints at me. Her eyes flash with recognition, and yes, I’m normally more polished looking, but there’s not much I can do about that at the moment. There’s hardly anything in my checking account because I’ve never really had need of it before. It’s my own fault for relying on others all my life, though. Lesson learned.

I can’t afford to waste any of the little money I have until I know what’s going on. I already had to use some to buy breakfast. And I’m not asking Wendy for a loan. I won’t drag anyone at the shelter into my personal problems.

“Let me call his executive assistant,” she says, a bit more urgency in her now. “If you wouldn’t mind having a seat over there?” She motions to a few armchairs grouped together out of earshot of her desk, and I sit where she indicates, watching her from afar as she picks up her phone, speaking into the receiver.

A minute later, she walks over to me, her heels clacking on the tile. “He’ll see you now. You can take the elevator up to the sixtieth floor.”

I will my face to stay neutral, even as I internally gawk in disbelief. I knew it was a longshot walking in here demanding to see him. I thought I’d have to wait a while at least.

I smooth out the wrinkles in my dress the best I can on the ride up, a pang running through my chest as I pass the fiftieth floor.

Archer's floor.

An older woman with a kind smile greets me as I step off, leading me to a set of polished oak doors. She opens her mouth like she's going to say something, then seems to think better of it, knocking briefly before opening them and announcing my arrival.

"Send her in."

His voice sends a rush of ice through me, calling to mind a dream I had last night that woke me out of a dead sleep. I'd been a rat, running in a wheel in a cage, Archer and his father standing outside looking down at me, grim expressions on their faces. Pretty sure I don't need a psychiatrist to decipher that one for me.

Mr. Bishop's sharp gaze pierces me from across the room, my steps slowing as I approach his massive desk. I take the seat in front of his desk, the hard back incredibly uncomfortable after my terrible night of sleep.

"I really don't know what you expect me to do," he starts before I have a chance to say anything. "Archer made himself perfectly clear. Though, I'll admit, it was a bit cowardly of him to involve me in his dirty work."

I swallow past the golf ball sized lump lodged in my throat. "He... you... Archer was the one who did this?"

He folds his hands in front of him casually, appearing almost bored. The action practically screams what little consequence this conversation is to him. As if my life being upended bears absolutely no importance. "Why do you think he so suddenly left

the country?”

Stay strong. Get your answers. “I thought he had to leave for work. Because you made him.”

“Me?” He chuckles, though there’s zero humor in it. “No, he insisted on going, even after I told him Connor was perfectly capable of handling our issues overseas.”

Archer wanted to go? He made it seem like he had to. “But why?”

He tilts his head, a predatory gleam flashing in his eyes briefly. “So he wouldn’t have to face you. With this deal with your father no longer happening, there’s no reason to continue this farce.”

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“You’re not buying Dad’s company?”

His lips thin. “No. His attempt at pulling one over on me won’t work out too well for him in the long run. Didn’t Archer tell you he was investigating your father’s company for fraud? Turns out he was right.”

Hundreds of invisible pins and needles prick at my skin, racing up my legs, my torso, my arms, up over my neck and scalp, numbing me, my back hunching forward with the weight of them. “But we’re married.” I grasp at the last straw I have, hanging onto it like a lifeline. He can’t push me out of his life so easily. I have legal rights, don’t I? Archer never mentioned that post-nuptial for us to sign again.

Mr. Bishop shakes his head, the solemnity of his act almost mocking. “Turns out you’re not.”

“W-what?”

“It looks like there’s a record on file with the clerk for a marriage license for you and Gabriel, but nothing for you and Archer.”

“I- I thought they just changed the names or something.”

He purses his lips. “That’s not how it works. Did you and Archer ever go get a license and get remarried?”

It takes me a moment to get out the word, “No.”

“Then it’s not legal.”

I shake my head, desperation bleeding out. “I know Archer. He wouldn’t do this. He wouldn’t evict me. He wouldn’t end things this way.”

He brings his hands up in an oh, well gesture. “And yet, here we are. Now, I don’t have all day to listen to my son’s jilted paramour.”

I curl my arms across my stomach, holding the pain inside. “But I have nowhere to go. He turned off my phone, changed his number or something. I don’t have any money.”

He opens his desk drawer, pulling out a checkbook even as his lips twist in annoyance. “Here. I’ll be generous.” He writes out a check and slides it across the desk.

I pick it up, my hands trembling, five hundred dollars made out to me, Serena Montague. The name is more a slap in the face than the modest amount of money. I was never a Bishop, apparently.

“Give my best to Greg,” he says, dismissing me. I automatically stand, not sure what else to do, not sure at all what’s going on right now. Were my questions answered? Or were only more raised in their place?

Let’s take stock. I’m not married to Archer and never was. There’s no reason to continue the fake relationship now that the Bishops aren’t buying Dad’s company. And Archer cut off my phone and credit card, had me evicted from our apartment, and fled the country so he wouldn’t have to face me while doing it.

There’s just no way. It’s too unbelievable. I know him, despite only being together a couple of weeks. He’s honorable. Noble. Kind. Even if he wanted to end things, he

wouldn't go about it like this. And besides that, he promised he wouldn't leave me.

And I told him I loved him.

But I also can't ignore the facts. And the facts are that I'm single, penniless, and homeless right now. Great combo.

I tuck the check in my purse and exit the office, not bothering to say goodbye. What's the point?

I take the elevator down and wander out on the sidewalk, letting the crowd sweep me away, directionless as to where I'm going. My eyes burn hot, but I don't let the tears fall, my face aching with the effort to hold them back. I'll get through this. I will.

It just might take some time to get to that point.

Archer

Weak streetlights shine intermittently through the rear window of our town car as we travel back to the hotel, Connor beside me in the backseat. Up front, our driver brakes as a moped cuts him off, shouting something in Filipino I can't understand.

"What'd he say?"

"Huh?" Connor looks over at me and then up at the driver. "Oh, basically likeson of a bitch. I think it literally means your mother's a whore, though."

"Oh." We lurch forward again as a truck inserts itself into our lane, and I avert my eyes from the window so I don't continually flinch. I thought New York was ridiculous, but this is an outright free for all. "Is it always this bad driving?"

"Yep." He relaxes further back into his seat, his apparent ease while we're in this death trap astounding. "You get used to it after a while."

"Right." Hopefully, it won't be a while for me. I'm already on day five and practically crawling out of my skin. There's no good reason for me to be here. It's a hassle to get any of my normal work done, and there's nothing I can do that Connor himself can't. The one bright spot is that I've been spending time with my brother.

And the darkest is that I still haven't spoken to Serena after the awkward end to our call the other day.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, checking the display, but there are no new

messages, no missed calls. Nothing's changed since I last checked five minutes ago.

Really, it shouldn't be her reaching out first. It should be me. I'm the one who didn't know what to say. I'm the one who made up that bullshit excuse about needing to go. I'm the one who keeps waiting for the perfect words to come to me.

But at this point, I just need to say something. To tell her she's been on my mind nonstop. That I miss her in a way that physically aches. That she'll have to bear with me while I inevitably screw some things up. This whole being in a relationship thing is new to me.

Being beholden to someone. Responsible for them. Tied together, not just legally, but deep within yourself. Your brain. Your heart. Your soul. Serena's in there, but how far?

How do you know?

I pull the reading glasses she gave me out of the inner breast pocket of my suit and put them on, my chest flaring in remembrance of how thoughtful she is, and bring up my messages on the screen, her name at the top. I miss you, I type out, keeping it simple. I just need to open the lines of communication again, get things flowing.

But when I press send, the phone does nothing. Not even the spinny circle like it's trying to act.

"Hey, do you get bad service over here?"

"Hmm?" Connor looks up from his own phone over at me. "Uh, sometimes. The signal's best at the office or hotel when I can connect to wi-fi."

"Yeah, but you're using data right now. Mine won't even do that."

“Here. Let me see.”

I exit out of my messages before handing my cell to him, wanting to keep anything between me and Serena private.

He frowns as he looks at it, fiddling with something in the settings. “It says you’re not connected to a network.”

“Shouldn’t it automatically connect? Do it manually.”

“I can’t. It’s acting like you don’t even have service.”

“What? I was using it today at the office.”

“To make calls?”

