



# Obeying the Owner

**Author:** *Jacob Chance*

**Category:** Romance, Action

**Description:** Get ready for a hilarious romp on and off the ice in this workplace romantic comedy where love isn't the only thing breaking the rules.

When my dad retires, I take over as the new owner of the Charleston Coyotes hockey team.

As a businessman and father of a teenage daughter, I'm prepared for the challenges of the game, but Maeve, the stunning blonde I meet on a dating app—not so much.

Despite the large age gap, the connection between us is electric, and our one-night hookup quickly spirals into something deeper.

But life checks me harder than a hockey player when I discover Maeve is the executive assistant my dad raved about—which means she now works for me.

Suddenly, our steamy affair is put on ice, and navigating the delicate balance between boss and ex-lover becomes a high-stakes game with no playbook to follow.

Cue the awkward office encounters and the never-ending struggle to keep my hands off her.

Spoiler alert: I'm failing spectacularly.

It seems the harder I work at remaining professional, the more I long for her to once again obey this owner.

This is a standalone feel-good low angst romcom with a billionaire hockey team owner who falls for his executive assistant, who's a "good girl."

**Total Pages (Source):** 87

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## CHAPTER 1

### MAEVE

My high heels echo increasingly faster against the shiny marble floor as I rush toward the elevator, where my coworker Sheryl is waiting for me.

“You’re a lifesaver,” I say as I step inside.

When I cross the threshold, she lets the doors close and whispers to me, “How was your date last night? Did you get lucky? Is that why you’re running late?”

“There was no date; therefore, I didn’t get lucky, and I’m not late. I’m just not as early as usual.”

“What happened? Did you chicken out?” She keeps pushing for an answer.

My lips pressing in a hard line, I send a perturbed look her way. “No, I did not. Randy stood me up.”

Her eyebrows rise, disappearing under her bangs. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Nope. I went to the restaurant where we agreed to meet and waited at the bar for an hour before I finally left.”

“Did he text or call?”

“No.”

Her brown eyes narrow. “What a piece of shit. I’m going to kick his ass.”

She looks like she means it. I’m a little worried for Randy.

“No, don’t get worked up. It’s not a big deal. It’s not like we had sex and then he ghosted me.”

“I know, but I was the one who told you to go out with him. I thought you two would be a good match.”

I shrug. “And now I know we aren’t.”

The elevator stops on the top floor. The door slides open, and we step out together. Sheryl touches my arm. “Maeve, I’m so sorry my cousin stood you up.”

I smile. “You don’t need to apologize. I’m not angry with you.”

“What do you say we get together for lunch? We can make a revenge plan against Randy.” She smirks.

“I’m game for lunch, but let’s hold off on planning your cousin’s demise for now.”

She shakes her head. “You’re too nice, girl.”

“Maybe he had a good reason.”

“If he did, will you give him another chance?” she asks.

My lips roll inward as I think. “Probably not. It’s a bad idea to date someone I work

with. I never should've said yes to begin with."

Sheryl glances at her watch. "We better hustle, or we'll be late. I'll see you downstairs at twelve thirty."

"Don't stand me up," I joke, walking away.

"As if," she calls out.

I'm still smiling when I round the corner, but my smile quickly turns into a frown when I see Randy walking toward me.

"Maeve, can I talk to you?"

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“There’s no need.”

“Please?” he asks. I freeze in place, and he closes the distance between us. “I made a huge mistake last night. I got nervous and decided not to show.”

“Why were you nervous?” I ask.

“You’re beautiful and intelligent. You’re the kind of girl a guy marries, and I’m not at that point in my life yet.”

“Jesus, Randy. I was expecting dinner, not a proposal.”

“I know you weren’t, but I panicked. Do you think you could give me another chance?” His brown eyes look so big and genuine.

“Right now, I need to get to my desk.”

He nods reluctantly. “Okay.”

Stepping around him, I hurry to my office and turn on my computer. This day is just beginning, and it’s already a shitshow. I sink into my leather office chair and get to work.

As the executive assistant to Greg Ledger, the owner of the Charleston Coyotes, I have a long list of tasks.

I’m nearly finished ordering office supplies when my phone rings.

“Good morning, this is Maeve.”

“Maeve, can you please come to my office?” Greg asks politely.

“Be right there.” I hang up and head next door.

“Good morning. How’s my favorite employee today?” he asks, smiling.

As far as bosses go, I’ve hit the jackpot. Greg is the definition of a kind older man. I nearly have to pinch myself daily to ensure this is reality and not a dream.

“Would you feel that way if my brother wasn’t one of your team’s best?” I tease.

Although Greg has denied that sharing the same last name with one of his team’s best hockey players helped me get this job, I’m sure it didn’t hurt either.

“Your impressive typing speed won me over,” he says with a wink.

“I won’t argue with you on that.” I type one hundred twenty words a minute.

“I called you here because I have some news to share. It’s not something I’m happy about, but I know it’s the right thing to do.”

I fold my hands in my lap to keep from fidgeting. WTF? Am I about to be fired?

“I’m turning over ownership of the Coyotes to my son, Trey.”

A gasp slips from me, and I blurt out, “Are you sick?”

“No, nothing like that. Aside from some high blood pressure and cholesterol, I’m fine. But the missus wants me to cut back. Two years ago, she and I agreed that I

would turn the team over to my son, but I wasn't ready. I wanted to wait until the Coyotes won one more championship, and as she's been reminding me, they've won two in a row."

"Yeah, but they could win another. Maybe you'll three-peat. Don't you want to wait and see?" I ask.

He chuckles. "And if they win a third, then what? Will I ever be ready to let go of control?"

"What will you do to stay busy?"

"I'll still be involved in an advisory role with some of Ledger Enterprises, working mostly from home, but Lillith hopes it'll be smooth sailing without me. And she has plenty of things lined up to keep me occupied."

"I bet." I smile. I've gotten to know his wife well, and she's been more than patient about his workaholic ways.

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“I don’t want you to worry about your position here. I’ve already spoken with Trey and ensured he knows my staff is staying at least through the end of the summer.”

“That gives me a couple of months to find a new job,” I droll.

He laughs. “You have nothing to worry about. Your work ethic and initiative make you stand out. I’m sure you’ll be as invaluable to him as you’ve been to me.”

“Thank you. I’ve loved working for you. I’ll be so sad to see you go. I finally found a job with the best boss, and you’re leaving.”

He smiles. “I’ll miss you too, but you’ll forget about me in no time.”

“When is your last day?”

“The end of next week.”

“Don’t you need to give a month’s notice?” I joke.

“I thought about stretching it out, but Trey is eager to start.”

“That’s understandable.”

“Before I forget, Lillith wants to have you over for dinner some night.”

“I’d love that,” I say, smiling.



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“I can’t believe Greg is turning over the team.” Sheryl leans in and speaks quietly before sitting next to me and biting into her sandwich. Apparently, the news is traveling fast.

“I know. I’m sad he’s leaving. I love working for him.”

“I don’t think you’ll mind having Trey as your boss,” she says, her lips mischievously curling.

“Do you know him?”

“Not personally, but I’ve seen him, and he’s hot as fuck.”

“What he looks like doesn’t matter. I hope he’s not an asshole to work for.”

A lot of attractive men have large egos, and I don’t want to deal with that.

We fall silent as we finish eating lunch, but my mind is on my new boss and what the change will mean for me the entire time.

“Did you see Randy?” Sheryl asks.

I push my plate toward the center of the table. “Yeah. He said he got nervous because I’m the type of girl guys marry.” I roll my eyes.

She huffs in disgust. “How lame. I’m ashamed we’re related.”

“He wants another chance, but it’s not happening.”

“Good. He doesn’t deserve one. Does this mean you need my help setting up a Finder profile?”

“Dammit. I shouldn’t have agreed you could if my date didn’t work out.”

“Oh, but you did, so let me have your phone.” She holds out her hand, wiggling her fingers. Reluctantly, I pass it off. Her tongue peeks from the corner of her mouth as she furiously taps away on my screen.

“Don’t make me seem desperate for sex,” I say.

She laughs. “But you are.”

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“Shut up.”

“What? You are,” she replies, her eyes never leaving the screen. “And finding someone to hookup with is the purpose of the Finder app.” Five minutes later she holds my phone up in front of me. “Bam! One sexy bitch has a Finder profile.”

I grab her hand, pulling it closer. There I am in color on the screen. “Change the picture.”

She draws her hand back, clutching my phone to her chest. “No way. That’s a great picture of you.”

“I’m in a bikini.”

“Hey, I used your best pic on your phone.”

“Best for what? Looking for a hookup?”

“Yes. Isn’t that what you’re hoping for?”

I shift in my seat. “Yes. No. Maybe?”

It would be nice to meet someone who would be interested in getting together each week for some steamy sex. But the idea of meeting a man on an app is disconcerting.

Sheryl slides my phone across the table to me. “You have a profile if you decide to use it. Your password is Ineedsex69.”

I laugh. “That should be easy to remember.”

“You can update your profile information, but you’re not allowed to change your picture,” she says sternly.

“Yes, Mom.”

“I turned your notifications on, so if you’re on the app, you’ll see who’s matching with you in real time.”

“Oh, thank God,” I jest.

She laughs. “I can’t wait to see who connects with you.”

“Me too,” I say, feeling equal parts curiosity and trepidation. I’ve never used a dating app before and never planned to. But, hey, desperate times call for desperate measures. I just hope something good comes from taking a chance. And by something good, I mean orgasms—delivered by someone other than myself.

## CHAPTER 2

### TREY

“Mom, everything is delicious,” I say while scooping up another forkful of pot roast and red-skinned mashed potatoes.

She smiles. “Thank you. I tried a new recipe.”

“I’ll have to get it from you before I leave,” Terry, my sister-in-law, joins in from across the table.

“What if I don’t like it?” my brother, Phil, asks.

Terry turns to glance at his almost empty plate.

“Yeah, that’s not gonna be a problem.”

“Phil, have I ever made something you didn’t like?” Mom sounds hurt.

Before he can reply, I jump in for the save. “No, Mommy, never.” Everyone laughs.

It’s a long-standing family joke that, as the oldest, Phil is my mom’s favorite.

“I like everything you make too, Gram,” my daughter, Gwen, proclaims with a smile.

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“Of course you do, sweetie. You have good taste.” Mom winks at her.

“Dad, I heard you made the official announcement at work about turning over the Coyotes to Trey.” Phil changes the conversation.

“Did you cry?” I ask, smirking.

Dad laughs. “Every time I told someone, I tried like hell not to cry.”

“It’s not too late to change your mind,” I say.

“Hush.” Mom waves her hand.

Dad shakes his head. “It’s long overdue, and your mother has been more than patient while waiting for this moment to come.”

“Mom, you can be patient?” I tease.

She laughs. “And you wonder why Phil’s my favorite.”

“I bet your employees are sad, Gramps,” Gwen chimes in.

“I don’t know how they all feel, but my executive assistant was upset when I told her. She’s only worked for me for a handful of months but is sharp as a whip and never complains.”

“Maeve is a peach,” Mom says.

“Wow, she must be great if you like her.” Phil smirks.

Mom’s lips curve with amusement. “She’s wonderful. It’s too bad your father didn’t have her help sooner.”

Dad nods. “That’s true. You’ll be thankful for her, Trey. I promised you would keep her on.”

I glance at Gwen. “Can you believe this? I don’t even get to pick my staff.”

She rolls her eyes. “Talk about first-world problems. Your dad is giving you a hockey team.”

My daughter is smarter than most adults.

“She makes a good point,” Terry says.

“Let me remind you, daughter, I didn’t ask my dad for the team. Not that I’m not grateful for the opportunity. I absolutely am. But I’ve made my own way in business up until now.”

Dad shrugs. “I couldn’t give the team to Phil. He hates hockey.”

“I wouldn’t say hate,” Phil defends. “It’s more that I have no interest in it.”

“In other words, Dad gave me the team because I love hockey, and he knows I’ll make sure the Coyotes continue to thrive.”

“Exactly,” Dad says. “I’ve always known Trey would be the next owner. And Phil’s already taken over the rest of Ledger Enterprises.”

Mom raises an eyebrow at Dad. “You fought me on that too. And I’m still waiting for you to stop being a consultant for him.”

“I will, when the time’s right,” he says, covering her hand on the table with his.

“Uh-oh,” Phil says, looking between our parents. “Dad, it better be sooner rather than later, or you might not survive.”

“Yeah, Mom will smother you with a pillow while you sleep,” I joke.

She shakes her head. “Poison is more my style. I’d slip it in your food, and you’d never know.”

“Boys, you heard that. If I suddenly croak, you’ll know why,” Dad says, grinning.



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“Gramps, if you retire, you won’t have to worry about your safety,” Gwen suggests.

Mom snickers, nodding. “Right. His fate is in his own hands.”

I shake my head. “No wonder I have no faith in women. My mother openly discusses offing my dad.”

“I think your lack of faith has more to do with your horrible past choices,” Mom drolls. “Although one of them resulted in giving us a beautiful granddaughter.”

“Thanks, Gram. I’m glad my parents met, but I’m thankful they’re not together.”

“You are?” I ask. She’s never mentioned anything of the sort to me before now.

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“You two can’t get along for more than ten minutes. Why would I want to live in a house full of arguing?”

Shit. I had no idea she felt this way, and now I’m ashamed of every single argument Claire and I have had over the years.

“I’m sorry that’s how you feel. I guess your mom and I need to do better.”

One of her shoulders jumps with a shrug. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is to me. I never want you to be uncomfortable around your mom and me.”

Claire and I band together for Gwen’s sake when needed, but for the most part, we’re like oil and water. If it wasn’t for her getting pregnant with our daughter, all we would’ve shared was a week-long fling. But I’m thankful for Gwen every single day. She’s the best thing in my life, and obviously, I have to do better when interacting with Claire.

“Co-parenting must be so hard,” Terry offers.

I ruffle Gwen’s hair. “When you have a great kid like I do, it helps.”