I rack my brain, trying to recall every time I used it. “No,” I say slowly. “I only sent emails. I was using the wi-fi, though. I haven’t called anyone on it since-” I clear my throat, pushing away that memory. “Since the other night.”

He hands it back to me. “Try calling someone.”

I bring up Serena’s contact, my thumb hovering over the phone icon. It’s seven p.m. here, which means it’s six a.m. there. She’ll definitely be asleep, but this is important. Not that I know what I’ll say, but maybe it’s been long enough that the awkwardness has faded.

But nothing happens. The call won’t go through.

“Let me use your phone.”

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He hands me his without question, his sober expression mirroring what's running through my head.

I type in her number, holding it up to my ear, but it doesn't even ring before an automated voice tells me the number's been disconnected.

An unsettling wave washes over me, the back of my neck prickling. "Something's wrong."

"What is it?"

"I can't call Serena. It says her phone's disconnected. I think mine is too."

His dark brows narrow. "What?"

"I- I don't know." I run a hand through my hair, over and over trying to figure it out, calling my number too only for it to give me the same disconnected message. Wait. I should call Lori. Duh.

I type her number in on Connor's phone and thankfully it rings. When it kicks over to voicemail, I hang up and try again, knowing she won't answer calls from numbers she doesn't recognize. Oh well, Lori. You're answering this time.

It goes to voicemail a second time and I simply hang up and repeat. I can do this all day.

"What is it?" she answers grumpily the third time. "You're obviously not a

robocaller.”

“Lori, it’s Archer.”

“Oh, sorry, I- Wait. This isn’t your number.”

“It’s my brother’s. Listen, I need you to do me a favor. I know it’s early, but can you head over to the apartment and check on Serena? I can’t get hold of her.”

“She’s probably sleeping,” she says, a bit of attitude in her voice. “She doesn’t like waking early.”

Apparently, I was the only one who didn’t know that. “I still want you to check on her.” And maybe I can get an answer as to why her phone’s turned off.

“She was fine when I left yesterday afternoon. What’s going on?”

“I- I have a bad feeling,” I admit, knowing it sounds stupid.

“You never have feelings.”

“Lori, please. Can you go there now? Take off a few hours early to make up for it, I don’t care.”

“Okay, okay. I’m getting dressed.”

A small part of me eases. “Call me back on this number. My phone’s not working. And ask her if she’ll talk to me. Wake her if you have to. Please.” I still can’t rule out the possibility that she’s just mad.

“Aye aye, captain.”

I chuckle and hang up, catching Connor's widened eyes.

"You begged her. I've never heard you beg."

I make the mistake of looking out the window, a motorcycle dangerously close to us weaving in and out of traffic. "This is important."

"She means that much to you?"

"Yes." The word comes instinctively, an absolute certainty within me.

"Why didn't you tell me? The last time you talked about her, you just said you were getting along well."

I fold my arms over my chest. "Sorry I don't talk to everyone about my feelings." Talking about them with one person has been a revelation enough.

"I'm sure everything is fine. Maybe it's a glitch in the service."

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I nod, knowing in my gut it isn't. I could understand her phone being off if she was upset with our relationship, though that seems extreme. But that doesn't explain why mine is too. Or why the message says they're disconnected. She has zero control over our phone plan.

But I know someone who does.

"Have you heard anything about the buyout of Montague Media recently?" I ask, that unsettled sensation in my stomach growing stronger.

He scratches at his jaw. "Not any new developments. It's still on track as far as I know. Why?"

I'm silent, mulling it over in my head.

"You think this is related to the buyout?" he asks, making the connection.

My fists clench reflexively. I have no proof other than a gut feeling, but I'd bet anything that private investigator found questionable activity from Montague Media.

"I don't know." I tap my leg with my thumb, my insides crawling with worry, even knowing it will take a bit for Lori to make her way over to my apartment. "Can I trust you with something?" I murmur, not wanting the driver to overhear.

"Of course," he says without hesitation.

"This stays between the two of us."

He swallows but nods. “I understand.”

We pull up to the hotel and I indicate for Connor to follow me to my room.

“I feel like I’m in a spy movie,” he comments as I stick my key card into the slot, the green light flashing.

A part of me feels that way too. Except this is real life. I bolt the door behind us and take a seat on the bed, still holding his phone in case Lori calls.

He pulls the single chair from the corner of the room over by me, settling in. “What is it?”

“I think Dad might be the one doing all this.”

“Dad cut your phones off? Why?”

“Remember how I told you last week about the department at Montague Media I suspected is fake and Dad hired a private investigator to look into it? That he wanted me to distance myself from Serena until we find out the truth?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I didn’t distance myself. I basically told him I wouldn’t ignore her. That my marriage isn’t only business anymore. That was my first mistake. Then he got mad when some gossip site posted another pic of us.” I mean, admittedly, we were making out on the street, but still. “That’s when he sent me over here.”

“I thought you were here to help with the bribing case.”

I throw my arms out. “What am I actually accomplishing by being here?” I swear

Dad's been throwing busywork at me to keep me occupied the last couple days. "You're more than capable of handling this."

His lips twist, acknowledging my point.

I take a deep breath, heading into conspiracy territory. "What if he really told me to come here to separate us?"

I have to give Connor credit because he connects the dots fast. "He wants to cut off communication between you two. Not in close proximity, opposite schedules, now no phone. Why's he so serious about it?"

"He must be considering killing the deal." It's the only explanation I can come up with. "Why go to these lengths, though?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"Ask him? No. If he was the one who shut my phone off... he can't know I'm on to him."

"What, does he think you won't notice your phone doesn't work? Come on."

"I'm keeping my cards close for now. If he's going this far, I don't know if I can trust him." Did I ever, though?

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Connor's phone rings in my hand and I answer it.

"She's not here," Lori says.

My stomach drops. "You checked the whole apartment?"

"Yeah."

No, she was supposed to be there. She should be sleeping in my bed right now.

Thoughts compete for space in my head, but the biggest thing isn't that my dad's involved. It's that I was the one who ruined things. I should have explained to her the idea of love is hard for me. That I haven't told anyone I loved them since Mom died. That we could go to that therapy she suggested together. That I could work through this.

It's six-twenty in the morning there. Too early for her to have gone somewhere, especially if she normally sleeps in. "Does it look like she left? Packed a bag?"

"No. All her stuff is here. Her clothes, toothbrush, phone charger. You'd pack those things if you left."

If she didn't pack a bag and leave, then where the hell is she?

"Go downstairs. Ask the lobby attendant when was the last time he saw her. Have him call the night attendant if they've already switched shifts. Look at the camera footage. Something. I want to know where she is."

“Archer, what’s going on? Why don’t you call her or something?”

“I can’t. Her phone’s off.”

“Listen, I’m not getting in the middle of some lover’s quarrel if that’s what’s happening here.”

I harden my tone. “Lori, as your employer, I’m asking you to go downstairs and do this, regardless of your personal thoughts on the matter.”

“Yes, sir.”

She hangs up, and while I hate to boss her around, even though I’m literally her boss, this is too important. Where is Serena?

Connor places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Why don’t you try contacting her another way. Email her or something.”

I wince. “I… don’t know her email.”

He gives me a look which clearly conveys what an idiot I am. “You don’t know your wife’s email?”

The tips of my ears burn hot. “I’ve never had to email her, okay? It’s only been a couple of weeks. I usually see her every day.”

“Social media then. She has a ThousandWords profile, right?”

“I don’t think she uses it. She gave over control of the account to Dad’s PR team a while ago.”

She wouldn't have gone into work at the shelter this early, would she? I pull up Connor's browser and google it, but it lists the operating hours as opening at ten a.m. I call, but it only gives me a recorded message saying the same thing. That's three and a half hours from now. I can't wait that long.

I get up and pace the room, across the length of the bed to the bathroom, then return the other way. Blowing out a breath, I cup the back of my neck, a sick sensation in my stomach rising. What's taking Lori so long?

Connor calmly hands me the phone as it rings again, my palms sweaty as I take it from him.

"I have bad news," she says, the most serious I've ever heard her.

I brace a hand on the bedside table, my knees faltering. "What is it?"

"The guy that's on duty now wasn't there when it happened, but he was told that two police officers escorted Serena out of the building last night. And the attendant received a call from the manager to collect her key on her way out."

What the actual fuck? Both our phones aren't working and she was removed from the premises? By the police? This has gone too far.

She's not absent because she chose to leave. Someone made her. And the only person who has the legal right to evict someone is the owner.

Dad.

“I tried calling her phone and it wasn’t just off,” she continues, “it was disconnected. Where is she?”

“I don’t know.” My heart races as I pace the room again, unable to stay still. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“Well, you better get back here and find her. From the conversations we’ve had, it doesn’t sound like she has anyone else she can turn to.”

Where would she go then? Did she get a hotel? Stay with a friend? Where do I even start? How am I supposed to track her down? It’s a city of over eight million people. It’s like searching for a needle in a haystack. “I’ll figure it out,” I tell Lori. “But don’t mention to anyone we talked, okay? If my father contacts you for any reason, you haven’t spoken to me since I left.”

“You think your fa-”

“No questions. As far as you’re concerned, you’re just there to do your job.”

“Got it,” she says, a slight waver in her voice.

“I’ll give you an update when I find out more.”

“Okay.”

I hang up and turn to Connor. “That goes for you too. You don’t know anything about this situation.”

“What are you going to do?”

He clearly overheard the conversation, so there’s no use hiding it from him. I can’t sit idly by if Serena’s gone. “I’m going to New York.”

“But Dad-”

“I don’t give a fuck about Dad,” I explode, nearly at my wit’s end. I grip the back of my neck so I won’t hurl the alarm clock across the room or punch the wall above the bed. I haven’t felt this kind of impotent rage in a long time. Not since Mom died. I shut down then, but right now, I’m pure emotion.

His eyes widen, wisely staying silent.

I jab a finger in his direction, still pacing. “I bet you more than anything this was Dad. I know how his mind works. You haven’t directly worked with him like I have. There’s nothing he loves more than destroying the competition, especially if they’ve slighted him.”

“Who’s he competing against?”

“Greg Montague. If that P.I. found out he was cooking the books, there’s no doubt Dad would take it personally.”

“But he’s doing this to Serena.”

“Greg wanted her to marry into our family for the connections. You split us up and boom, no more connections. And Greg needs money. Bad. I’m sure of it. I can

guarantee you Dad will do everything he can to blacklist Montague Media too. No one will work with them or buy them. They'll go bankrupt by the end of the year."

"Doesn't he care that he's hurting you?"

I pause in my pacing, looking at Connor. God, there's so much of Mom in him. "No. He doesn't care. He gave an edict and expects it to be followed. Feelings don't come into play as far as he's concerned."

He bows his head, his chin nearly touching his chest. "Like with Gabriel."

"Exactly." I grab my suitcase and lay it on the bed, unzipping it and stuffing the closest things at hand inside. "Tell Dad you don't know where I am if anyone reports I'm not here. You're just as confused as him about where I've gone."

He nods.

"And don't defend me. It'll only set him off. I don't want you mixed up in this."

"Do you know what you're doing? Have you thought about what he might do?"

I open the dresser drawer, pulling an armful of clothes out to chuck in the suitcase. "I'm prepared to accept whatever happens." And it's the truth. I can't live my life under his thumb. Not after discovering how my life could be with Serena.

"All right. What can I do to help?"

"Find me the next flight to New York."

Serena

I startle, a long string of drool stretching from my mouth to my arm where my head was just resting. Gross. I wipe it away, the sound that must have woken me happening again, like someone pounding on glass.

It's dark around me, the only source of light coming from the windows along one wall, and I instinctively turn in that direction before remembering where I am. Slumped over my desk at the shelter, eventually passing out after hours of exhaustion worrying about what tomorrow will bring.

There's more banging and I realize it's coming from downstairs. Is someone at the outside door? It's the middle of the night.

I stretch, my back popping as I stand. I can't afford to spend another night here for the sake of my spine, but I also literally can't afford to go anywhere else. I have less than a thousand dollars to my name, including the check from Mr. Bishop I cashed today. A hotel room would easily eat through that in a week. I need to be smart with my money. After the twists and turns my life has taken lately, I can't take anything for granted.

I descend the stairs carefully, pausing as the sound of banging on the front door echoes through the lobby. Is it a drunk person? Who would expect us to be open this late? A part of me wants to go get the night worker, but I never interact with them and the kennel's on the other side of the building, too far away for them to hear. I'd have to pass in front of the entrance anyway.

I peek my head around the corner of the stairwell, spotting a tall form standing outside. Even in the moonlight, it's easy to make out the dark hair, muscular build, and tailored clothes. I rub at my eyes, sure I'm not seeing things right, and as the figure raises an arm to pound on the door once again, he pauses, looking in my direction.

My hand flies to my mouth to contain my gasp, my feet moving toward him on their own, stopping in front of the glass door. I gaze at Archer, his face weary, thick stubble dotting his jaw.

"Open the door," he says, his voice slightly muffled through the glass, and my head tilts down, eyes fixating on the lock, but it's like my brain isn't firing on all cylinders.

"What are you doing here?" I ask instead, half sure I'm in a waking dream. He's supposed to be in the Philippines, not here in Manhattan standing in front of my shelter in the middle of the night.

"Open the door," he repeats, an edge to his voice now.

My arms cross over my chest, hiding my trembling hands. "Why should I? You promised-" I swallow heavily, forcing the words out. "You promised you wouldn't leave and then you did just that."

His jaw clenches, lips set mutinously. "Serena, I've been going nonstop for the past eighteen and a half hours to get to you. Open the damn door."

His words don't register, the hopeless anger and resentment that's been building inside all day gushing out. "I trusted you. I thought we were on the same page. But you were investigating my family, trying to back out of the deal. If you didn't want to be with me, you only had to say that. You didn't have to go to such lengths."

He grips the door handle, brows furrowed. “The business has nothing to do with us.”

“It has everything to do with us,” I cry, throwing my hands up. “You didn’t even tell me we’re not really married.”

He takes a step back, blinking hard. “What are you talking about?”

His confusion seems too genuine to be an act. Wait, did he not know that? “We never applied for a license with our names on them and remarried.”

He shakes his head, denying my words. “No, Dad said he’d get a judge to change...”  
He trails off, mouth twisting bitterly. “He never did that, did he?”

“I-” My hand comes up to cover my gasp, my head finally clearing. “Why are you here?”

“I thought I was rescuing you.”

Rescuing me? But it was him who did this.

I stare at him through the glass, a dawning realization coming over me. Oh my God, I’m an idiot. “Was anything your father said true?”

“My father? You spoke to him?”

“I went and visited him this morning.”

His posture stiffens. “What did he say?”

I relay everything that happened, his expression growing darker the longer I continue. “He blamed me? For stranding you with no phone? Having the police kick you out of

our home?”

“Y-yes.” In the wake of his obvious disgust, it seems foolish to have ever let his father plant the seed of doubt in my mind.

“And you believed him?”

I unlock the door, my lower lip trembling as I take a step through the doorway, tears forming in my eyes. “I didn’t want to. It seemed so impossible. But I couldn’t call you. Couldn’t ask you.” The tears break free from my lashes, dripping down my cheeks. “And we had just had that awkward end to our conversation. I thought I’d ruined everything.” I sniffle, the tears coming faster now, stronger, clogging my nose, blocking my throat. “I wanted to ask you what I’d done wrong. I’m sorry I told you I love you-”

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I sag in relief as he crushes me to him, wrapping me in his strong embrace. I inhale, breathing him in shakily, throwing my arms over those broad shoulders to hug him tight.

“You never have to apologize for that,” he whispers fiercely, stroking a palm down my hair. “It was one of the best things anyone’s ever said to me.” His hand rubs slow circles on my back until I calm down some, the tears a mere trickle now. “It caught me off guard in the moment, but I thought about it a lot on the plane ride over, and I’m really glad you said it. I needed to hear it. I... I haven’t in a long time.”

I scrub at my eyes, clearing them, pressing my ear against his chest to listen to the deep rumble of his voice. “I love you,” I murmur, letting myself truly relax in his arms for the first time in days.