“Dad.” She sighs with frustration as she smooths out the long brown strands I mussed.

“Who wants dessert?” Mom asks, and we all shout simultaneously, “Me!”

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Once home, I change into a pair of pajama bottoms and an old white t-shirt. My mom sent extra chocolate cream pie home with us, and it’s calling my name as I wander back into the kitchen.

“Looks like we had the same idea,” I say to Gwen as she pulls out a stool at the counter. She licks some whipped cream from her thumb and smiles at me.

“I couldn’t resist. And I won’t even be here tomorrow night, so I figured I better have some now.”

“Yeah, this pie won’t last until the next time you’re here.” I grab a plate from the cabinet and join her on the other side of the island, sitting on the stool next to her.

“Gram’s food is too delicious to pass up.”

She hands me the knife, and I cut a generous piece for myself.

“It’s a good thing you work out so much, or you’d have a jelly belly like Dean,” she says, mentioning her stepfather.

I laugh and then remember I shouldn’t encourage her. “Be nice. Dean’s good to you.”

“I know he is. That has nothing to do with his rapidly expanding stomach. He claims he’s being supportive by gaining baby weight along with Mom. But I think he’s nervous about becoming a dad and he’s eating his feelings.”

Jesus, my kid is astute.

“It’s only natural he’d be nervous.”

“Were you?” she asks.

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“Are you kidding? I was so scared.”

She tips her head, studying me. “Why?”

“For the first time in my life, I was responsible for someone other than myself. What if I didn’t know what to do? Or if I was a horrible dad? But as soon as I held you in my arms, you became the person I loved most in this universe.”

“Well, you worried for nothing. You’re a great dad.” She leans her head on my shoulder.

I press a kiss to the top of her head. “It’s easy when you have a daughter like mine.”

She smiles at me and then digs her spoon into the pie. “Are you excited about the hockey team?”

“I am. How do you feel? Any concerns?”

She immediately shakes her head. “Nope. I’m happy for you.”

“If that changes, I want you to let me know.”

“I will.”

“You promise? You know you can tell me anything.”

“I promise. Will this make you feel better?” She holds out her pinky, and I briefly

wrap mine around it.

I smile. “Of course. Pinky swears are unbreakable.”

Sliding off the stool, she opens the dishwasher and places her plate and spoon inside. She turns to me. “I’m going to get ready for bed and do the reading I couldn’t finish earlier. Night, Dad.”

“Goodnight, Gwennie.”

I’ve finished my pie, and it’s not quite enough. But as much as I’d like another piece, I’m forcing myself to save it for tomorrow night. Gwen won’t be here, and a little late-night comfort food will be just what I need.

After putting my plate and fork in the dishwasher, I settle on the couch. Slipping my phone from my pocket, I pull up the Finder account I recently started. With no one catching my eye right away, I repeatedly swipe left.

I’m about ready to close the app and give up when I notice a stunning blonde. She’s wearing a bikini that nearly has me drooling. But her smile sets her apart from every other scantily dressed woman I’ve passed on. With her lips slightly parted, it looks like someone unexpectedly captured her image while she was mid-laugh. I love the genuineness of the moment, and I can’t help wondering what her laugh sounds like. Or if her long golden hair feels as soft as it looks. Sunglasses cover her eyes, making me curious about what color lies behind the dark lenses.

“Why not?” I swipe my thumb right without further hesitation. Now, I just have to wait and see if I’ve also caught her interest.

## CHAPTER 3

MAEVE

Groaning loudly, I flop my head against the back of the couch. “Why am I so apprehensive about logging on to Finder?” I ask Lucy, my brother’s girlfriend.

She quickly wiggles and shifts her hips until she’s sitting closer to me. “Probably because it’s something you haven’t done before. But remember, no one will know if you choose not to swipe on them.”

“They won’t?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. You only get notified when you both swipe right.”

“I guess that makes it a little better. I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.”

She nudges me with the side of her arm. “You’re so kind-hearted.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Oh really? Yesterday, I watched you pick up the trash that blew all over the neighbor’s lawn,” she says with a triumphant smile.

“Okay, stalker.” This time, I nudge her arm. “I couldn’t leave it there. She’s ninety years old.”

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“I agree, but that’s not the only example I can give of you being sweet.”

“Enough about me.” I struggle with handling compliments gracefully.

“If you’re too nervous to open the app, I’ll do it. It’s the least I can do. After all, you were instrumental in getting your brother and me together.”

“All I did was invite you over for dinner.”

Niall walks into the room and says, “And look what that got her.” He winks at Lucy.

Since I finished my master’s degree in December, I’ve lived with my brother for six months. Lucy is his next-door neighbor. They had a rocky start when they first met, unlike she and I, who became fast friends.

Niall struts over to the couch, stopping in front of Lucy. He holds his hand out. “It’s time for bed.”

“Aww, he needs you to tuck him in,” I say.

Lucy shakes her head. “I was gonna help your sister with something.”

I wave my hand at them both. “Go on. I’m all set.”

She takes Niall’s hand, and he pulls her to her feet. “Night, Maeve.”

I smile at her. “Night.”

“Sorry to ruin your plans,” he says, leading her toward his room.

“Sure. Sure,” I shout after him.

Finally, I stretch out lengthwise on my stomach and tap the Finder icon on my phone. Scrolling through slowly over the next several minutes, I’m mostly disappointed with the options I’m seeing. There seems to be no shortage of good-looking men on this site, but I’m searching for an intangible factor that will make him worth swiping on. And I suppose it would help if I had any idea what that factor is.

Maybe it’s charisma? But how can you judge someone’s charisma if not in person?

Perhaps it’s a friendly glint in their eyes or a devilish smile—or maybe it’s all these things.

I guess it’s something I’ll recognize when I see it.

“Nope. Nope. Nope.” I pass on three more men before someone finally catches my interest. “Hello, handsome.” Looking closer, I notice a few silver strands in his brown hair. He looks older than the guys I’m typically attracted to. And the mirrored aviators he’s wearing in his profile picture give him a look I’m instantly drawn to.

Maybe someone older would be a good thing.

A man who’s mature and experienced—what would that be like?

The few guys I’ve been with sexually were neither of those things, which is possibly why none of them lasted—in the bedroom or my life.

For the past six years, I’ve focused on doing well in school and getting a job, so I missed out on some of the wild times college life offers. I didn’t mind then because I



was thinking about the bigger picture, which I've always done.

But sometimes, I feel so much older than I am—older than someone my age should. Maybe that's why my friendship with Lucy has been so effortless. I guess I just relate better to her because she's ten years older than me.

Sheryl and I have become friends through work, and while I enjoy her company, she and I have different interests. She's all about fashion and going to a new bar every night. Shopping is something I do out of necessity, and I'd prefer hanging out at home with my brother and Lucy over spending time with strangers at some random bar.

The longer I study his picture, the more details I notice. His build is lean and muscular, but not bulky. His blue polo shirt fits well enough to reveal a flat stomach, and the short sleeves show off solid forearms. Hot damn, forearms are a significant weakness of mine. Suddenly, my face feels flushed.

Is it getting hot in here?

I quickly swipe right before I can talk myself out of it. There. What's done is done.

I'm about to log out when I see a notification that Mr. Handsome and I matched.

Letting out an excited squeal, I beat the tops of my feet against the couch, then bury my face in the throw pillow as if he can currently see me. After a few calming breaths and mild self-admonishment for my childish behavior, I raise my head.

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James: Hello, Mae.

I didn't even notice Sheryl shortened my name on my account.

Me: Hello, James.

James: How's your night been?

What should I say? Where's Lucy when I need her? Actually, I don't want to think about where she is right now or what she's doing with my brother. Blech.

I can handle this. After graduating summa cum laude, this should be easy.

Me: It's suddenly improving. How about yours?

James: That's funny. I was thinking the same thing. Do you live in Charleston?

Me: I do. What about you?

James: Just outside of Charleston. How would you like to meet me tomorrow night for a drink?

I like how he said to meet him and didn't offer to pick me up. I'm not about to give a stranger my address.

Me: That sounds great. Where are you thinking?

James: BLITZED rooftop bar at eight?

His choice surprises me for a moment, but then I recall the one time I went there with Rogan, my younger brother, I noticed it catered to an older crowd.

Me: That works.

James: I'll see you then.

Me: Looking forward to it.

James: So am I.

My face hurts from smiling as I log out. I can't believe I did it. I'm proud of myself. And it was not only relatively painless, it was fun. I set my phone on the end table and prop my chin on my palms. I have a date tomorrow night!

Wait. Is it considered a date if you meet on Finder?

I'll have to talk with James and figure out what he wants. I don't have high expectations because I've heard horror stories about these apps. Hell, if he shows up, it'll be an improvement, but I have hopes of having an orgasm.

And I don't know what about James makes me so confident he can deliver, but I am.

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Sheryl's waiting near the building's entrance when I arrive at work. "Good morning." She hands me a cup of coffee.

I study her for a moment. "Who are you, and what have you done with my friend?"

She laughs. “I had an overnight guest, and they left early, so I figured I’d grab you a coffee for a change.”

“Was it someone I know?” I ask.

She taps her red fingernail against her smirking lips. “You know Ed from the accounting department?”

“Yeah.” Everyone knows who Ed is. With the physique of a bodybuilder, he’s the antithesis of what you think of when you hear the word accountant.

“Well, it wasn’t him,” she says, laughing.

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“You’re ridiculous. I no longer care to know.” I start walking toward the door, knowing she really wants to tell me.

She catches my arm, stopping me. “Wait. It was Juan.”

“Who’s Juan?”

“He also works in accounting,” she says.

“Is this something new?”

One of her shoulders offers a quick shrug. “We’ve hooked up a few times. But enough about me, I want to hear about your matches on Finder.”

I take a sip of my coffee, making her wait. “I only jumped on there for a few minutes last night. I matched with one guy, and we’re meeting tonight.”

“Ooh, where are you going?”

“I’m not telling you.”

She laughs. “You know I’d show up.”

“Exactly. I’ll have my hands full already.”

“Isn’t that the idea?” She raises her dark eyebrows at me.

“I’m not sure yet. I’ll see how I feel when we meet. If he’s giving off creeper vibes, I’m out of there.”

“Oh, definitely. You should listen to your instincts. Keep your eyes open for red flags, and don’t be swayed by good looks.”

I picture James’s profile pic. “I think it’s too late for that. He’s gorgeous.”

“Well then, make sure there’s more to him than just his good looks,” she clarifies.

“I want to hook up with the guy, not bear his children. I’ll be satisfied if he’s attractive and nice.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Do you want a nice guy in bed?”

If I’m honest, I don’t know what kind of man I want in bed beyond someone who’s able to make me come.

“I didn’t mean in that sense. I just meant I don’t want to end up going home with a serial killer.”

“Take him to your place,” she suggests.

“I can’t. I live with my brother.”

“Oh, yeah. Your sexy-as-fuck hockey-playing brother you’ve yet to introduce me to.”

“You mean my brother, who’s in a very serious relationship?”

She pouts her red lips. “Boo. All the good ones are already taken.”

I nod. “Sometimes it feels that way.”

“I hope you have luck with your date tonight. Send me a pic of him while you’re out,” she says, sipping from her cup.

“Yeah, that’s not happening. There’s no stealthy way to do that. And with my luck, the flash would go off or something.”

She laughs. “That would be hilarious.”

“Not for me.”

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“You could show me his profile pic,” she suggests.

I reach inside my pocket and realize my phone’s buried in my purse. “I’ll show you later. I need to get inside anyway.” Moving forward, I open the door and turn to her. “Are you coming?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not ready to work yet.” She glances at her watch. “I still have twenty minutes before I need to start. Unlike you, I don’t like to be here before I have to.”

I roll my eyes at her and step inside. I’m not sure Sheryl would love to work no matter what job she had. As I pass by, I smile and wave at the receptionist and security guard. I press the button to call for the elevator, and the doors instantly part. I’m barely inside when I hear a male voice shout, “Hold the door, please.”

I press the open door button, and when I glance up, I realize it’s Randy hurrying my way.

Would it be rude to let go?

He steps in and smiles at me. “Thank you.”

Too late. I press the button for our floor, and the doors close. “No problem.”

We’ve barely started moving when Randy asks, “Have you thought about giving me another chance so I can take you out?”



Ugh. I was hoping this wouldn't happen. Now, I definitely regret my manners.

I should've let the damn door close.

Since we're coworkers, the best way to handle this is to make it as quick and painless as possible.

"I did some thinking and decided it's best if we don't go out again."

His expression goes from hopeful to crestfallen in the blink of an eye. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "Absolutely."

"Can I ask why you changed your mind?"

Is he for real?

"You stood me up."

"I know, but I apologized."

"Sometimes you don't get a second chance. Besides, we work together, and I don't want to muddy the waters here."

He nods. "Okay. That's understandable. If you change your mind, let me know."

"I don't see that happening." I give him a tight-lipped smile.

As soon as the door slides to the side, I dart from the elevator and hurry toward my office, as if someone is following me.

Once I've closed the door behind me, I expel a relief-filled sigh. Setting my coffee on my desk, I turn on my computer. I hang my purse on the coat rack, and settle behind my desk. This day hasn't had a great start, but hopefully, it will improve.

I jump right in and tackle my email first, writing replies and taking notes on all the vital information I need to remember.

Next, I type up a few memos Greg asked me to take care of. When I finish, I head to his office. Standing outside, I gently tap my fingers on his open door to get his attention.

He looks up and smiles when he sees me. "Come in, Maeve. What can I do for you?"

"Here are the memos you requested that need your signature." I hand them across his desk and wait as he looks them over.

He passes each back to me as he signs them. "Please make sure they get delivered where they need to."

"I will."

“How are you?” he asks.

“Do you mean, how am I after the bombshell you dropped yesterday?” I ask, my lips curving with amusement.

“Yes, that’s what I’m asking,” he clarifies.

“I’m happy for you and Lillith. You deserve some time off.”

“But?” he presses.

“I know this makes me a horribly selfish person, but a part of me wants you to stay.”

He smiles. “You’re not selfish. I mean, I am an amazing boss. Who wouldn’t miss me?”

I laugh.

“You’re going to love working for Trey. After a month or so, you’ll have forgotten all about me.”

“That’s doubtful, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

“I’ll still be checking in from time to time.”

“Gotta make sure the new boss is doing his job, huh?”

“Not really. I just want to annoy Trey.”

I laugh. “That’s horrible but also hilarious.”

“I’m handing him a billion-dollar team. I can’t make the process too easy.”

“That’s true.”

“You can be my secret insider and tell me how everything’s going,” he says.

My mouth falls open. “Oh no you don’t. I’m not spying on my new boss. That’s a good way to lose my job. Once you leave, my loyalty will be with Trey.”

He smiles wide. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Placing my hands on my hips, I ask, “Are you testing me?”

“I was, but you passed.”

“Pfft. Of course I did. Before I return to work, do you need anything else?”

“Could I please get a cup of coffee?” he asks.

“Sure. I’ll be right back.” I walk down to the far end of the hallway where the staff lounge is located. I find Sheryl rifling through the cabinets. “What’s up?”

She slams the door shut. “I’m looking for something good to eat, but there’s nothing.”

“I can order some stuff. What do you want?”

“What happened to all the protein bars? There’s no yogurt in the fridge either.”

“I’ll get some fruit and other stuff. I’ll put in for a delivery when I’m back at my desk.”

“What are you planning to wear tonight?” she asks, abruptly changing the subject.

“Done with that subject, are we?”

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“You said you’re taking care of it, so I’m moving on to a more important topic. So what are you wearing on your date?”

“I don’t know yet. It’s still hours away.”

“You should wear a dress and show off your long legs.”

“A dress? Really?”

“Think of it this way. Dresses are easy access.” Her eyebrows dance up and down.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say, grabbing a clean coffee mug from a cabinet and filling it with freshly brewed coffee. “I have to get this to Greg. I’m working through lunch, so don’t wait for me.”

“Okay. If I don’t see you before you leave, have fun tonight. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” she says with a wicked-sounding laugh.

“Bye, Sheryl.” I carefully carry Greg’s coffee back to his office and set the mug on his desk.

He’s in the middle of a phone call, so he mouths, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I whisper, then return to my office. I get busy right away ordering food for the lounge. But I keep getting distracted thinking about my “date,” and I wish Sheryl hadn’t brought it up. Now, I’m sitting here getting nervous about all the what-ifs I’m coming up with instead of focusing on my work.

No matter what happens with James, at least I'm getting out and trying something new.

## CHAPTER 4

### TREY

Leaning back in my chair, I rub a hand over the stubble on my chin. "Are you sure you're alright with handling everything? I feel like I'm leaving you buried in work."

Isaac nods. "Relax, brother. I've got this. I may be taking over as CEO, but we started this company together, and that's how it'll stay."

"I know, but I've been coming to work here since we started this company fifteen years ago, and after next week, I won't be."

"Just admit you're going to miss me and get it over with," Isaac says.

"Like you won't miss me too?"

"Hey, I didn't say I wouldn't. We've spent almost every day together since freshman year of college."

"I guess it's time for a break," I joke, but I feel conflicted about leaving this company in my best friend's hands.

And it's not because he's not trustworthy. If he weren't, we wouldn't be business partners.

I guess it's the fear of change and missing out on what I'm used to. This building's filled with employees we chose together, some of whom have been with us since day

one. They're like family to me, and it'll be a big adjustment not to see them daily.

I'm about to go to a workplace where I barely know anyone, and everyone who works there was hired by my father or his staff. With the size of the staff involved in running the Coyotes team and organization, even learning who everyone is will be damn near impossible, but I'll do my best.

"You want to grab dinner in a few?" he asks.

"I'm gonna keep wrapping up loose ends and then I'm meeting someone."

"A woman?"

"Yes, a woman."

"Where did you meet her?"

"On Finder."

"I didn't think you'd start an account."



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“I wasn’t going to, but I figured it might be good to have some female company when I wanted, without taking time away from Gwen, like having a girlfriend would.”

“Good point. So where are you going?”

“We’re meeting for a drink.”

“Where?” he presses.

“Isaac, I swear to Christ, if you show up, I’ll beat your ass.”

“That wouldn’t make a very good impression on your date.” He smirks.

“Maybe she likes guys who take charge.”

“She better if she’s with you, you controlling asshole.”

I laugh. “Hey, I keep things running smoothly, and now it’ll be your job. You’ll appreciate me more when I’m gone and your workload doubles.”

“Yeah, I’ll need to find a workaround for that,” he says, winking.

“Good luck. Let me know how it works out for you.”

“I’m going to get out of here early while I can. I’ll see you tomorrow, and you can tell me about your date.”

“Like that’ll happen.”

He laughs as he walks toward the door and then pauses on the threshold. “I hope you have a good night, bro. You deserve it.”

“Thanks. I hope so too.” I smile as I think about the picture of Mae in the white bikini and the texts we exchanged last night.

I have a good feeling about tonight.

\* \* \*

I stay at the office longer than I plan and don’t have time to run home after work. Fortunately, I have a bathroom connected to my office, so I brush my teeth, wash up, and reapply deodorant and cologne. I keep a few extra button-down shirts in my closet, so I can swap out the blue one I wore all day for a fresh, clean white one. I skip a tie and roll up my sleeves in favor of a more casual look.

Arriving with ten minutes to spare, I pay the fee at the door and pass through the first-floor nightclub. Flashing lights immediately assault my eyes, and the pounding thump of bass is ear-splittingly loud. I walk straight through and take the elevator up, stepping onto the rooftop deck. Softer music plays in the background; if my ears could, they’d sigh with relief.

I quickly scan the bar area, stopping on a woman with golden hair hanging down to the middle of her back. I can’t see her face from this angle, so I cross the checkerboard-tiled dance floor for a better look. As I approach, I see she’s tapping at her phone screen.

“Mae?”

Her head immediately snaps my way.

I'm stunned when I see the big, beautiful blue eyes her sunglasses hid in her profile picture.

Her berry-colored lips tentatively curve. "James?"

I almost forget my Finder account is under my middle name for a moment, but then I nod. "Yes. It's nice to meet you." I shake her hand firmly.

"And you as well."

The bartender comes over. "Can I get you two anything?"

I gesture for Mae to go first.

"I'd love a Moscow mule, please."

"And you, sir?" the bartender asks.

“A gin and tonic, please.”

She nods and sets about making our drinks.

“I hope I didn’t keep you waiting long,” I say, sitting on the barstool beside hers.

She shakes her head. “Not at all. I’m chronically early for everything. I think it’s a genetic defect.”

“Punctuality is a positive thing, especially when it comes to work. I bet your boss loves you.”

She smiles. “Pretty sure he does.”

“What do you do?” I ask.

“I’m an executive assistant. It’s not the most glamorous job, but so far, I love it.”

“You haven’t been there long?”

“No, just since the beginning of the year.”

“What did you do before that?” I ask.

“I was in grad school.” She studies my face for my reaction, but I manage to keep my expression one of interest and not shock or horror. Fuck me. She’s even younger than I imagined. “Are you alarmed by my age?” she asks.

“Alarmed? No. Surprised? Maybe.” I smile.

“In case you’re wondering my exact age, I’m twenty-five.”

“I’m forty-two. Does that bother you?”

She shakes her head. “Not at all.”

The bartender returns, sliding our drinks to us. I hand over my credit card. “Can we start a tab, please?”

Mae and I sip from our drinks until the bartender returns and hands my card back to me.

“Would you like to sit at a table or on one of the couches?” I ask.

“Sure.”

Standing up, I grab my drink, and I’m about to reach for hers too, when I pause. “Do you mind if I carry your drink?”

She gives me an appraising glance. “I don’t mind, but thanks for asking. That’s a first for me.”

I pluck her copper mug from the bar. “I know women can’t be too careful these days.”

Way to make yourself sound like an old man.

“You’re right. We can’t.”

While we walk side by side, it's all I can do to keep my eyes off her. "Pick wherever you'd like to sit," I say.

She chooses a small round table next to the railing that runs around the roof's perimeter, giving us a great vantage point from where we can see nearly the entire city.

Setting our drinks on the table, I pull a chair out for her. "Thank you." She lowers, sweeping her hands over the back of her skirt before she sits.

"You're welcome." I take the seat across from her, and I'm once again dazzled by her bright blue eyes. Not even the evening sky and dim lighting can detract from their stunning appearance.

"I never asked what you do for work," Mae interrupts my staring.

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“My friend and I have a real estate and redevelopment business.”

“That sounds like it could be fun. As long as he’s dependable.”

“He is. We’ve been friends since we were eighteen.”

“That’s impressive. I don’t have any long-term friendships.”

“You might by the time you’re my age,” I say, smiling.

“Maybe. I moved to this area around Christmastime, so I’ve only made a few friends.”

“Where did you go to school?”

“In Virginia.”

“What brought you to Charleston?”

“I have an older brother here. I’m living with him at the moment. But I’m hoping to remedy that soon.”

“Is he your only sibling?”

She shakes her head and smiles. “No, I also have a younger brother who’s in college.”

“Are you all close?”

“Yeah, we are. Don’t get me wrong; sometimes I want to strangle them both. Well, mostly my younger brother. He likes to push my buttons like only a sibling can.”

I laugh. “I have an older brother, so I understand that all too well.”

“My brother’s been great about me staying with him, but he’s got a serious girlfriend now, and I don’t want to be in the way.”

“I bet he likes having you there.”

“I like to think so, but my social life has been almost nonexistent since I arrived, so I’m willing to bet he wouldn’t mind me disappearing for a little while.”

“You’re not home right now,” I point out.

“True.” She smiles, raising her glass toward me. “Cheers to being out.”

“Cheers.” I tap my glass to hers. The ice cubes clink as I sip my drink.

“Have you ever been married?” she asks.

Swallowing another gulp of gin and tonic, I place my glass on the table. “No, I haven’t. But I have a thirteen-year-old daughter.”

Her eyes widen. “Ooh, a teenager. How’s that going?”

I smile. “So far, so good. She’s still sweet, and I hope she’ll stay that way.”

“Do you get along with her mother?”



“Claire and I were never together as a couple. We had a brief interlude, which resulted in our daughter. Claire’s since married a great guy, and they’re having a baby in a few months.”

She sips from her copper mug, then her tongue drags over her pouty bottom lip, removing the leftover moisture. Just watching her makes my dick semi-hard and reminds me of why I’m here.

“How do you feel about going to my house after we finish our drinks?” I ask.

Her eyes flash wider with surprise.

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“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shock you. I have a habit of being direct.”

She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. “No apology needed, and your directness is appreciated. I’m new to this.”

“This being...?” I ask, prompting her to be more specific.

“Finder. Meeting up with a stranger.”

“Okay. Why don’t you tell me what motivated you to download the app.”

“I haven’t had sex in a long time,” she says, laughing.

I smile at her candor. “It’s been longer than I’d like to admit for me too.”

She tips her head, studying my face with skepticism lacing her expression.

“Don’t give me that look. I’m serious.”

She rolls her eyes. “You expect me to believe you’re not getting laid regularly?”

“Between my long hours and my daughter, I don’t have much time for frivolous pursuits. I’ve reached the point where my quiet time is minimal. When I have a moment alone, the last thing I want to do is be around another person.”

“That’s understandable. But if that’s true, why are you here?”

“I miss connecting with a woman. And I’ve been thinking one night would be better than nothing.”

“So, we go back to your place and...” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“That works for me. How do you feel about it?”

She traces a fingertip over the mug’s handle. “I like that plan.”

“Do you want another Moscow mule, or do you want to get out of here now?”

“You’ve barely touched your gin and tonic,” she points out.

I shrug. “I’m not much of a drinker.”

“Me neither, but I will finish every last drop.” She raises her drink and swallows down the remainder. “Here’s to liquid courage,” she says, setting the mug down purposefully.

Standing, I move to pull her chair out as she rises. “I’ll pay the bill, and we can go.”

She reaches into her purse. “Wait, let me give you some money.”

I place my hand on her arm, and her eyes meet mine. “Please, let me take care of it.”

Her lips curve in a soft smile. “Okay. Thank you.”

I close out the bill, sign the receipt, and return to her side. “We’re all set.” Placing my palm in the center of her lower back, I usher her toward the elevator. The ride down seems endless when it only takes a matter of seconds.

When the door opens, I take hold of her hand and squeeze quickly, shouting over the music, “I don’t want to lose you.”

She squeezes back, smiling at me.

As we maneuver through the crowds of people gathering near the bar, I’m unsure which is pounding harder, my heart or the techno beat pumping through the sound system.

Exiting through the front doors, we step outside into the fresh air. The usual city sounds seem quiet compared to the cacophony we left behind.

“Where did you park?” I ask.

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Mae points to a small Volkswagen at the edge of the parking lot. “That’s mine.”

Still holding hands, we walk over to the white vehicle. She pulls away, rifling through her purse for her keys. She unlocks the door using the remote, and I tug it open for her. “Thank you,” she says, sliding inside.

“I’m parked farther back in the lot. I’ll meet you back here in a couple of minutes.” She nods, and I close her in. She starts her car, and I head off to find mine. My steps are hurried, as I’m eager to get Mae to myself. She’s a smoke show—a goddess in the flesh. And I’m not letting her slip away.

## CHAPTER 5

### MAEVE

I follow James’s Porsche Cayenne across the Ravenel Bridge, which spans the Cooper River. During the daytime, sprawling views of Charleston Harbor and the surrounding area are visible, but at night the bridge’s lighted structure is the star of the show.

The Moscow mule I drank and the nervous energy whirling around inside my stomach make me feel a bit unsettled and hot. I turn the air conditioning up, hoping it will cool me off.

I’ve never gone home with a man I just met, and I certainly haven’t gotten to know a stranger in the biblical sense. Not that I’m a prude or ashamed of my sexuality, I just haven’t felt the need to until now.