His grip tightens on me briefly, but his body doesn’t stiffen. If anything, he seems to further embrace me. “I tried texting you last night. To apologize, to tell you how much I missed you. When I couldn’t get hold of you, when I found out you were gone, the only thing on my mind was regret for how I left things between us. The truth is, I’m falling for you too. Hard.” He leans back, cupping my face, the blue of his eyes intense as they study me. “I’ve never felt this way about anybody. But the words... I need some time for those.”

“I understand.” Going from completely closed off to open isn’t something you can switch on and off at will. “I really do.”

“And I want you to say it to me, if that’s what you’re feeling. Don’t hold anything back.”

I stretch up to kiss him, the meeting of our lips brief before he pulls away. “Once I get started with you, I’m afraid I won’t be able to stop.” His gaze rakes me up and down, a lingering wildness behind his eyes that sends a satisfying shiver through me. “Is there somewhere we can go? Other than the street?”

I finally take stock of our surroundings, realizing that, yes, we’re still standing on the sidewalk near the open doorway of the shelter.

“I-” Oh God, I have to admit I’ve been sleeping at my desk upstairs, don’t I? “Can we go back home?”

“No. I don’t trust it. The lobby staff would see us. And once Dad finds out I’m here in New York, we’ll only have a short window.”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t officially confirmed it, but based on what’s happened and the conversation you had with him, my gut tells me Dad wants you out of the picture. And not just for the last few days if he never took care of legalizing our marriage. He said he’d do that weeks ago.”

A stab of pain runs through me at the reminder that we’re not actually married, that our relationship has only been us playing pretend.

“I need to get everything I can together in case he does anything else,” he continues. “All our stuff we want out of the apartment, start selling my stock in the company, looking for another place-”

“Whoa, what?” Is he being serious right now?

“Just as a precaution. Once he finds out I came back here without telling him, that

I'm staying with you, he might try to pull the same thing on me he did to Gabriel."

My lips part, staring at him. "You're talking about potentially changing your whole life. I can't ask you to do that. I never meant to come between you and your family. I can't be the reason--"

He cuts me off. "It's not just you. I can't trust him anymore. Not if he did all this behind my back, after I told him I had real feelings for you. Not if he's keeping me out of the loop about not buying Montague Media. Not if he's making decisions that affect my whole life with no notice. Things will never be the same."

His thumb sweeps over my bottom lip. "You were the catalyst, yes. You made me realize I want more in my life. To feel. I've felt more with you in the past weeks than I have in the last decade."

I grip his forearm, savoring his words, his closeness, the tender look in his eye.

"Serena, even if all this stuff wasn't happening with my dad, you're still worth everything. I somehow have this amazing, gorgeous, caring woman that loves me. I can't tell you how much that means to me."

I sniffle, too far caught up in his wonderful words to say anything.

"He's not dictating my life anymore. I'm ready to start a new life. With you."

I bring him close, tugging his head down until my lips meet his, pouring all the love I have for him into my kiss. He groans his approval, backing me up until I reach the doorframe, his mouth hot on mine, the spark between us stronger than ever.

His hard body presses into me, and though it hasn't even been a full week we've been apart, I'm starved for him.

“We need a hotel,” he murmurs between kisses. “Where’s the closest one?”

It takes me a moment to process his question, my head still caught up in the taste of his lips, the feel of all that muscle underneath my fingertips as my hands roam his torso. “Um, down the block. I pass by it all the time when I take the dogs on walks.”

“You ready? Need to grab anything inside?”

“Give me a second.” I press one last kiss to that delicious mouth before I rush upstairs and gather the few essentials I bought today, stuffing them in my purse.

We walk hand in hand down the sidewalk, the place strangely empty this time of night. The only sounds are the wheels of Archer’s suitcase on the cement and the occasional car that passes by. He tells me his version of events from when he discovered his phone wasn’t working, his brother covering for him as he left, his plane ride here. It’s hard to believe this is really happening, that Mr. Bishop is this hell bent on sticking it to my dad, if that truly is his motive for breaking us up. And most of all, that Archer chose me. That he would willfully defy his father like this. This could change everything. Archer’s standing within his family, his job, his home, his money. The consequences are serious.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:21 am*

I peek over at him, his face set in concentration as he looks ahead, the dark slash of his brows, his full lips, the stubble he doesn't normally sport. The lines bracketing his mouth are more prominent than usual, a tiredness lingering around his eyes. He must be exhausted from the plane ride, from dealing with this whole situation. But he made the effort anyway. And we'll figure something out. I want to spend my life with this man.

The hotel lobby is quiet as we enter, the woman behind the counter's eyes flaring in recognition as she spots us. She thankfully stays professional and treats us like any other guest, but I can't help but feel on edge, hoping she doesn't report us to some gossip site if Archer wants to stay under the radar. At least it shouldn't be too suspicious. There's definitely one reason a couple would check into a hotel in a city they already live in.

Sex.

And I can only assume that's what's on the agenda for tonight. It's on mine, at any rate.

A tingle races down my spine as he books a room for Mr. and Mrs. Bishop, pulling out a card I've never seen before to pay.

"It's my own account," he says when he catches me looking. "Dad's not linked to it at all. I'll get you your own card tomorrow."

I nod, a small part of me easing knowing he's looking out for me, but the bigger part is ramping up in anticipation for what's to come as the clerk hands us each a key to

our room on the fifth floor.

He wraps his arm around my waist as we walk over and wait for the elevator, his palm hot through the thin cotton of my dress. “I’m guessing all your sexy lingerie is back at home?” he murmurs in my ear.

I grin, loving his teasing. “Other than the set I’m wearing.”

His breath tickles my neck, a wash of goosebumps racing across the area. “I’m taking it off you as soon as we get up there.”

A deep ache pulses within me as we step on the elevator, and I don’t wait for the doors to close before I reach up and kiss him. He crowds me into the back of the elevator car, bracing his hands on either side of me as he takes my mouth roughly, no preamble to how much he wants me. There’s nowhere I’d rather be than here right now, surrounded by him.

I match him kiss for kiss, reaching our destination too soon, and have to pause as we find our room. The green light flashes as he swipes the lock, and he opens the door wide, surprising me when he picks me up to carry me inside.

“I never did this last time,” he murmurs, bringing me over to the giant king bed. He lays me down, stepping back for a moment to look at me, heat in his gaze.

It feels a long time coming to this point. Agreeing to this deal two months ago thinking I’d be marrying him, pleasantly surprised when I actually did get to marry him, growing closer, discovering our mutual attraction, falling in love with him. And now, finally, consummating this marriage, despite us technically not being married anymore.

His big body covers me and I relish his weight atop me as his mouth meets mine once

more, his kisses drugging, building me higher. I hitch a leg over his hip, tilting my own to better rub against him, wanting more.

His palm skims down my thigh, my overheated skin tingling where he touches, until he reaches the curve of my ass, squeezing lightly. "I meant to go slow with you. I promised our first time wouldn't be a quickie."

"But I want you." I kiss his jaw, the arch of his neck, behind his ear, anywhere I can reach, impressing the taste of him on my memory. With the way things have been lately, I'm half afraid he'll somehow be ripped from me again.

"Serena." He twists to the side, the loss of his body turning me cold. "You have me. All of me." He leans in, gentler as he kisses me softly, teasing me, cupping my jaw to keep control. "And I plan on discovering all of you. Slowly."

He reaches a hand down, his fingers featherlight as they drift up my other thigh, dragging my dress up until it's pooled around my waist. "I don't know if I've seen these before." He strokes soft fingers over the side of my lace panties, too far from where I want him. "Does the top match?"

"You'll have to look to find out."

He grins, leaning in to kiss me again, his hand delving under the bottom of my dress to trace my stomach, everywhere he touches branding me, marking me for his own. He travels across my torso, light caresses that tease, my thighs squeezing together to relieve the growing ache.

When he gets to the undersides of my breasts, I let out a groan. "Strip me. Please." I can't help how breathy my voice sounds, but it seems to have the intended effect as he shifts, his hands spanning my ribcage as he peels my dress off me, revealing my pink lace lingerie.

He pauses a moment as his gaze rakes me up and down, pure lust shining through. “You have the most amazing body. That first night you came into my office with that skimpy robe...” He bites his lip, shaking his head. “I didn’t know it, but you had me then.”

Well, mission accomplished. “Let me see you too.” I tug at the hem of his dress shirt. “You’re the one with the amazing body.”