Once off the bridge, we follow Highway 17 North into Mount Pleasant. I don't know much about this area, but the old, stately homes we're driving by, paint an impressive picture.

After a couple of turns down a few narrow side streets, James pulls into a cobblestone driveway, and I follow, parking directly behind his SUV. Once I step from my car and close the door, I take a good look at the two-story cottage-style house. A well-lit porch stretches across the front and wraps around the side. The siding is painted beige, and the trim is crisp white.

James meets me at the front of my car and takes my hand, leading me up the driveway. Glancing over at the side view of his house, I realize it's even more significant than I originally thought. We climb the steps to the porch, and he unlocks the door.

The first thing I notice when I pass over the threshold is a large glass pendant wrapped with brass that casts welcoming beams of light over the white walls and dark hardwood floors. The second is the console table where I place my phone and keys.

James locks up and turns to me with a smile. "Are you freaking out yet?"

I laugh, shaking my head. "Surprisingly, no."

"Good. Let me show you around." He leads me through a doorway to the left, flipping on the overhead lights. "This is my home office."

It's extremely neat, not a single piece of paper on his desk.

"Do you use it much?"

"No. Not unless Gwen is home from school for a day. Otherwise, I prefer to go into

the office.” I follow him through a second exit on the other side of the room. He flips more wall switches, lighting up a large living room. The fireplace with the flatscreen television mounted above immediately catches my attention. But as my eyes travel around the space and I take in all the architectural details like the crown moulding, built-in shelves, and window encasements, I realize every little detail works together to make this an elegant and comfortable home.

“Is orange your favorite color?” I ask, pointing to the area rug.

“Nope, that was my mom’s idea. I let her have free rein in decorating most of the house. Except for my office and bedroom.”

“She obviously knows what she’s doing,” I say.

“Yeah, she’s good at spending my money.” He chuckles. “Come on, I’ll show you the kitchen. I know open floor plans are popular, but one of my favorite things about this house is how there are open areas and some that aren’t.”

“What year was this house built?” I ask.

“Twenty years ago. But I had the kitchen and bathrooms renovated when we moved in five years ago.”

“With the attention paid to the moulding, I thought it might’ve been built in the nineteenth or early twentieth century,” I say.

“That was also my mom’s idea,” he explains. “So, this is the kitchen.”

My eyes bulge when I see the size of the room and the number of cabinets within.

“Wow. With a kitchen this beautiful, I hope you like to cook,” I say.

“I do my best. And my mom likes to feed us too.” He grins.

“Are you a momma’s boy?” I tease.



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“No, that would be my brother, but we’re a tight-knit bunch. I’m blessed to have amazing parents.”

“That’s so nice. I’m close to mine too. They’re currently living in Sweden. My dad’s a guest professor.”

“How long has it been since you’ve seen them in person?”

“About a year and a half.”

“Can I get you another drink or maybe something to eat?” he asks.

“Yes, please. A glass of water would be great.”

I watch him take a glass from one of the upper cabinets and fill it with water from a pitcher he removed from the fridge. He hands me the glass, and our fingers brush.

His body parts are about to be doing a lot more than brushing against me.

“Thank you,” I say. My hand trembles as I raise the glass to my lips, and I’m hoping he doesn’t notice. The cold, crisp water soothes my parched throat. “Would you like some?” I ask, extending my hand toward him. I don’t expect him to take the glass from me, so I’m surprised when he does. His gray eyes lock on mine as he raises it to his mouth and swallows down the remainder. He doesn’t look away as he places the empty glass on the granite counter, nor when he steps forward, gently invading my space.

He skims the back of his fingers down my cheek and along the curve of my chin, making my heart pound in a steady drumbeat.

“You’re absolutely stunning.” Starting at the corner of my mouth, his thumb slowly traces out the shape of my lips. “And I can’t hold off on kissing you any longer.”

He cups my jaw in his large hands, tipping my face upward as his lips descend toward mine. Time slows, and my eyelids fall closed just before the first touch of his lips. Soft as a whisper and much too brief, I long for more.

The next press of his lips lingers as he explores my mouth with tender reverence. He angles my head, taking control and deepening the kiss. His tongue sweeps in, caressing mine, igniting a spark of desire.

Flattening my palms on the hard planes of his chest, I slide them up, clutching his shoulders, and press myself into the heat and hardness of his body.

One of his arms moves down, wrapping around the small of my back, drawing me in closer. Our tongues tangle together in a frenzy of need. When we finally part, both our chests heave as we stare with wide-eyed surprise at each other.

“Goddamn,” he husks, his voice deep and gravelly.

Our kiss seems to have fried my brain. All I can manage is a brief nod of agreement.

He takes hold of my hand, leading me from the kitchen to the main hallway and up the stairs without a single word. After the kiss we just shared, I might be willing to follow him anywhere he wants.

James’s bedroom is the first room on the left side. When he taps a switch on the wall, the lamps on both nightstands turn on, lighting up his enormous bed and gray padded

headboard.

Still holding my hand, he walks to the side of the bed and turns to me. “If you change your mind at any moment, I’ll stop, no questions asked.”

I nod. “Do I need a safe word?” I’m unfamiliar with one-night stand rules, but that’s how they handle it in books.

His eyes darken with heated interest. “Do you have a safe word?”

My gaze lowers, and I shake my head. My cheeks heat with embarrassment.

Why did I bring up a safe word?

He raises my chin with his knuckle until I meet his gaze. “Don’t be embarrassed. Does the idea of a safe word intrigue you?”

I nod without hesitation. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to need one.

“Tell me with words,” he prods.

“Yes, it does.”

His lips curve, and the thought of pleasing him sends a shiver up my spine. “Are you cold?” he asks.

“No. It’s from anticipation.”

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His fingers go to the tie on the side of my blouse, undoing the bow I carefully fastened earlier. He parts the two sides, pushing the green material over my shoulders and down my arms. Shaking my hands, it free-falls to the floor behind me. As I stand still for his perusal, his eyes go to my pebbled nipples, clearly visible through my black silk tank top. He cups my breasts, sweeping his thumbs over the taut peaks. I hum my approval, and he does it again. This time I moan.

“I can’t wait to hear what you do when I bury my tongue in your pussy,” he says, making my knees weak.

Leaning into him, I say, “Me either.”

He grips the bottom of my tank top, slowly dragging it up my torso and over my head, then lets out a groan when he sees I’m naked beneath. “No bra. What a naughty girl.”

“I figured it was one less item to remove.”

“I like the way you think. Did you leave off your underwear too?” His smirk is wicked.

I shrug. “There’s only one way to find out.”

In two seconds flat, I’m lying on my back with him kneeling between my legs, hovering over me. I guess he took my challenge to heart.

He removes my high heels, tossing them one at a time over his shoulder.

“Mae, what’s your safe word?”

“Pizza.” I go with the first thing that comes to mind.

His lips quirk as if he’s fighting a smile. “If you want me to stop for any reason, you say ‘pizza.’ Got it?” He watches me intently, waiting for my confirmation.

“Yes, sir.”

He lets out a groan, and his head and shoulders disappear underneath my loose skirt. Warm hands glide up the inside of my thighs, spreading them wide, and then he rubs his face all over my satin-covered lady parts. “I was hoping you weren’t wearing panties, but these are soft. I bet your pussy’s even softer.”

Oh my God!

I hear him inhale deeply, then say, “You smell amazing.”

Am I supposed to thank him?

“I bet you taste even better,” he says right before I feel a tug and hear material ripping. And then his mouth is on me, his tongue circling my entrance before dipping inside, tasting me. “Mmm. So fucking good.”

I not only hear his words, I feel them in a place I’ve never felt a mouth before. But I still can’t see what he’s doing, and that only makes it hotter.

His tongue slicks between my lips, moving up to tease my clit. I moan loudly and raise my hips from the bed.

“You’re a greedy little thing.” He slips his arms underneath me, draping my legs over

his shoulders. “I’ll take care of you,” he says, burying his face between my thighs.

He licks, sucks, and nibbles every inch of my pussy as if he’ll never tire of it. By the time he settles in on my clit, I’m already on edge. It only takes a few whisks of his tongue over the swollen flesh to make my legs start shaking. And another two until I’m crying out with my release.

James’s mouth gentles, coaxing every wave of my orgasm from me.

When his head pops out from under my skirt, his hair is tousled, and his lips are shiny with my cum. And I’ve never seen anything so sexy.

“I hope you’re okay with staying longer, because I’m nowhere near done with you,” he says.

“If your dick is as talented as your tongue, you might have a new roommate.”

## CHAPTER 6

### TREY

I can’t help but laugh out loud.

She’s hilarious as well as being sexy as fuck.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:09 am*

My God, I can't wait to get my dick inside her.

I unzip the side of her skirt and drag it down her long, smooth legs until she's lying before me, completely naked. My eyes trace over every inch of her twice.

Goddamn, she's perfect.

My fingers feel numb as I undo the line of buttons on my shirt. Most likely from all the blood in my body currently flooding my groin. I quickly strip it off, and I'm already undoing my belt before it even hits the floor. Seconds later, I'm standing naked beside the bed.

"That was fast. I hope that doesn't foretell how the rest of this night's going to go," Mae says, giggling.

I sit on the edge of the mattress and shift over until I'm lying next to her. Propping my head on my hand, I stare down into her vivid blue eyes. "You're a cheeky little thing. Be careful, or you just might get your ass spanked." I watch her reaction in case my threat scares her. But, once again, she surprises me by smiling.

She drags her bottom lip between her teeth before confessing, "I might not hate that."

Oh Jesus.

My dick aches from the pressure building. I've reached a super-boner level, and if I don't get inside her soon, I'll lose my mind.

I reach a hand over, pulling her hip as I roll to my back and take her with me. She ends up lying on top of me, staring down with wide eyes.

“You move me around like I’m light as a feather.”

I laugh. “You are.” Wrapping one arm around her waist, I thrust my other hand into her hair, cupping the back of her head and applying pressure. “Be a good girl and kiss me.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispers with a wicked smile right before our lips connect.

There’s no gentleness. This time, we’re two strangers with undeniable chemistry who are ravenous for one another.

Our mouths go to war, our tongues dueling, while my hand glides down from her waist to clutch an ass cheek. I knead the roundness with my fingertips, then caress my palm over the smooth, warm skin. My other hand lowers to squeeze her other ass cheek. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt anything as soft before.

The more of her body I explore, the more I’m convinced she’s flawless.

She rocks her hips, rubbing against my hard-on. She’s so wet, I slide back and forth between her warm lips, and it’s all I can do to keep from angling my hips and sinking inside her.

I push her to her back once more and tear my lips free. “Condom,” I say, kneeling as I frantically grab one from the nightstand drawer.

Mae comes up behind me, wrapping her arms around my chest and pressing her tits into my back. Ripping it open, I focus on rolling it down my length while she trails kisses along my neck, distracting me.



I feel like I'm fifteen years old again and putting a condom on for the first time.

Rising from the mattress, I turn around. Her eyes lower to my dick, and her lips part, letting me know she likes what she sees.

I pick her up, tossing her to the middle of the bed. She giggles as I crawl between her spread legs, but the second the head of my dick nudges her entrance, she goes silent. Except for the shaky inhale she drags in.

Gripping my cock, I rub the tip between her slick, pink lips. "Don't forget your safe word," I say.

Mae looks straight into my eyes. "Forget about my safe word. Just fuck me." She clutches my shoulders, dragging me down against her gentle curves. I guide myself to the promised land, pushing slowly inside her.

It's a tight fit at first. I have to take my time as she gets acclimated to my size. She wiggles her hips underneath me and spreads her legs, taking me in deeper.

"Yes." She groans her approval in my ear. "Take me, please," she begs, snapping the fragile threads of resistance.

Drawing my hips back, I thrust forward until I'm buried to the hilt. "Christ," I groan. I've just gotten inside of her, but the way her tight, wet channel is squeezing my cock almost drives me to the brink.

I pause to drag in a deep breath. Her pleasure is important to me. I want this to be the best sex of her life—a night she'll never forget. I can't be some two-pump chump who doesn't know what he's doing. I need to show her the benefits of being with an older man. God knows she'll be the star of all my fantasies from now on, and I'd like to be in a few of hers as well.

Shifting forward, I lift her hips and prop them up with a pillow before I start to move. With her pelvis raised, every stroke of my cock makes contact with her G-spot. I keep the tempo slow but steady to start.

“Yes, harder,” she says, wrapping her long legs around my hips.

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Gripping onto her shoulders, I put more power behind my thrusts, pulling her down as my dick drives into her.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chants. Her fingernails dig into the skin on my upper back, and her bare heels press into my ass with every thrust, urging me on. Being inside her feels amazing. I’ve never felt anything like it.

“Yes, yes.” Mae feels it too.

No matter how good her pussy is, there is no way I’m finishing before she does. But staring down at her jiggling tits and listening to our flesh slapping with every thrust of my hips challenges my control.

Beads of sweat form on my brow as I try not to burst. I pick up the pace, thrusting my hips faster and harder. I can’t last much longer.

“Oh... God.” Mae gasps, trembling beneath me. Her orgasm hits, and tremors pass through her torso. Her pussy clenches my cock with each wave until I can’t hold back any longer.

My orgasm arrives like a freight train. My hold on her shoulders instantly tightens, fingertips gripping her delicate skin.

Back bowing, a long groan falls from my lips as every muscle in my body tenses. And when they finally relax, I gently pull out of Mae and fall forward. My arms catch my weight, preventing me from crushing her, and I gently press a soft kiss to her lips.

“Damn, that was amazing.”

“If you do say so yourself,” she teases.

“You enjoyed it just as much as I did,” I say.

She smiles. “I did. Operation one-night stand has been a success.”

“I’m glad.” I roll over and sit on the edge of the bed with my back to her. I grab some tissues from the box on my nightstand, remove the condom, and wrap it up.

Rising, I head toward the bathroom. “I’ll be right back,” I say, closing myself inside. I dispose of the tissues in the trash can and wash my hands. Glancing in the mirror, I find my reflection smiling back at me.

Not bad, old man.

I wipe my hands on the towel and open the door. My brow furrows when I see Mae getting dressed.

“You don’t have to leave so soon,” I say.

I was thinking we should take advantage of a second round.

She steps into her skirt, dragging the black material up her sexy-as-sin legs. “That’s okay. I have work in the morning.”

Grabbing my boxer briefs from the floor, I draw them on. I pluck a pair of sweats and a clean t-shirt from a drawer and get dressed.

When I glance at Mae, she’s tying the bow on the front of her blouse. She quickly

shoves her torn underwear into her pocket, like she doesn't want me to notice, but I do and I'm not happy about it. I thought I'd get a keepsake to remember her by. She slips her feet into her heels and smiles at me. "I'm all set."

I nod. "I'll walk you out."

She follows me into the hallway and down the stairs. "Do you want a drink or anything before you go?"

"No, thank you," she replies, and we continue to the front door. She takes her keys and phone from the entryway table. "I'm glad we matched on Finder."

My lips curve in reply. "Me too. This has been a great night."

"It has. Thank you for making me so comfortable with a new situation."

"Next time you match with someone, it'll be easier for you." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I want to claw them back in. I don't want to think about her sharing what we just did with some other guy.

"I guess I'll find out at some point," she says, making me regret my careless reply even more.

"Let me walk you to your car," I say.

"There's no need."

“I want to.”

“You don’t have shoes on,” she points out.

I shrug. “It’s not raining. Come on.” I catch hold of her hand and don’t let go until we reach her car. Raising my hands, I frame her face. “I’m kissing you goodbye,” I warn, then her soft, warm lips are parting underneath mine. Sweeping inside, my tongue connects with hers, and I have to remind myself this is it for us. I need to remember this final moment. How sweet she tastes and how her supple body is curved against me.

When her hand presses against my chest, I draw back. I clear my throat and say, “Drive safe.” I slowly open her door.

She lowers into the driver’s seat and smiles up at me. “I will. It’s been nice getting to know you, James.”

“You as well, Mae. Take care.”

“You too.”

I close her door and move off to the side, watching as she starts her car and backs out of my driveway. She gives a quick toot of her horn as she drives off. My eyes stay on her vehicle until it disappears from sight.

As I walk back toward my house, I can’t help but wish she had stayed longer. Then again, with a golden goddess like Mae, I’m not sure I’d be satisfied no matter how

much time we had.

## CHAPTER 7

### MAEVE

My drive home passes in a blur, as if my car is on autopilot. I'm worried that my whirling thoughts were such a distraction, but I'm thankful I made the twenty-minute drive safely.

I let myself in the front door and lock up as quietly as possible. It's almost midnight, and I don't want to wake Niall or Lucy.

Removing my heels, I carry them to my bedroom and put them on the closet floor. I turn the lamp beside my bed on and set my phone and keys down on my nightstand. I grab a t-shirt and pajama bottoms from my dresser and change into them. I bury my torn underwear in the trash, my cheeks flushing as I remember what happened to them. I shove my discarded clothing into the hamper that, as always, is filling up quicker than I'd like. If only my bank account had the same problem.

Moving down the hall to the bathroom, I run through my nightly routine as quickly and noiselessly as possible.

After giving my damp face one final swipe with a towel, I return to my room and shut myself inside.

I slip underneath my dark-purple comforter and then turn off the lamp.

Lying on my back in the dark makes it easier to call up James's face. Sweet Jesus, he's one handsome man. The threads of silver peppered through his brown hair and the stubble on his chin only add to his appeal.

For the first time in my life I understand why a man with “daddy vibes” is so hot. When he told me to be careful because I might get my ass spanked, it turned me on more than I was willing to admit. I’m a little sad I didn’t get to experience his palm meeting my flesh. I also didn’t get much of a chance to explore his body. My hands never even made contact with his dick.

Talk about a travesty!

There didn’t seem to be a time when he wasn’t focused on me, and now I’ve missed my opportunity.

Why God? Why?

Oh well. I can’t go back in time and grab his dick. But at least I’ll have the memories from tonight to help me through the lonely nights.

\* \* \*

My cell phone vibrates on my desk at work, pulling my attention away from the email I’m currently responding to. Glancing at the screen, I see a message. I finish typing my reply before opening the text.

Sheryl: I’m home today. Try not to miss me.

Are you playing hooky, or are you really sick?

I’m sick as a dog. I think it’s the flu.

What can I do to help?

Send a handsome doctor with the good drugs.



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Her reply makes me laugh out loud.

How about some chicken soup? I can have some delivered.

I guess that'll do.

I'm gonna order you some stuff now. I'm assuming you'll be out for the next couple of days too.

Yes. This isn't going away anytime soon.

You poor thing. I'll check in on you later.

When I'm better, I want details of your date.

Sounds good.

I pull up one of the local grocery store websites and add everything I can think of that Sheryl might need over the next few days.

And I make sure to throw in some of the deli section's homemade chicken soup and oyster crackers to the order.

When I check out, I can't help but grimace at the total dollar amount. I'm not paying rent right now, so I can afford to help a friend. But at the pathetic rate I save money, I'll be living with Niall for longer than I'd like. At least I have a roof over my head and a safe, comfortable place to sleep every night.

My cell phone vibrates, and I assume it's Sheryl again.

Lucy: Want to get together for lunch?

Yes! Where and what time?

I'll meet you at the sub shop near your work at noon. If you get there before me, I want pizza.

A little zing of satisfaction runs through me as I'm reminded of the safe word I chose.

Perfect. See you then.

I smile as I send my reply.

What a nice surprise! With Sheryl out sick, I had planned to eat at my desk, but now I have something to look forward to, which hopefully will help the morning pass quickly.

\* \* \*

I'm already seated at a table for lunch when Lucy enters the sub shop. She smiles when she sees me, and walks right over.

"Hey, bestie," I say. It's kind of a joke about how quickly we clicked when we met.

But she really is the closest thing I have to a best friend in South Carolina.

"Hey, Maeve. How's your day going?"

"Better now. I'm so glad you texted me. I love getting out of the office for lunch."

“I’m working from home today, and I needed a break too.”

Lucy hosts a local show about Bigfoot, and she’s been gaining more attention lately, which is increasing her viewership. She’s hoping for national syndication.

“I ordered a pizza for us, and it should be ready soon,” I tell her.

“Thank you. I’m so hungry. I’ve been staying at your brother’s so much that I haven’t done any of my own grocery shopping. I basically had a handful of crackers with my coffee this morning.”

“I didn’t eat this morning. I was running late. Well, not late, but late for me,” I say, laughing.

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She laughs too. “If you’re ever late for anything, I’ll know the world is ending.”

“I don’t know why I’m so prone to punctuality. My brothers aren’t.”

“It’s not a negative, Maeve.”

“Yeah, I know. It makes me seem uptight, though. Like some goody-goody who doesn’t want to get in trouble. Or like I’m sucking up to my boss.”

“I think you’re wasting energy thinking about this. Let’s talk about your hot date instead.” Lucy raises her eyebrows and cocks her head. “C’mon, now, no holding back. Get talking.”

“Who said anything about it being hot?”

“Oh, please. Don’t waste my time denying it. You had sex and an orgasm.”

Propping my elbows on the table, I lean forward. “Actually, I had more than one, but how can you tell?”

“You seem extra cheerful, and who isn’t happy after great sex and orgasms?”

“That’s so true. I feel like the sun’s shining a little brighter today.”

Lucy laughs. “It’s amazing what consistent sex has done to improve my mood. I haven’t yelled at anyone on my crew in months.”

“Whenever we have discussions about sex, I really wish you weren’t in love with my brother.”

She snickers. “So tell me what happened on your date.”

“We met on the rooftop deck at BLITZED, and he was even better looking than his profile pic. He was personable and kind. He bought my drink, and we had good conversation. It didn’t feel awkward at all.” I pause for effect. “Then we went to his house.”

“Where does he live?” she interrupts me.

“Mount Pleasant. And yes, his home is beautiful, and he shares it with his thirteen-year-old daughter.”

“She lives with him all the time?”

I shake my head. “No, it sounds like she’s with her mom most of the time and with him less.”

“So, the sex was good?”

“No, it was amazing. James is older and knows what he’s doing.”

“How much older?”

“He’s forty-two.”

Her brown eyes open wider. “Hello, daddy.”

I laugh. “I feel like referring to him that way should disgust me, but it doesn’t.”

“It’s not about him being your daddy as in a father figure. It’s about him being older and able to take care of you in all the most important ways,” she points out.

“Yes. That’s it exactly.”

“When are you getting together again?”

I roll my lips inward and prepare myself for Lucy’s inevitable disappointment.

“We’re not.”

She gasps loudly. “Why not?”

I shrug. “It was just a hookup.”

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“Yeah, but if you had chemistry, why not continue?”

“I don’t know. Neither of us mentioned anything about making plans again.”

She rolls her eyes up and shakes her head. “Here’s some unsolicited advice... When you find someone you gel with sexually, take advantage of the opportunity.”

“Okay.”

“Maeve.” My name is announced.

I jump from my chair. “Our order’s ready.”

Lucy also rises. “Let me help you.”

I grab the tray with the pizza and paper plates while she collects our drinks and napkins.

We place everything on the table, and Lucy adds a slice to a plate in front of me.

“Thank you,” I say, already picking it up for a bite.

“You’re welcome.” She takes one for herself, biting off the pointed end and humming as she chews. “This beats crackers, for sure.”

“Yeah, I love this place. They’ve got great prices too,” I say.

“That reminds me,” Lucy says, reaching into her front pocket. She slaps a twenty-dollar bill down on the table. “That’s for you.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I don’t want that.”

“Too bad. I want you to take it, and you’re going to.” She sticks her tongue out at me, and I laugh.

“Thank you.” I tuck the money into my purse.

“I remember what it was like being your age. I was always broke.”

I nod. “That sounds about right.”

“I don’t miss that part of being young. But I miss my perky boobs.” She glances down at her chest and shrugs. “Oh well, your brother doesn’t seem to mind.”

My nose wrinkles. “Ugh. I’m trying to eat here.”

She laughs. “I’m sorry.”

I arch an eyebrow in her direction. “I doubt that.”

We fall into silence as we work on devouring the small pizza.

When I’ve had enough, I brush the crumbs from my hands and take a sip of water.

Lucy blots her lips with a napkin and looks at me like she wants to say something.

“What? Do I have sauce on my chin or something?” I ask.



“No. I was thinking you should message James and make plans to get together again.”

“Nah, if he wants to see me, he’ll reach out. I’m not going to be the one to make contact again.”

“Why not? This isn’t the eighteen hundreds. There’s no shame in going after a guy you want.”

“I know, but I’m still leaving the ball in his court.” I can’t explain to Lucy or myself why I feel so strongly about it; I just do.

\* \* \*

I add another pillow to the stack behind me and lie back on my bed to watch an episode of a home improvement show. I like shows like this because I can watch any episode at any time. There's no story to follow along with, and even though I don't have my own place, I'd like some decorating ideas for when I do.

For the entire day and night, James has been intruding on my thoughts whenever my mind isn't otherwise occupied.

After lunch with Lucy, where she planted the seeds of hope, it's been even worse. I was prepared to never see him again, and now I'm wondering if she was right. He and I are compatible sexually. Why go to the trouble of sleeping with other guys if he can scratch my itch?

I give up on the show I'm watching after ten minutes. It's not holding my interest, and I'm still thinking about James. Grabbing my phone from the nightstand, I tap the Finder icon on the screen. My heart leaps to my throat when I see a message, and my fingers feel uncoordinated as I open it.

James: Mae, I know we didn't make plans, but I'd like to see you again. How about you meet me at my place tomorrow night at eight?

Oh my God! I shoot straight up in my bed.

He wants to see me again.

I wave my arms and kick my heels into the mattress as I do a celebratory dance. I start to type out a reply and then I pause for a moment. I need to slow down, think about what I want to say, and not react like a flattered schoolgirl—even if I feel like one.

After a few minutes of sifting through my thoughts, which are spinning like a tornado, I come up with what I want to say.

Me: Hi, James. Tomorrow night works for me. I'll see you then.

I send it through before I can change my mind, and place a hand over my racing heart.

Flopping back on the pile of pillows, I stare up at the ceiling with a goofy smile arcing my lips. More orgasms, and I'm going to get another chance to get my hands on James's hot body. This time, I'm going to make sure I don't miss out on the opportunity.

## CHAPTER 8

### TREY

I'm sitting on the front porch steps when Mae pulls into my driveway. Rising to my feet, I descend the stairs and hurry over to open her door.

"Well, this is good service." She smiles, stepping onto the pavement. She moves out of the way, and I close the door.

I smile back at her. "Hey, I'm a Southern gentleman at heart."

She nods her approval. "I like that about you."

Catching hold of her hand, I lead her up the stairs and around the side of the porch. “I made mojitos and was thinking since it’s not as humid, we could sit out here for a bit.”

“That sounds great.”

“Sit down.” I gesture to the wicker loveseat.

She places her keys down on the teak coffee table and lowers onto one of the thick cushions. Taking the seat next to her, I hand her a drink.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I hope it tastes good. This is my first time making mojitos, and I’ve never tried one before.”

“Ooh, a mojito virgin.” Her eyes twinkle over the rim of her glass. “Take a sip and pop that cherry.”

Chuckling, I grab the remaining mojito and lift it to my lips, trying it out. It’s sweet and fizzy against my tongue, and when I swallow it down, I notice the minty lime taste.

“What do you think?” Mae asks.

“It’s a bit too sweet, but it’s kind of refreshing.” I take a longer sip and lick my lips. “It might be growing on me.”

Her mouth turns upward on one side. “That’s how every alcoholic beverage I’ve ever tried has been. They’re an acquired taste, but I prefer mixed drinks.”

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“I’d rather smoke some weed than drink, but I’m a dad now and have to set a good example.”