His daily time in the gym proves evident as he unbuttons his shirt, revealing those hard pecs I love so much. A shudder runs through me as I trail a hand up his abs to his chest, circling a nipple with my thumb.

“I’m supposed to be teasing you,” he says, even as he clearly enjoys what I’m doing.

“I want you to do more than tease.”

“All things in due time,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss me once more, his lips moving south over my jaw, my neck, my chest, flirting with the edge of my bra cup.

I strain upward, needing more contact, and he finally gives me what I want, peeling the cup down, sucking my nipple, his tongue hot on me. I pant his name, digging my fingers through his hair, holding him in place as he tortures me in the sweetest way possible.

He pulls the other cup down, repeating it on the other side, lapping at my nipple till it’s a hard bud, the action tugging at the invisible string within me running from my breasts straight to my pussy.

“More,” I beg, craving him.

He looks up at me, a wicked glint in his eye. “I’ll give you everything.”

Archer

I take my time traveling down her body, sipping at her sweet skin, enjoying the way she strains toward me, the sounds of encouragement she makes, how she keeps running her hands through my hair restlessly, needing that contact.

I whisper kisses along her inner thighs, rubbing my thumb softly over her panties, her little twitches making me grin.

“Archer...”

I meet her eye, her hair spread wildly on the pillow, cheeks pink, lips slightly swollen from my kisses. The need to keep her like this every day tugs at me, wanting this connection between us. “You said on the phone you wanted me at your breasts first, then to finger you.”

“You remember that?” she pants as she lifts her hips so I can remove her panties. I unhook her bra too, sliding the straps down her arms until she’s completely nude for me, an erotic dream come to life.

“I can’t stop replaying every bit of that conversation in my head.” I shuck the rest of my clothes and bend down to slowly enter a finger in her, finding her already deliciously wet for me, and drag my thumb slowly over her clit, her thighs tensing in response.

Her fingers grip my hair as she tilts her hips forward, gently rocking against my hand. I add a second finger, pumping in and out of her, the breathy gasps she makes revving

me up.

“Do you remember what you asked for next?”

“My pussy,” she breathes, the word even better seeing it fall from her lips. “Lick my pussy.”

I lean in, giving her a long lick, and her hips buck, immediately returning down for more. I bring my hands to her knees, parting her so she’s wide open for me, leisurely nuzzling her, savoring the honeyed taste of her.

“Every day from now on,” I tell her. “I want you like this every day.”

She nods, readily agreeing, and tilts her hips up, wanting more. I give her little nips and licks, building her up, and when she shifts restlessly under me, her fingers tightly gripping my hair, I bury my tongue in her, finding her clit with my thumb and rubbing.

“Yes,” she pants, arching her back. “Oh God, right there.”

I keep going as her cries rise in volume, and I have to palm my dick in relief, loving how vocal she is, how responsive. She crests the edge, coming gloriously for me, rocking her hips against my face in abandon until she comes down from her high.

She reaches for me, gripping the back of my neck as she kisses me, her tongue meeting mine, intertwining. Her hands roam my shoulders, her legs locking around my lower back as my body settles next to hers.

“That was amazing,” she murmurs against my lips. “You make me feel so alive.”

No, she’s the one who does that to me. I swear I haven’t really lived before the last

couple weeks. “It’s the same for me. Everything’s better since you’ve come into my life.”

The dreamy haze leaves her. “Archer, you’re on the verge of possibly being disowned, losing your job and home.” Her face takes on a worried cast, tugging at my heart. “You can’t say that everything is better.”

I cradle her jaw, her luminous green eyes looking back at me, porcelain skin flushed, blonde brows knit in concern. I smooth the wrinkle there away with my lips, shaking my head softly at her. “Those things were never really mine. They were decided for me. But I want to choose my own path now. And that involves you. If Dad can’t respect that, I’m cutting ties. I’m honestly fine with it. It’s been a long time coming.”

She strokes a hand down my back. “I just want you to be sure.”

“I’m sure. Seriously, I don’t think I’ve ever been so sure about anything.”

Her lips curve up, a gasp escaping her as my dick brushes against her core. “I want you,” she whispers. “All of you. I can’t wait to feel you inside me.”

I leave her briefly to grab a condom out of my suitcase, glad I had the foresight at the airport after landing to buy a pack. I roll it on, watching her stretch languorously on the bed, her natural sensuality urging me to hurry and join her.

I move to the bottom of the mattress, kissing my way up her body, exploring her thoroughly until she’s squirming underneath me, her breaths hastening.

“Are you ready?” I ask her, positioning myself at her entrance.

“I’m so ready for you.”

I savor this moment as I enter her for the first time, her tightness gripping me.

Her eyes squeeze shut, lips parting seductively. “I love you. I love you so much.”

Warmth radiates through me, her words a balm to my soul now that I’ve had time to process them. How did I ever get so lucky? What are the chances this business deal would turn into the real thing?

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:21 am*

I sweat, going slow for her, letting her get used to my size. Her nails dig at the back of my neck, her face set in concentration as I push in until I'm all the way seated.

"You okay?"

She nods, but it's not convincing.

"Are you sure?"

"You're so big." She shifts under me, searching for a different position, and it nearly kills me to hold still and not madly pump into her the way my body's aching to.

"Here." I flip over so she's riding me, her hands bracing herself against my chest. "This should be easier." I grip her hips, encouraging her to move, captivated by the expression of bliss that crosses her face as she moves up and down my length, slowly at first, and gradually picking up in speed.

"It's never been like this before," she breathes in awe. "I didn't know it could be this good."

A burst of pride runs through me, my fingers digging into her before I remember myself. "It's because it's you and me. It's never been like this for me either."

She has no idea what she does to me with the way she arches her back and shakes her hair out behind her shoulders, putting her breasts on display. They bounce gently, the nipples beaded with how aroused she is, and I reach up, shaping her soft weight, flicking the tips.

She groans, biting her lip as she looks down and watches me do it again. “Harder,” she whispers, almost like she’s afraid to say it, and I comply with her request, a thrill racing down my spine.

“You like that? When I’m a little rough with you?” Honestly, it shouldn’t surprise me after that phone sex we had.

She nods enthusiastically, unable to hide her reaction as I do it again, throwing her head back as she sticks her chest out farther, lips parted seductively. “You make me so hot,” she moans, her movements atop me growing more erratic as I lightly pinch her nipples next, still pumping into her from below.

“Touch yourself.” I grab one of her hands and guide it to her clit, the area slick with arousal, then scoot us further up on the bed so I can lean against the headboard, tilting my head down to suck a nipple as I pinch the other.

She grasps my shoulders to brace herself as I switch breasts, biting gently now, her low groans incredibly hot. She works herself on me, fingers flying frantically over her clit, the sight so fucking sexy I can’t hold myself back from coming any longer.

I suck her roughly, bringing my hands to her hips to keep her in place as I let go, groaning my release, pouring myself into her. She gives a keening cry in response as she bucks, spasming around me, extending my own orgasm.

She falls against me as she finishes, breathless as she tells me she loves me in that sweet voice of hers. Emotion bubbles within me, rusty with disuse, my chest zinging with a warmth I can’t ignore. Words I haven’t said in over a decade flit through my head, retreating as fast as they come, and I keep my mouth shut, not wanting to ruin this perfect moment.

We lay idly for untold minutes until our hearts beat regularly, and I kiss her deeply,

submerging myself in her presence, trying to preserve this memory. She snuggles into me, yawning, and I realize it's the middle of the night still. I've been on a plane so long, time has lost all meaning.

I head into the bathroom to clean up and when I return she smiles sleepily at me, already under the covers, holding out an arm to me. I gladly join her, bringing her in close to my body, listening as her breaths become steady, sleeping peacefully beside me. I mentally trace her fair brows, long lashes, delicate nose, down to the lushness of her lips.

She's mine. No matter what Dad tries to throw at me. And regardless of what our legal status truly is, I still consider her my wife in every way. I intend to honor our vows, even if it means we have to hold another ceremony.

"I love you," I whisper, trying the words out, needing to say them alone first to see how they feel, with no pressure. And the truth is... they feel right. We've been on a crash course of a relationship, things more intense than they'd normally be between us from day one. It only makes sense we'd fall in love just as fast.