“I’ve never tried it,” she says, and I know my surprise is evident. “What? I wasn’t much of a party person in college.”

“What about high school?” I ask.

“You were smoking pot in high school?” It’s her turn to be shocked.

“Yeah.”

“How did you have access to it?”

“It wasn’t hard to find. I have an older brother.”

“So do I, and he wasn’t offering me weed.”

“If I had a sister, I wouldn’t have either.”

She clicks her tongue against her teeth. “That’s sexist.”

“I get how it seems that way, but it’s really not. Women are the fairer and kinder sex. If I had a little sister, I’d want better for her, and I’d protect her.”

“Aww, that’s sweet.” She sips her drink, and I notice the wine-colored polish on her fingernails.

Two nights ago, those same nails left crescent-shaped divots in my shoulders.

My dick twitching with the memory, I take a deep pull of the mojito. I'm trying not to rush her right inside and up to my bedroom, but I haven't stopped wanting her since the moment she left my house the first time.

I didn't plan for our night together to turn into anything more, but my hunger for her isn't waning. In fact, it's only growing stronger. I've jerked off multiple times, and it's not helping.

"What made you message me again?" she asks.

Is she a freaking mind reader?

I decide to be honest about my change of heart. "We had such great chemistry, and it seemed a shame to take advantage of that only once."

She nods. "I'm glad you messaged. I wasn't ready to swipe on anyone else on Finder."

Fuck that. I don't want to think about her with another man. Especially when there's no reason for the two of us not to do this.

"To be honest, I wasn't either."

"So here we are," she says, raising her glass.

"Here we are." I tap mine against hers before we simultaneously knock back the rest of our drinks. "Can I get you a refill or something else?" I ask, setting my empty glass down.

Pressing her front teeth into her lower lip, she gnaws on the dark-pink flesh, as if she's unsure what to say.

“What do you want?” I press for her to answer.

She places her glass on the coffee table, turns toward me, and mischievously lowers her eyebrows. “I’ll give you a clue. It’s definitely not another drink.”

I wrap a hand around the back of Mae’s head and pull our mouths together again.

She casually crawls into my lap, straddling me as our greedy tongues reunite.

I thread my fingers through her long hair. It’s soft as silk as it slides over my skin.

Cradling my head in her hands, she gently massages along my scalp, driving me mad.

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Holding Mae under her ass, I push to my feet. She immediately wraps her legs around my waist as I carry her inside the house and straight up the stairs to my bedroom.

“You’re so strong and manly,” she coos in my ear, pressing kisses over my neck.

Dipping forward, I place her on the bed and kick off my shoes. Tugging her flats off, I notice her toenails are painted the same color as her fingernails, which I find incredibly sexy.

Placing a knee on the mattress, I crawl after Mae as she scoots backward to the pillows. She parts her legs as I move between them. Reaching under her shirt, I hook my fingers in the waistband of her leggings

Inch by inch, I peel them down her legs and toss them aside. Staring down at the long lengths of bare skin makes me hungry for the sweetness I know lies between them.

Pressing my hands to each of her thighs, I skim my palms under her oversized shirt that hangs almost to mid-thigh, and come to the realization she’s not wearing underwear.

Goddamn.

My fingers curl around her hips, clutching her curves as I look down and meet her unflinching blue gaze. “You naughty little thing, going commando. Is that for me?”

“Yes, sir.”



Blood surges to my cock. Gripping the hem of her shirt, I raise it. Mae first lifts her hips and then her back to help me. Once the garment is over her head, she's naked from head to toe.

"Surprise," she says, wearing a mischievous smile.

Moving backward, I say, "I shouldn't be surprised you weren't wearing a bra, but you got me." When I reach the end of the mattress, I grip her ankles and give a sudden yank. Rustling the sheets, she slides down the bed to me. I slip to the floor on my knees and spread her thighs wider.

"I've been thinking about this pussy since you left the other night. Thinking about how pink and pretty it is. How sweet it tastes. How soft your lips felt against my tongue. Thinking about feeling it again." I drag my tongue from her entrance straight up to circle her clit.

"James." She wiggles her hips. "More."

I hook two fingers inside her, rubbing them against the sweet spot while my tongue feathers over the sensitive bundle of nerves.

Mae's hips rock, and her thighs tighten around my head while I continue rubbing that little spot on her inner wall that's going to make her go off like fireworks.

My lips close around her clit, drawing it into my mouth. I alternate between suction and repeated flicking with my tongue.

"Yes." Her thighs squeeze my cheeks as her inner walls start to quiver around my fingers.

I stay on task, with her hips bucking and her legs shaking, until her release soaks my

hand. Sliding my fingers from her, I gently lick all traces of her release away before raising my head. I swipe my forearm over my mouth.

“You taste so fucking good. I could do this all night.”

“Did you make me squirt?” she asks in a breathless whisper.

I glance at the significant wet spot on my comforter. “Yes, I did.”

She sits up. “But how?”

I laugh. “I can explain it, or I can show you.”

Shifting positions, she kneels beside me. “That can wait. I’d rather make you squirt.”

Before I can laugh at her reply, her hands are undoing my belt buckle and pants.

My amusement disappears in a flash as the pressing need to feel her hands on me takes over. Chewing on her tempting bottom lip, Mae painstakingly unbuttons my shirt while my impatience makes me want to tear it open.

Her hands slide under the material on each side, quickly pushing it up over my shoulders and down my arms. She presses on my chest, urging me to lie down. I fall back and lean on my elbows. There’s no way I’m taking my eyes off her for even a second.

Her fingertips trail from my chest to my stomach and back to my chest again. When they make the descent the second time, goose bumps break out on my skin. When she clutches each side of my pants and boxer briefs, I raise my hips to help. She drops the clothing to the floor before she tugs my socks from my feet. Then her eyes trace over every inch of my body until my desire to feel her hands on me has me ready to beg.

And that's not me.

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I like to be in control, but Mae disarms me in a way no one ever has.

Kneeling between my legs, she places a palm on each quadricep and digs her fingertips in, massaging. “So strong. Your muscles are so solid under your skin.” She continues working her way up my legs. She draws a line over my hip bones, then leans over, pressing a soft kiss on the skin beneath one.

When she’s finished, she moves over to the other side. I suck in a quick breath as her hair drags over my dick. “This right here is sexy,” she says, caressing the V-shape of my lower stomach. “They call this the Adonis Belt. I’m impressed you have one.”

“You mean at my advanced age?” I ask.

She laughs, trailing her fingers lower. “No. I meant at any age. I’ve never seen one this up close and personal. But now that I have...” She trails off. Leaning forward, her naked tits cradle my cock as she licks each side of the Adonis Belt.

Jesus. So close and yet so far.

That’s it. She’s trying to kill me. Death by anticipation.

Every time I think she’s going to finally put her hands or mouth on me, she doesn’t.

She might be a little mean-spirited.

She straightens up and notices me watching.

“Touch me, Mae.”

Desire kindling in her blue eyes, her gaze lowers and centers on the burgeoning appendage between my legs. Bracing herself with one hand on my hip, she wraps the other around me, squeezing me tightly in her fist. A moan escapes my lips. Having her touching me feels better than I imagined.

She slowly strokes me from base to tip and down again. Her eyes dart to mine as if she’s looking for my approval.

So, I praise her efforts. “Good girl.”

Her lips curve as her focus returns to my cock. Her grip tightens, and her strokes become more confident. My head tips back as I give myself up to the pleasure. Her hands feel fucking amazing.

Wet heat engulfs the tip of my cock, and my head snaps up so I can watch Mae’s swirling tongue. Her lips wrap around me and then she slides downward at an excruciatingly slow pace.

I suck in a ragged breath and then exhale with a guttural groan. She bobs, each time taking me deeper until I’m hitting the back of her throat. She swallows, contracting her muscles around me, and I’m ready to burst.

“Fuck, your mouth is amazing.” I grip her head, burying my fingers in her hair.

She hums her approval, and I feel the vibrations on my cock. She cups my balls with her hand and moves up and down my length at a faster pace. If I let this continue much longer, I’m going to shoot my orgasm right down her throat.

“You’re gonna make me come,” I warn.

Her eyes lock on mine. “Yes, please,” she says, with my dick still in her mouth.

Fuck me.

Without looking away, she goes right back to aggressively bobbing up and down again and again. After that, my control completely slips away. This is the best head I’ve ever had in my life, and I can’t hold back another second.

My orgasm slams into me hard and fast, rocking me like an earthquake.

## CHAPTER 9

### MAEVE

James falls to his back, his arms flopping to each side of his still frame. I crawl up to lie on my side and prod his chest. “Are you alive?”

He grunts. “Barely. I think you may have just sucked me to paralysis.”

I tap my fingers against his chest. “What can I say? I forgot you’re an old man.”

He opens one eye, looking at me. “I’ll prove how young I am. I just might need to rest first.” His lips curve into a smile, and I laugh.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:09 am*

He curls his arm around my shoulders, drawing me closer. Resting my cheek on his chest, I slide my hand onto his flat stomach.

Being held by him is nice—actually, it's more than nice. We fit together just right. This may only be the second time we've hooked up, but it feels like I belong in his arms. But that's crazy, and I shouldn't be having these thoughts.

Whatever this is, it needs to stay casual.

For all I know, this might be the only time we lie together like this. I can't get attached to someone who's not looking for a relationship. Then again, neither am I. Or so I thought.

Maybe I'm just getting a little carried away and romanticizing what amounts to powerful chemistry and some earth-shattering orgasms.

His fingertips skim along the curve of my waist while the steady beat of his heart drums beneath my ear. The combination of the two relaxes me, and my eyelids fall closed while I savor everything about this moment.

\* \* \*

Something hot and wet tugs at one of my nipples, dragging me from my slumber. A large hand cups my other breast, fingers pinching and rolling the taut peak.

My lashes fluttering, I struggle to open my eyes.

James releases my nipple from his mouth with a pop and smiles devilishly down at me. “Time to wake up, Sunshine.”

“What time is it?”

“One in the morning.”

I gasp and try to sit up, but he’s lying over me. “I need to go.”

He chuckles. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“James, I’m serious. I need to get home to bed.”

“You’re in bed.”

I stare stonily at him. “You know what I mean.”

“You’re not leaving until I fuck you... and you come at least once more. What do you say to that?”

I might be able to stay a little longer.

“Yes, sir.”

He groans, burying his face against my neck.

“I’ve been watching you for the past ten minutes and imagining what I’m going to do to you. I need to get inside you.” His lips and tongue feather over my skin, raising goose bumps. “I need to feel your tight cunt around my cock.”

Threading my fingers into his hair, I tug the longer strands on the top of his head and



urge him to bring his lips upward to meet mine.

His fingers plunge inside me at the same time his tongue thrusts between my parted lips. I moan into his mouth and rock my hips as his fingers move in the same coaxing motion that made me soak the comforter earlier.

He growls. “Such a good girl.”

I don’t know why his praise is so hot, but it’s fucking working. I want to be a good girl for him. I want to please him.

He leans over to grab a condom, and my hand slides down to rub my clit. He works the sheath down his shaft and then kneels between my thighs. His gaze locks on my swirling fingers before he pushes my thighs toward my chest.

He grips his length, rubbing the head back and forth between my lips.

“I’m gonna fuck you so hard you feel me for days.” His cock thrusts into me like the exclamation point after his warning.

I suck in a breath, and before I can adjust to the size of the welcome intrusion, he thrusts again. And then he doesn’t stop.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:09 am*

“Keep working your clit,” he orders. I quickly comply, working the pad of my middle finger over and around the sensitive bundle of nerves.

He grabs each of my ass cheeks while he continues pistoning his hips. His eyes zero in on the place we’re joined together. “Your pussy looks incredible taking my cock.”

My view isn’t as clear as his, but what I can see is sexy as fuck. Not to mention his corded biceps and rippling stomach muscles.

And when I glance up at his face, I’m surprised by the intensity I find in the steely depths of his gaze. And like a fly caught in a spider’s web, I can’t seem to look away.

“Are you gonna come for me like a good girl?” he husks.

“Yes... sir,” I answer, my fingers strumming my clit as an orgasm fires to life in my center.

I’m so close.

He moves his hands up, clutching behind my knees as his thrusts shift to a rapid-fire pace.

A pulsating throb of ecstasy starts between my legs, increasingly intensifying until pleasure engulfs me.

“James,” I call out as tremors tear through me.

His rhythm changes as his climax creeps up, with the final few pumps being erratic. His fingers digging into my skin, he holds on to me. All his muscles go rigid, and he moans my name.

He holds still for a few moments before withdrawing from me. He falls to the mattress beside me with a groan. He grabs a bunch of tissues from the nightstand and places the condom inside. “Sunshine, you’re so fucking sexy,” he says.

Turning onto my side, I prop my head on my fist. “Sunshine?” I raise an eyebrow.

He smirks. “Your hair’s so golden and shiny; you remind me of sunshine.”

“Aww, that’s sweet. I kind of like it.”

But not as much as I like when he calls me good girl.

“Aren’t you glad I made you stay later than you wanted?” he asks.

My lips quirk. “Maybe,” I tease. “But I do need to head home.”

He takes hold of my free hand, threading our fingers together. “You can’t go until you promise we can do this again.”

Should we, though?

I want to agree, but I don’t want to grow too attached to him. Or to the amazing sex we’re having. He’ll ruin me for other men.

Hell, he probably already has.

“Mae?” He drags me from my introspection.

“Sorry. I was thinking.”

“What’s there to think about? Don’t you want to do more of this?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“But?” he prods.

“This was only supposed to be a onetime hookup, but now it’s been a two-time hookup, and you want to add a third time.”

“And maybe even a fourth or fifth.” He exaggerates a gasp and covers his mouth, playfully mocking my concern.

I roll my eyes. “I’ll agree to once more and then we’ll have to reevaluate. That’s the best I can offer.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:09 am*

“Okay,” he quickly agrees. “I have Gwen for part of this weekend and Monday. Why don’t we plan for Tuesday night at seven? You come over, and I’ll feed you this time, and I don’t mean my cock.”

I laugh. “That works.”

“What would you like for dinner?” he asks.

“Hmm. How about Chinese food?”

“Anything particular you want me to order?”

“Chicken lo mein, fried rice, chicken fingers, crab rangoon?—”

“I’ll get a bunch of stuff,” he cuts in.

I try to tug my hand from his, but he doesn’t release his hold. “James, I have to go.”

“I know you do. I just want to hold you before you go.” He turns to his side, drawing me into his arms. With my face buried against his chest, the sparse hairs tickle my nose.

With every breath, I inhale the masculine scent of his body wash. His hands caress up and down my spine, but when they roam lower, cupping my ass, I realize if I don’t get up from this bed right this moment, he’ll easily persuade me to stay.

Rolling away from his arms, I spring to my feet and collect my discarded clothing

from the floor.

“Dammit. You’re really leaving?”

“Yep.” I draw my leggings on. “I wouldn’t have time to go home and get ready before work. Plus, I’d be stuck in traffic and stressed out. I don’t want to start my day off negatively.”

He climbs from the bed and tugs on his boxer briefs. It’s all I can do to drag my eyes from his impressive naked torso and finish putting my clothes on.

The next time I glance at him, he’s wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants, but he’s sockless. For the first time in my life, I find a man’s feet attractive, and I don’t know what to make of it.

Maybe being with him has broken my brain because I’ve always thought men’s feet are notoriously gross.

“Why are you staring at my feet?”

Dammit, he noticed. I search my mind for an excuse but decide to be truthful.

“You have nice feet for a guy.”

He laughs a little too hard, leaving me questioning why he found what I said so amusing.

“I’m laughing because I asked Gwen what she wanted us to do last weekend, and she chose to get pedicures.”

“So you had one too?” I ask, and he nods.

Cue my ovaries exploding.

“I want to spend time with my daughter, and if that means soaking my feet and having someone clip my toenails, then so be it. And one of the advantages of getting the pedicures was that Gwen was trapped next to me for the duration. It was a great opportunity for us to talk.”

“You might be the coolest dad in the world.”

“I don’t think that’s the case. In fact, a lot of the time, it feels like I’m the opposite.”

“I admire your effort. You could’ve easily had her mom take her for a pedicure instead.”

“I’ll do just about anything if it makes Gwen happy.”

Jesus. I need to leave before I ask him to marry me.

“Come on, I’ll walk you out,” he says, gesturing for me to precede him. When we get to the bottom of the staircase, he leads me through the living room and part of the kitchen to the side door, and I realize I don’t have my keys.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:09 am*

“I think I left my keys on your porch.”

“No worries; this is a quiet neighborhood.” He pushes his feet into a pair of slides lined up neatly beside the door. Next to them is a smaller, sparkly pink pair.

I find my keys on the teak coffee table where I left them.

“See, no worries,” he says, smiling.

My hand ends up in his as we walk down the stairs and over to my car. I spin around, smiling up at him. “I had a nice night.”

His lips part, showing off his straight teeth. “So did I.” His fingers curve around my chin as he leans in, pressing his lips to mine for a soft kiss. As brief as it may be, I’m currently questioning my reasons for leaving.

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to stay?” he asks, his lips curving mischievously.

My body screams to stay, and my brain tells me to leave. I’ve always tried to do the right thing, and in this case, it’s no different.

“As tempting as your offer is, I need to get home.”

“All right.” He opens the door for me, and I lower inside. “Before you go, I’d like your phone number.”

Plucking my phone from the cup holder, I hand it over to him. “Call yourself.”



“You don’t have a code on your phone?” he asks.

I shake my head. “There’s nothing in there that I’d care if anyone saw.”

He taps the screen for a bit before handing it back to me. “I’d rather text you than have to communicate on Finder.”

“Sounds good.”

“Drive safe, Mae.”

“I will.”

He closes my door and backs away as I start my car. I give a quick wave before backing from his driveway. And just like the first night, I beep the horn as I drive off. But this time I know we’ll see each other again. And damned if I’m not already looking forward to it.

## CHAPTER 10

### TREY

“What do you think, Gwennie? Is it a masterpiece?” I step back from the easel and study the brown and green blob that’s supposed to be a palm tree.

Her gaze leaps from the canvas she’s painting to mine. “I think you’ll be a better team owner than an artist,” she answers diplomatically.

I laugh. “I hope you’re right. My art leaves a lot to be desired. It looks like you’ve got all the talent in the family.” I point at her canvas, where the palm tree and beach scene look like they were painted by a professional artist.

“You can’t be good at everything, Dad.”

“You’re right. I’m having fun with my favorite girl, and that’s all that matters.”

“It’s good you’re here with me and not on a date.”

“Why are you saying that?”

“Because your painting wouldn’t impress them.”

“Ouch,” I say, clutching my chest.

“Sorry. But I don’t want you to embarrass yourself.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:09 am*

Would Mae care about my lack of artistic ability? I doubt it. Thinking about her makes me miss her company. I bet we'd have fun if I took her on a date.

"Okay, I'm finished," Gwen says.

We clean up and carefully carry our canvases to the car, laying them on the back seat. However, mine is better suited for the trash.

"Thanks for bringing me here. This was awesome."

"You're welcome. What do you say we grab milkshakes before I take you home?"

"Yes, please." She bounces on her toes. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, I steer her back onto the sidewalk toward our favorite ice cream shop.

When we enter, the bell jingles, and we step right up to the counter to order. And we always get the same thing.

"Can we please get a vanilla cookie milkshake and a chocolate cookie milkshake?"

When the server walks off, I turn to Gwen. "Should we get your mom and Dean shakes?"

Her eyes light up. "Yes, that's a great idea. Maybe it'll help Mom be in a better mood."

"I'm sure seeing you will be enough to do that."

She rolls her eyes. “Pfft.”

When the server brings our cups over, I add the additional shakes to the order. Gwen and I grab extra napkins and slowly sip our ice-cold treats while we wait.

“Did you finish your homework?” I ask.

“Mhmm. Don’t worry, Mom can’t yell at you.”

“She doesn’t yell.”

Gwen’s expression is skeptical. “If you say so.”

The server brings over a tray with their shakes, and I hand over the cash.

The ride to Claire and Dean’s is quick. Gwen adds her cup to the tray for me to carry while she handles removing her painting from the back seat. I close the door for her, and we walk up the driveway.

Dean opens the door for us and smiles at Gwen. “Hey, stranger. How was your weekend?”

“It was good.”

Claire appears. “Hi, honey.”

“Hi, Mom.” Gwen hands me her painting so she can properly hug her.

“Dad bought us all milkshakes.”

Claire’s gaze swings to me. “Thank you, Trey.”

“No thanks needed.” I hand the tray to her. “Gwen, I’m gonna head home.”

She hurries over, hugging me. I press a kiss to the top of her head. “Be good. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Bye, Dad.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” she says, and my chest fills up to overflowing. Knowing my daughter loves me trumps everything else in my life.

\* \* \*

“Are you feeling anxious about your new job yet?” Isaac asks.

“What good would that do me? I plan on leaning on my dad through the transition process. I know he won’t leave me hanging.”

He points his half-full bottle at me. “Good point. He wants you to succeed.”

“Absolutely. Plus, I’ve already got the blueprint for winning team. We have the best coaches, the best trainers, the best facility. We have everything we could need and most of that will stay as is for the next season. Aside from some contract negotiations.” Raising my bottle, I swallow down some of the ice-cold beer.

“Well, aside from the unpredictable stuff that pops up with any business,” he points out.

I set my bottle down on the bar. “Right. I’m not planning for smooth sailing all the time. But I’m hoping I have a chance to get acclimated without any major surprises.”

“How’s Gwen doing?”

“She’s great, thanks. She spent the weekend with me.”

“You know, you never told me how your Tinder date went,” he mentions.

My lips curl at the reminder of Mae. “It went great.”

“Have you seen her since?”

I nod. “We got together a second time.”

“So what’s the deal?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t feed me a line of bullshit. I can tell you like this woman by your expression, so what’s holding you back?”

“She’s only twenty-five.”

He grimaces. “Jailbait.”

“Not quite, but she’s mature for her age. And, God, is she beautiful.”

“Sounds like you’re interested in seeing her again.”

“I am. We made dinner plans for one night this week.”

“Dinner and sex? Sounds like more than a hookup.”

“It’s a meal, not a proposal, Isaac.”

“Yeah, but meals can make things murky. If you’re committed to keeping things low-key, stick with just sex. There’s no mixed signals then.”

Except for when you try to get her to sleep over after sex.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“What does she look like?”

“Long golden-blond hair, bright-blue eyes, and the most perfect ass in the world.”

“If you don’t want to date her, I will. You know blondes are my weakness,” he says.

Like I’d let him anywhere near her.



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“I’m not sure what’s going to happen yet. She’s someone I could see being in a relationship with, but I don’t want to rush into anything. Gwen comes first, and I’m about to add a new job to my plate. How much can I pile on?”

“You can always see how it goes, and if it’s too much, you can end things with her.”

“Right.”

“You know I hate it when you say that.”

“Right.” I laugh.

He punches my arm. “I gave you good advice.”

“I know you did. I’ll think about your wise words later.” I pick up my bottle. “For now, I’d like to finish this beer.”

“And then have one more?” Isaac asks.

“Maybe.”

He smiles. “That’s good. My advice improves with every beer I drink.”

I don’t want to discuss Mae anymore.

Even though I mentioned her to Isaac, I didn’t share many details about her. We may be hooking up temporarily, but I want to keep her to myself.

\* \* \*

This house feels so lonely without Gwen here. Raising the remote, I flip through a few channels and settle on the local news.

After a few minutes of barely watching, my mind wanders to Mae, and I wonder what she's doing. There's no reason why I can't simply ask her.

I have her phone number.

Grabbing my phone from my nightstand, I tap on her name and smile. I added her to my contacts as Sunshine. I type out a text and send it.

Hi, Mae. How was your weekend?

I hope she replies. If she didn't save my number, she might be wondering who the fuck is texting her this late.

It's only a couple of minutes before she answers.

It was nice. How was yours?

Gwen was here, and we stayed busy. But it passed too quickly.

The weekends have a way of doing that.

Where are you now?

What do you mean, where am I? It's well after eleven p.m. and I have to work in the morning. I'm in bed.

Her reply makes me smile even though she killed my opportunity to ask what she's wearing.

I figured as much but didn't want to assume. Plenty of twenty-somethings go out at night and still manage to make it to work the next day.

Not this one. I need sleep to function properly.

Is that my cue to stop texting you?

Maybe.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:09 am*

Way to crush my ego, Mae. She'd rather sleep than talk with me.

Does tomorrow night still work for you?

Yes. I'm looking forward to it.

Okay, she made up for her earlier remark.

So am I. See you at seven.

Yes, sir.

That little vixen.

Go to sleep like a good girl.

Yes, sir.

And now my dick's hard, and I'm wishing she were here to do something about it.

I set my phone on the nightstand and slide my hand inside my boxer briefs, fisting my cock. Closing my eyes, I call up the memory of Mae kneeling between my legs as I start stroking.

I think about how sexy her lips looked as they wrapped around the head of my cock.

How warm and soft her tongue felt swirling around every inch of me as she worked

her way down and back up my length.

Spreading around the pre-cum gathering on the tip, I increase the pace of my strokes. Recalling how she swallowed every drop of my cum, sends me over the edge. My orgasm hits, and my release shoots onto my bare stomach.

I clean up with some tissues and shut the TV off. I need to get plenty of rest. If I have my way, there won't be much sleeping tomorrow night.

\* \* \*

Mae is climbing the porch steps when I open the side door. "Hey there." I smile, letting her in.

She echoes my smile. "Hi."

I press a brief kiss to her lips. "I hope you're hungry. I ordered a lot of food."

"Yes, I'm starving. I had a light lunch." She places her keys and phone down on the small table.

I like that she's fully present when she's here and not scrolling on her phone.

Capturing her hand, I steer her toward the kitchen table, which is loaded with cardboard containers of Chinese food. "Help yourself to whatever you want. What would you like to drink?"

"Water would be great, thanks." She starts to fill her plate while I fill two glasses with ice and cold water.

"My mouth is watering at how good this looks," she says.

“Don’t wait for me to dig in,” I say, placing her glass in front of her and mine at the end seat. I lower into the black metal chair and add fried rice, then beef and broccoli to my plate. “How was your day?”

“It was pretty good. How about yours?”

“It’s been busy. Some changes are happening at my company.”

“I hope they’re good changes...”

“They will be, but it’s shaking things up right now.”

She takes a bite of lo mein with a piece of chicken finger and hums. After a few more bites, she says, “This is so good.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:09 am*

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

“That’s an understatement. So, what did you and Gwen do this weekend? Or is that too personal of a question?”

I don’t mind her asking about my personal life. I’ll tell her anything she wants to know.

“No, it’s a great question. Saturday, we went shopping for some new sneakers, and on Sunday, we had dinner at my parents’ house. Last night, we went to one of those art studios where everyone paints the same picture.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“It was. My painting sucked, but Gwen’s looked like it was professionally done,” I brag. “Oh, and we also went out for milkshakes afterward.”

“It’s wonderful that you make the most of your time with her.”

“Thank you. It’s easily the hardest job I’ve ever had. Most of the time, I feel like I’m failing at it.”

“I’m sure you’re not.”

“I wish I could be so confident.”

“So, do I get to see your painting?”

“It’s funny you ask. Gwen told me I should keep my lack of artistic ability a secret.”

“That’s kind of brutal,” she says.

“That’s kids for you. They keep it real.”

“If it’s any consolation, in my opinion, you have other skills that more than make up for any lack of artistic ability.” She winks at me, and I grin.

We settle into silence for a bit as we focus on clearing our plates. Having dinner together feels natural, like it’s a regular occurrence. I could easily get used to these moments and want more of them. She’s easy to be around, and having her beautiful face to look at certainly improves the scenery.