Every part of my life has changed, and I was being honest when I told her it was for the better. Things are richer somehow, fuller. Like I'm actually experiencing them rather than going through the motions. I still have work to do, I know that, but for the first time in a long while, I'm excited to see what tomorrow holds.

The next few days are filled with fresh beginnings. New phones for both of us, adding Serena to my bank account, having Lori secretly pack up our apartment, discreetly meeting with a real estate agent. And starting my first therapy session, Serena holding my hand the whole time in support. I'm glad the days keep me busy because it's strange not going into the office. I still answer emails, but I had Connor tell everyone I'm sick and working from my hotel room.

The jig is up all too soon, though, as my old phone rings three days after my return, just as I'm narrowing down properties to tour that the realtor sent over. So Dad finally turned on the service, huh? I let it go to voicemail, listening to the message afterward to discover it's Vivian, my dad's secretary, requesting a meeting ASAP with him. Guess he knows I'm in New York then.

I call her back and set up a time for later in the day, then give Lori a heads up that she needs to finish getting everything important she can out of there and to the storage unit I rented. I have no idea if Dad will pull the same stunt he did with Gabriel where he up and changed the locks on the apartment.

No one gives me any strange looks as I enter Bishop Tower, not that I really thought Dad would air the family's dirty laundry. But they'll find out I'm leaving soon enough. I just don't see any way I can stay here after what he's done. I'm the second son he's alienated now. He better be careful he doesn't do it to Connor too.

I reach floor sixty, Vivian's face sympathetic as I approach her desk.

She glances once to Dad's closed office doors and back at me, whispering, "I warned him not to do this. That you'd take it seriously. But he wouldn't listen."

"Thanks, Viv." She's always been too good for him.

I knock once and enter, probably the most relaxed I've ever been when summoned here. There's something to be said for no longer giving a fuck about consequences.

He peers up at me over the rim of his reading glasses, steepling his hands in front of him. "I thought you were sick."

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I stand behind the chair meant for guests, not wanting to sit just yet. “That’s what I told Connor.” Hopefully he bought that I left him out of the loop.

“What are you doing in New York?”

I let out a sigh, already done with his mind games. “You know exactly why I’m here.”

He scoffs. “Are you still hung up on that girl?”

I clench my teeth. How can he not realize he’s in the wrong here? “You stranded her. Left her homeless with no means of communication.”

He shrugs, the action making me see red until I remember myself. My hands grip the back of the chair in an attempt to divert my anger elsewhere. “She’s not our responsibility anymore,” he says evenly. “You were right about Greg. The P.I. hit pay dirt on him.”

My curiosity gets the better of me. “What is it?”

“That whole department doesn’t exist. He created it and drew those salaries because the board wouldn’t approve a salary increase for him until the end of the year.”

“Why’d he need the money that bad?”

“Gambling debts. Owes a pretty penny to some Chinese mafia and he’s in over his head. That’s why he was so keen to sell the company. Why he wanted his daughter

connected to our name. Thought it would protect him somehow. Well, I'm not getting caught in all that."

"Serena's not part of-

"She's complicit," he interrupts. "We're not associating with any Montagues. That's done."

"She's my wife. It's too late to pretend a connection doesn't exist."

He smiles smugly. "I'm sure she's already told you there's nothing legal about your marriage."

"I made a commitment to her. I'm not leaving her."

His gaze narrows. "You can stop with the bullshit sense of honor. You're set to take over this company one day. There's no room for saints in the boardroom."

I shake my head. No, I don't believe by any means I'm a saint. If anything, I've discovered I'm more selfish than I ever thought I was. Because now that I have Serena, I'm not giving her up. "You don't trust me to take over this company. You wouldn't have pulled this stunt if you did."

His lips pinch together tightly. "This was a lesson. To show you how ridiculous you're being." He spreads his hands out in front of him, face relaxing. "Now, if you just apologize, I'll let bygones be bygones."

Apologize? Is he serious? "Dad, I'm waiting for an apology from you."

The faux friendliness drops from his features. "Archer, if you don't pull your head out of your ass, you'll find yourself in the same position as Gabriel."

Ah, there it is. It was only a matter of time before that threat popped up. “I’m not ending my relationship with Serena. And at this point, I’m not sure if I can continue working for you. You’ve proven I can’t trust you.”

He blinks, mouth gaping at me. He’s had a hold on me and my brothers for so long, it must be quite a revelation for him to discover we don’t need him as much as he believes. Gabriel had more to lose, but I’m prepared. I negotiate an above market rate salary every year that’s immediately deposited into a private account Dad can’t touch. I invest half of it annually, and it’s only grown from there. Serena and I are set for life if we live within our means. It’s just never been in my nature not to work.

When his silence continues, I tell him, “You don’t have the same leverage over me you did with Gabriel. I can support myself. In fact, I could go out right now and start a rival company if I wanted.”

He sputters for a moment. “You try that and I’ll be on the phone with my lawyers before you leave the building. You signed a non-compete agreement.”

I shake a finger at him mockingly. “No, the other chiefs did. You said what was the point when it would be mine one day.”

His hands clench the edge of his desk. “You can forget about inheriting anything if this is the way you treat family.”

“You brought this on yourself, Dad. The moment you turned off my phone. You knew how I felt about her and you did it anyway. There’s no reason you had to treat her like that. Or treat Gabriel that way either. I should have said something weeks ago.”

His nostrils flare, that vein in his forehead popping.

“You rule with an iron fist,” I continue, “and expect everyone to fall in line with your whims. I’m done with it.”

Eyes as cold as ice meet mine, disappointment and rage swirling in their depths.

“Consider yourself disinherited then. That’s not an idle threat.”

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I cross my arms over my chest. “I didn’t think it was.”

“Don’t bother going back to your apartment. It’s mine.”

“I know.” Joke’s on him because the place is empty of everything I want to keep. Lori made sure of that. I’ve already promised her full-time employment with a raise at whatever new home Serena and I buy.

“Get out of my office,” he grits out, hands gripping the edge of his desk.

I do as he says, looking back at him one last time by the door. “Don’t screw things up with Connor too. He’s all you have left.”

I exit, a weight lifting off me as I pass by Vivian’s desk. This must be what Gabriel meant when he said he felt alive. I don’t regret my decision. If anything, I’m exhilarated by it. I can do whatever I want.

But right now, there’s only one thing I want to do.

See Serena.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:21 am*

Archer

Days bleed into weeks as we embark on this new life together, swapping our old apartment in the Upper East Side for one in Tribeca, adding a third member to our family with the adoption of Petey, the dog with a walnut for a brain, and trying not to go crazy without work to occupy me every day.

Lucky for me, I have Serena's shelter to focus on, including her fundraiser she's been putting together. It's more important than ever to receive new sources of funding now that she doesn't have Montague Media or Bishop Industries to rely on, but with Gabriel's connections, we should meet our goal and then some based on the guest list tonight. There's even a TV network filming some kind of behind the scenes special that'll increase awareness of the shelter.

"Do I look okay?" Serena asks me for the fourth time, smoothing down the front of her navy dress.

I tilt her chin up, laying a soft kiss on her lips before telling her, "You're beautiful. Like always."

She shakes her hands out, giving me a nervous smile. "Thanks."

"I told you, I'm happy to make the speech tonight."

"No, no. It should be me. I'm the founder. The chair of the board. I'm responsible for it all."

“The offer still stands.”

Mackenzie comes around, a clipboard in her hand. “We’re just about ready for the welcome speech. Are you set?”

She nods, grabbing her index cards with her notes off the table. “I’ll be up there in a minute.”

Mackenzie circles away from us, pausing to grab an hor d’oeuvre off a passing server’s tray. The woman’s more than earned the right to a snack. She’s been a powerhouse putting this whole thing together in such a short time. And she and Gabriel offered to do it pro bono too.

I rub my hands down Serena’s arms, warming her up. “You’ll do great. You’ve memorized that speech backward and forward.”

“I know. I-” She pauses, glancing around the crowded room. “I just didn’t think this many would want to come to support the shelter.”

“Gabriel marketed it as the hottest benefit of the season.” And did a damn good job of it too surprisingly.

“It’s a nice problem to have, I know. But they’re going to see me up there and think-”

“And think that Archer Bishop is the luckiest man in this room.” I wrap my arms around her waist, bringing her in close to me. “There’s no doubt in my mind you’ll knock it out of the park.”

She finally loses that panicked edge, hugging me tight. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Her head whips up, blinking rapidly at me. “You... I...” She stops, the smile that spreads over her face contagious. “We’re talking about this later, okay?”

I nod, unable to help my own smile at her obvious happiness. Speaking with Dr. Brannock at our therapy sessions over the last few weeks has helped unpack a lot of baggage I had surrounding the issue. “Now get up there and kick butt.”

She bites her lip to contain her glee, relaxed now as she heads to the podium and addresses the crowd. I swear I didn’t say it to distract her, it just felt right. So much about being with her does.

I watch as she commands the room, so damn proud of her as she captures her audience’s attention, the things she was so worried about like stuttering or getting tongue-tied not even an issue. She made the decision to change the name of the shelter to New Beginnings, not only to cut ties with the Montague name but also as a symbol of this new direction life has taken us, and people have responded very positively to it.

When she’s nearly finished, she makes a gesture with her hand, knocking her index cards to the floor, and I see the panic overtake her face, the moment stretching out. Her eyes search in the crowd until they lock with mine, and I nod my head in encouragement, sending all my love up there to her.

She takes a deep breath, calming herself, and continues on without the note cards since she’s memorized it anyway. I clap loudly along with everyone else as she finishes, her director Wendy approaching her after, beaming from ear to ear.

“You, sir, are smitten.”

I turn, finding my brother grinning at me. I’ve met up with him several times over the last few weeks, each time feeling a little more natural, like we’re actually brothers

who hang out. “Shut up.”

He smiles wider, scratching at his jaw. “I felt guilty there for a while you got stuck with her, but as it turns out, you should be thanking me.”

My lips twist. “Thank you, Gabriel.”

He bows in a mock courtly gesture. “All in a day’s work.”

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“You know, um, I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a while. Like a serious talk.”

“Yeah?” He sobers, taking a seat next to me. People mill around near us, but no one’s close enough to overhear.

“Serena convinced me to go to a therapist.” His brows raise, but he stays quiet, allowing me to continue. “I’m letting myself think about Mom lately.” The subject still makes my chest ache, but it’s manageable now.

“What about her?”

I grab my glass of champagne, taking a sip to ease my parched throat. “I don’t know if she ever told you or Connor, but before she passed, she asked me to take care of you two. I wasn’t... well, you remember. I didn’t want to talk to anyone for a while.”

“I remember,” he whispers.

“My therapist says I have incomplete grief.” I shrug. “I’m working on it. But, um, I know I dropped the ball. I wasn’t there to take care of you like I promised. And I’m sorry.”

He stares at me, a strange look on his face. “Have you been worrying about that?”

“It was my responsibility. And I left you to deal with things on your own.”

“Archer, you were a grieving teenager, the same as me. No one expected you to actually take care of us.”

That's the same thing Serena said when I confessed to her. "But I promised Mom."

"That's just something you say to a dying person. The one who dropped the ball was Dad. Not you."

"He was busy-"

"Bullshit." His voice rises, the couple at the table next to us glancing over in concern. "Too busy to deal with three grief-stricken sons who had just lost their mother to cancer? Nah. I don't buy it. He should have made time, not pawn us off on hired help and hope we figure it out for ourselves."

I've never witnessed this kind of intensity from him before. He's always been the one to make a joke and brush things off. "Gabriel, I-" I don't know what to say.

He lets out a long breath, his body relaxing. "Sorry, I'm done getting worked up over him. But Connor and I never blamed you for any of it."

"Okay." I'm not sure how else to respond.

"Seriously. Don't blame yourself."

I firm my mouth, my eyes blurring the slightest bit as I stare down at the tablecloth. Maybe this was the wrong place to have this conversation.

"The three of us did our best. It's in the past now."

I nod, getting myself under control again before looking up and spotting Serena still across the room, smiling as she and Wendy chat with a woman I recognize as a local philanthropist.

“You’re not a robot anymore, huh, Archie?”

I roll my eyes, appreciating his attempt at humor to make me feel better. “No, I’m not.” I won’t close myself off again. Not after experiencing what things are like when I open up.

He claps me on the back, opening his mouth to say something else, but his phone cuts him off, trilling from inside his pocket. “Duty calls,” he says, excusing himself.

I’m barely alone a minute before I’m ambushed by two people I thought I’d shaken. Harlan and Courtney Nash.

“Archer, my man,” Harlan says jovially, sticking his hand out for me to shake. “I’ve been trying to call you forever. I guess it’s not going through.” Yeah, because I don’t have that phone number anymore.

“It’s been a hectic month,” I reply, not wanting to go into the details with him.

“I heard you’re not working for your Dad.”

It’s not a secret I’m no longer with Bishop Industries, but we’re not advertising it either. “That’s right.”

“Well, I know you said you weren’t interested in appearing on Nash Ville before, but now that things have changed, I thought we’d extend the offer again.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:21 am*

To guest star on their D-list reality show? Yeah, no, thanks.

A figure in navy blue appears at my side, almost like she could sense my discomfort, and my arm slips easily around her waist. Serena nods at the Nashes as I ask them, “Why do you want us on there?”

Harlan’s smile falters the slightest bit. “Oh, you know, the network mentioned they’d like more star power. And you guys definitely fit the bill.”

“I heard you promised them we’d be on it,” Serena says coolly.

Is that so?

He pulls at the collar of his shirt, gaze darting between me and Serena. “I... um...”

“We’re not interested,” I interrupt, not wanting to listen to him hem and haw trying to come up with an excuse.

“But we came to your benefit,” Courtney says, frowning.

I chuckle, though there’s little humor in it. “From the way I hear it, you asked for an invitation after you found out who else would be here.”

She blinks at me, almost like she’s surprised I called her out on that, but I’m not finished with her yet. “And I don’t believe you ever apologized to Serena for how you treated her in high school.”

The woman's cheeks redden, even in the relatively dim lighting of the event space. "That was like a million years ago," she sputters. "Who cares about any of that now?"

Serena stiffens, and I squeeze her tighter to my side. "I care."

Harlan glares at his wife, wrapping an arm around her shoulders a little too tightly. "Why don't you just apologize, babe?" he grits out.

She huffs out a breath, nearly rolling her eyes. "Sorry, okay? Is that better? Will you be on our show now?"

Serena's back straightens as she looks her squarely in the eye. "You can't give me a half ass apology you don't mean then expect me to do you a favor."

"Oh, sick burn." A dark haired woman joins us, chugging the last bit from her champagne glass. "You should have had that on your show."

Courtney's lips tighten. "No one asked you, Claire."

"Ah, ah, ah," the woman tsks, waving her finger. "You have to be nice to me. Remember, my husband's an executive at RealityTV." Oh, is that how Serena got them to do a behind the scenes exclusive for the shelter?

Harlan glances between the women, then steers his wife away, cutting his losses. "Let us know if you change your mind."

Yeah, don't think so.

"Looks like you finally found your voice," the woman says to Serena, smirking at her.

“Yeah, a decade later,” she mumbles, relaxing into my side again.

The woman stops a server, taking a refill of champagne. “Well, I didn’t mean to interrupt. I just couldn’t help overhear your satisfying takedown. Now, I’ve got to find Ava. When I last saw her, she was trying to convince Jerome to adopt another dog as a friend for Sandy.”

She wanders off and Serena turns in my arms, her lips tilted up in a smile. “Thank you for standing up for me. Again.”

“Always,” I tell her. And I mean it too.

She reaches up on her toes to whisper in my ear, “Let me hear you say it again.”

It takes me a moment to understand her meaning before it clicks. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She kisses me soundly, no thought to everyone surrounding us, but that’s how she’s always kissed, from the very beginning. With her whole soul, nothing held back.

She breaks away, grinning devilishly at me. “I want you to say that later to me. In bed.”

My dick twitches. “Yes, ma’am.”

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She laughs lightly, sobering when Gabriel approaches us, a solemn expression on his face.

“What is it?” It’s not like him to be so somber.

“I have... news. That was Connor.” He motions to the phone still in his hand. “Dad had a heart attack.”

Something in my chest thumps painfully. “Is he okay?”

“Don’t know. Connor’s headed to the airport to fly home just in case. He said Dad’s in the hospital now having an angioplasty done, whatever that means.”

Serena grips my hand, lending me support, and I squeeze it back, too many thoughts running through my head to make sense of it all.

Dad and I haven’t spoken since the blow up at his office. My resignation from the company was immediate, and true to his word, I wasn’t let back in Bishop Plaza to go up to my apartment. Thank God I’d had Lori take everything out she could beforehand. And after Dad fired her, she was happy to resume her position as housekeeper in our new place.

“I... I don’t know how to react. How to feel,” I admit. There’s so much history tied to this news. “How do you feel about it?”

He shrugs. “Am I an awful person if I say I don’t care? I made my peace cutting ties with him a while ago. He’s an abusive jerk.”

“You wouldn’t care if he... dies?”

His mouth firms and there’s silence between us for a few moments. “I don’t know,” he admits finally.

I look over to Serena, but she merely shakes her head. “He tried to convince me you’d left me, then made me homeless. I’m pretty biased.”

I nod, not quite ready to unpack the jumble of this news about Dad. For now, there’s nothing I can do. No one from his team contacted me directly, so I assume he didn’t give instructions to include me in the loop. But I can provide support to Connor at least. I leaned on him during my brief time working overseas. If there’s anything he needs from me, I’ll gladly do it. He’s the only one of us left that still speaks to Dad, even if it’s only business related.

I pull my phone from my pocket to tap out a quick text, asking Connor for an update when he has one, then turn back to Gabriel, his mouth a grim slash across his face. “I’m going to find Mackenzie,” he says, already searching the crowd for her.

“Yeah, of course.”

He walks away and Serena gently wraps her arms around me. “I know people aren’t always black and white,” she murmurs, her voice barely audible over the din in here. “He did bad things, but he’s still your father.” She would know about that. We spent a long time discussing what I’d learned about her father and his gambling debts, and how deceived she’d felt by what he’d hidden and plotted. “I’m here to listen if you want to talk about it when we get home.”

God, I don’t deserve her. How can she be so understanding when he tried to ruin her life? “I actually had something else planned for later.”

She leans away, tilting her head up at me in question.

I retrieve the ring box out of my breast pocket, popping the lid to show her the ring inside, the diamonds sparkling brilliantly even in the dim lighting. “This just came in from the jewelers today.”

She steps back, clapping a hand over her mouth, but she can’t hide her spreading smile.

I take it out, holding it up for her to see. “You said you wanted a ring from me, right? I saw you looking at this in the shop window on one of our walks with Petey.”

“You remember that?” she whispers, her voice catching.

I nod, slipping it over her left ring finger, next to the wedding band already there. “Your fingers are so slim, I had to special order the size.”

“I love it.” She holds her hand in front of her, admiring it. “Oh God, I really love it.”

“We’ll have a do-over wedding sometime soon. If you want to marry me for real, that is.”

She nods before I’m finished speaking. “I do. I want that. I love you, Archer.”

“Love you too,” I whisper in her ear as she crushes herself to me.

I may not know exactly what the future holds with my family, my career, even myself, but I do know I want this woman by my side while I figure it out. Gabriel had no idea how much he hit it on the head when he said I should be thanking him.

Because there’s no one else I’d rather spend my life with. This is only the beginning.

### Epilogue

Serena - 1 year later

“So what’d you think?” I hold Archer’s shoulder for balance as I bend down to slip off my heels. “You have an okay time?”

“Yeah.” He shrugs, closing the front door before heading over to the living room. “It was fun.”

I hide a smile, going over to give Petey a quick pat where he’s lounging in his dog bed in the corner, and join Archer on the couch.

“I’m being serious,” he insists, seeing my expression. “Gabriel and Mackenzie know how to put on a party.”

“Well, they’re professionals.”

“What do you think they’ll do for their wedding? If their engagement party was that big, I can’t imagine what the actual day will be like.”

He chuckles softly. “I don’t know.” He pats his lap, motioning for me to place my feet there. I gladly reposition myself, sighing in relief as he massages my heels. Over the last year, he’s learned his own massage tricks I frequently take advantage of.

“I saw Mackenzie’s mom had you cornered at one point. Sorry I couldn’t save you.” I’d actually enjoyed chatting with a few of Gabriel’s friends who were interested in

starting their own nonprofit. New Beginnings is thriving, enough that we're considering opening another building in Brooklyn.

"It was fine," he says, digging his thumb into my arch and releasing the tension there. "I just feel bad for Gabriel. He's the one that's going to have her as a mother-in-law."

"Oh God, I overheard her saying the cringiest thing to them earlier. Something about how she better get grandchildren soon. Mackenzie looked about ready to muzzle her."

Archer stiffens slightly. "What'd Gabriel say?"

"Oh, he laughed it off. Said eventually they'll have enough kids to make their own baseball team."

He gives me a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"What is it?"

He looks up at me. "Hmm?"

I lean forward and touch the wrinkle between his brows. "You're worried about something."

He relaxes his face, but there's still a lingering tension there. "It's nothing."

I give him a look, which he correctly interprets based on his sigh.

"I'm at a new company this week," he admits, "and this lady made a comment I can't get out of my head."

Archer does freelance consulting for businesses now, which is great because he can

pick and choose how often he works, and he never lacks for clients because who wouldn't want advice from the former CFO of a major corporation? After six p.m., though, we have a strict no work policy at home. We value our time together too much. "What'd she say?"

"Well, she was the receptionist there. Super grandmotherly type. She asked if I had kids and I said no, I hadn't really thought about it before."

His fingers move to the ball of my foot and I wiggle my toes as I relax further into the couch. "Okay..."

"She went on to tell me I'd be a great dad. I mean, I've never even met this lady. I had no clue how to respond."

Admittedly, yes, kind of weird for a stranger to say that, but I don't know why he's so worked up. "I know we haven't discussed it much, but I'd like to have kids with you one day. I think you'll be an amazing dad."

"Not like Gabe. Or Connor."

I study him for a moment. "What are you really worried about?"

He's silent for a minute as he continues the massage, his fingers magical as they soothe my tired feet. "You don't think I'll be like..." He doesn't finish his sentence, but I know exactly where his mind is.

"Your dad?"

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He nods warily, not meeting my eye. Has this been weighing on him?

“Let me ask you a question. Do you believe I’d treat my child the way my mom treated me?”

His gaze snaps up, looking appalled for a moment before he sees where I’m going with this.

“You are nothing like your dad.” My voice is fiercer than I expected, but it’s only a testament to how strongly I feel about this. “You’re loving, kind, protective-”

“That’s with you, though. It’s easy to be that way with you.”

“And you don’t think you’ll have the same instincts with your kids? I know you will. Don’t compare yourself to anyone else. You’re your own person. And I’m excited to start a family with you one day, if that’s something you want too.”

His face softens. “As long as you give me some time to get with the program. You remember what I was like at the beginning of our relationship.”

I reach a hand out, stroking it through his dark locks. “Totally clueless,” I grin.

His lips quirk. “I got there eventually.”

“That you did.”

His hand comes up to cover my own. “Thank you. For always having faith in me. For

seeing me in the best light possible. Sometimes I need to hear things from you to really believe them.”

Warmth spreads through my chest, creeping up my neck to my cheeks. I’ll never tire of hearing his praise. “I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.”

“And I’ve said the same about you.”

I duck my head to hide my smile. “Touché.” I play idly with his fingers, bringing his hand back down to join mine in my lap, and twist his wedding band, the gold glinting in the lamplight. “Take as much time as you need to think about things, you know, family wise. There’s no rush, but I’m ready when you are.”

“Maybe we could practice tonight?” A wicked grin spreads across his face, his hands leaving mine to smooth themselves up my legs.

“Practice, huh?”

“Yeah. Making a baby and all that.” His palms move past my knees, skimming along my thighs. “Not sure I quite understand how it works. I’ll probably need a lot of practice.”

“Will you now?” I grin back, gasping as those skillful hands hitch my dress up.

I tug him off the couch, leading him into our bedroom, ready for another blissful night with him.

I’ll never get enough of this man. And I plan on it staying that way for a long time to come.