“What’s been happening with you since we saw each other?” I ask.

“Not much. I had a weekend filled with errands and cleaning. Exciting stuff.”

“Did you do anything fun?”

“I went over to a friend’s house for drinks.”

“A female friend?” I ask. My tone has a sharper edge to it than I meant to.

Her surprised gaze jumps from her plate to me, and she cants her head. “Why does that matter?”

I can tell her ire is worked up, so being honest is the best path to take. I tug nervously on my ear. I’m not a jealous man. I don’t covet other people’s successes or their possessions. And I never get jealous over a woman—and yet here I am, acting like an ass.



“It shouldn’t, but I hate the thought of you enjoying another man’s company.”

Her expression softens. “I was with my friend Lucy.”

I hold up a hand, stopping her from elaborating. “I shouldn’t have asked. I have no right to.” I shake my head. “I’m sorry.”

Her lips curve in a small smile. “It’s okay.”

I know I made things weird, and a subject change is needed. Of course, my mind goes blank as I search for something to say. I blurt out the first thing I think of. “How about those Coyotes?”

Mae’s head snaps up. “What?”

“I said, how about those Coyotes?”

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She stares at me with apparent confusion.

“I was trying to change the subject, and hockey was the first thing that came to mind.”

“Oooh,” she says, looking oddly relieved. “I’m not much of a sports person,” she explains.

“No worries.” At least I got her mind off my fuckup. My phone goes off in my pocket. Tugging it free, I see Gwen’s name on the screen. “Mae, excuse me, please. I need to answer this.” Pushing back my chair, I rise and walk a handful of steps away so as not to be rude. The space I placed between us will make it less likely for Mae’s presence to distract me from my conversation with Gwen.

## CHAPTER 11

### MAEVE

“Hello,” James answers, stepping away to take his call. “Hi, Gwennie. How was your day?”

How sweet. It’s his daughter.

Tuning out his conversation, I allow my thoughts to wander back to a few minutes ago when he mentioned the Coyotes. For a moment, I was confused and started to panic, wondering if he had somehow found out who my brother is, or...

Relax. Breathe.

This is a new experience, and my anxiety may be getting the better of me. I don't need to worry about James and the rest of my life intersecting.

I can't believe I'm even thinking about it right now. This was all supposed to be just a hookup, but at this point, it feels like more to me.

"I love you too, Gwennie. Goodnight." He ends the call, placing his phone on the counter.

"Sorry about that. Gwen calls me most nights when she's not here."

"That's sweet," I say. He's the ultimate DILF. But I guess in my case, it's DIF—dad I'm fucking.

He gestures at the Chinese food containers. "Would you like some more?"

"No, thank you. I had plenty."

He closes the boxes, and I help. We carry them to the fridge, and he stacks them all inside.

"Want to watch a movie?" he asks.

"Sure."

He loosely takes hold of my hand and leads me through the living room, to the hallway, and up the stairs to a room I've never seen before.

He flips a switch on the wall, turning on a few recessed lights. Shelves with sports

memorabilia and books line the wall behind the couch, and a massive television is mounted to the opposite wall.

His hand drops from mine. “Gwen calls this my dad cave.”

“Is this where you hide away?” I ask.

“Only when she has friends over, and they’re occupying the living room. Otherwise, this space doesn’t get much use.”

I drop down onto the couch, running my fingers over the dark-gray microfiber material. “It’s nice and comfy.”

He sits next to me. “One of the reasons I don’t use this room much is I tend to fall asleep when I do. There have been plenty of mornings where I’ve woken up here instead of my bed.”

“Do I need to worry about you falling asleep on me?” I tease, poking his side.

He laughs. “I have a feeling every inch of me will be wide awake if you’re here.” He plucks the remote from the large ottoman, turning on the TV. “Any requests?”

“Something funny. You can never laugh too much.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:09 am*

“You’re right. Funny it is.”

After a brief search, he settles on the movie Blockers, which is about three parents who try to foil their teenage daughters’ plans to have sex on prom night.

I lean my head on his shoulder. “I love this movie.”

He shifts his position, wrapping his arm around me. “This movie makes me nervous about the upcoming teenage years.”

“Then why are we watching it?”

“Because it’s also hilarious.”

Tipping my head back against his arm, I look up at his face. “Are you going to be like this with Gwen?”

“I hope not. I like to think I won’t lose common sense or my ability to think clearly and rationally, but... she’s my daughter.”

I snuggle into his larger frame and slip off my Chucks before putting my bare feet on the ottoman next to his.

Tonight, I’m seeing a different side of James, a more casual one. Wearing shorts and a black t-shirt, with his hair more unruly, he looks younger than the man I’ve come to know. But he’s no less attractive. I’d say he seems more approachable, but even when I met him wearing his wingtips and business wear, he was friendly and unassuming.

He plays with my hair, combing his fingers through the long strands. The motion is so soothing, my eyelids fall shut. Slinging my arm across his stomach, I burrow into his side. I want to be as close to him as possible.

\* \* \*

My eyelids slowly flutter as I fight my way out of a dreamless sleep. My backside is so warm. I wiggle against the heater behind me, wondering how it ended up in my bed. And then the heater groans.

Wait. What?

My eyelids finally snap open and stay that way. I'm surprised to realize I'm lying on James's couch and in his arms. His tall frame is what's been providing all the warmth. I don't even remember falling asleep.

His arm tightens around me. I tap on the back of his hand. "James."

"Hmm."

I tap some more. "James," I say louder.

"What's going on?" he asks in a groggy tone.

"We fell asleep on the couch."

"Oh shit." He raises his arm, checking his watch. "It's two in the morning."

"Fuck." I scamper to a seated position and rub my eyes. "I should've left hours ago."

"It's okay. You can stay and leave later this morning."

I stand. “I’ve got to go now.”

He moves to his feet, placing his hands on my shoulders. “Mae, please stay. It’s dangerous for you to drive home at this time of night.”

“I’ll be fine.”

His brows snap together. “Mae, think this through. What if you break down?”

“Are you saying my car is a shitbox?”

“No. Any vehicle can break down. You shouldn’t take a chance on your safety.”

“I’m a big girl.”

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He gently squeezes my shoulders. “Mae, please don’t go. I’ll worry about you.”

I’m struck by the imploring expression on his face, and I can’t refuse him. “Okay, I’ll stay for a few more hours.”

“Thank you.” He presses a kiss to my forehead. “Go get in my bed, and I’ll shut everything off in here.

Despite the solid hours of sleep I got in his arms, I’m still tired. I strip out of everything but my panties, and put on one of his t-shirts. It hangs so loose, the hem falls to mid-thigh. The cotton is worn soft, and knowing I’m wearing something of James’s feels nice.

Once I slip between the crisp sheets, I realize I’ve never been so comfortable in a bed. That is until James slides in behind me. His arms hook around me like bands of steel. He pulls me back against his chest as if he’s never going to let me go. And I might be okay with that. I sync my breathing with his and enjoy the way our bodies fit together. He kisses the top of my head, and I fall asleep with a content smile bowing my lips.

\* \* \*

Warm lips press to my cheek and trail down my neck. “It’s time to rise, Sunshine.”

“No,” I moan. “Don’t make me.”

He chuckles. “If you want to stay in bed I can climb back in and give you a reason to



be late.” His lips nuzzle my earlobe, tempting me, but he said the magic word. Late. I roll away and dart from the bed. “What time is it?” I ask in a panic.

He smiles. “It’s five thirty.”

I sigh with relief, feeling the tension in my shoulders lessening. “Oh, thank God. I thought it was much later.”

“You’re right on schedule, Miss Punctuality, and breakfast is waiting for you downstairs.”

“You cooked for me?” I can’t keep the surprise from my voice. No man has ever done that for me before.

“I did. It’s nothing fancy, but it’ll save you some time.” He winks. “I’ll be downstairs waiting.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there.”

He leaves the room while I dress. I use his bathroom and scare myself when I catch my reflection in the mirror. Smudged makeup and a bird’s nest for hair—not my best look. And James saw me like this.

Wetting a tissue, I wipe around my eyes the best I can. Once I work through the tangles in my hair with his brush, I look more like myself. I add some toothpaste to my finger and spread it over my teeth and tongue before swishing it out with a cup of water.

I return to James’s dad cave where I left my Chucks, and slip them on. My gaze lands on the couch where I woke cuddled in his arms, and flutters break free in my stomach. I wish I’d been able to savor the feeling more and not be so freaked out at

how late it was.

I find James in the kitchen, loading the dishwasher. He closes the door and turns, smiling at me. “You look more awake now.”

“Yeah, I am. I’m sorry you had to see me looking like such a fright.”

“Sunshine, you couldn’t look anything but beautiful.”

He thinks I’m beautiful.

More butterflies take flight in my stomach.

He moves to the stove. With his back to me, I can’t see what he’s doing. But then he spins around with two plates in his hands and delivers them to the table. “Come sit and have breakfast with me.”

We settle into the same chairs we used for last night’s dinner. On the table, there’s a cup of coffee, creamer, and packets of sugar.

“If you don’t like coffee, there’s juice in the fridge,” he tells me.

“I love it and desperately need it in the morning just to wake me up.” I take a good look at the breakfast he’s prepared and know there’s no way I’ll be able to eat all the food. “You gave me enough for three people. Are you trying to tell me something?”

Ducking his head, he rubs the back of his neck. “I wasn’t sure how much you wanted. I guess I got carried away.”

This is the first time I’ve seen him look the slightest bit unsure of himself, and I find it endearing.

I take a bite of the scrambled eggs and bacon. “Wow, this is delicious. You’re a good cook.”

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He laughs. “I’m capable of making a few edible meals, but that’s about it. Breakfast is the hardest to screw up.” He spears eggs onto his fork, then they quickly disappear between his full lips. Watching him eat makes me wish I didn’t need to go to work. I’d like to spend the better part of this morning with him.

We could take a walk after breakfast and then climb back into bed once we got home. Then maybe we spend the rest of the morning exploring each other’s bodies. Of course, we’d go back to sleep for a bit and rest up for a second round of making love.

Making love with your Finder hookup?

I need to check myself. Being with Trey makes it easy to get carried away by fanciful notions, and I need to be careful of that. For all I know, this is the last time I’ll see him.

I finish eating as much as I can before pushing my plate away. “Thank you for breakfast. I usually have a protein bar, so this was a nice change.” I sip the remainder of my coffee and wipe my lips on a napkin.

He stands, taking our plates to the sink. I carry our mugs over and toss my napkin in the trash.

“Let me walk you out,” he says.

And I panic. I don’t want a long, drawn-out goodbye in which he explains that this is the last time we’ll be together.

“No, that’s not necessary. You’ve done enough for me already. Besides, I’m going to be late if I don’t hurry.”

His brows draw together, and he shrugs. “Okay.” He walks me to the door. I pluck my keys and phone from the table and turn to him. “Thanks again. I had a great time. I’m sorry I passed out on you. I’m sure this isn’t how you envisioned your morning going.”

He skims his fingers down my cheek. “This has been a wonderful beginning to my day.”

I swallow down the emotion his words provoke, and smile. “I better go.”

He presses a soft kiss to my lips and then opens the door for me. The sunlight shines through the trees as I descend the stairs to the driveway.

James wanders around to the front of his porch as I climb into my car. I start the engine and glance at him. His hands are shoved into the pockets of his shorts, but when he notices me watching him, he raises one in farewell. Wondering if this is the last time I’ll see him, I try to capture this image of him like a snapshot in my mind.

I wave at him before reversing from the driveway. And as I pull away, I don’t allow myself to look back.

\* \* \*

The party is in full swing. We’ve got music playing and great food set out on the boardroom table that Sheryl and I pushed to one side wall. We set the chairs around the perimeter of the room and left the middle open for mingling.

I rented a helium tank so Sheryl and I could blow up “Happy Retirement” balloons,

and we hung a long sign across one wall that says CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR RETIREMENT. And on another, we hung a WE'LL MISS YOU sign.

The guest of honor is basking in the attention of all his employees. He's not only loved by me; every person here feels the same. I'm so sad that he's leaving.

I wait for a break in the crowd around him before I deliver the present I purchased for him.

"Hi, Greg."

He smiles. "Maeve, thank you for doing all this." He gestures around the room.

"What makes you think it was me?"

"I know it was. Who else would set all this up?"

"I had help."

"Regardless, I appreciate it so much."

"Here." I hand him a blue gift bag. "I got you something."

"You shouldn't have. But I'm glad you did." He grins before reaching inside the bag. He rifles around between the sheets of tissue paper and lifts out a stainless steel beer stein. He rotates it until he reads the words engraved on one side: BEST BOSS.

"I figured you might not be here drinking out of your Best Boss coffee mug, but there's no reason you can't be at home having a beer."

"Maeve, I love this. Thank you. Can I hug you?"

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“Of course.” I step into his arms, and my eyes water. Having a new boss is going to be a huge adjustment for me.

When we part, he notices I’m getting emotional and pats me on the arm. “In a few months, you’ll be thankful I’ve retired.”

I shake my head. “I doubt that very much.”

“You might even forget all about me.”

I roll my eyes. “Like that would happen. I hope your son knows he has some big shoes to fill.”

“I have the utmost confidence in Trey’s abilities to run the Coyotes organization.

There’s a difference between being a good businessman and being a good boss.

Fortunately for me, Greg was both of those. I couldn’t have had a better introduction to the world of business than I did with him. But when you start at the top, there’s only one way to go—down. I’m hoping it’s only a slight drop and not a free fall.

Sheryl and I are cleaning up when Randy comes over.

“Let me help,” he says.

I don’t want to deal with him, but we can get out of here sooner if he does.

“Can you help us move the table back to the middle of the room?”

“Sure.” He carries one end of the table while Sheryl and I take the other.

“Thanks. That was a lot easier than when we set up. We just pushed it across the room.”

“I’ll put the chairs back,” he offers, and I give him a thumbs up.

Sheryl and I remove the signs from the wall and then tie the leftover balloons to the chairs in the break room. Greg didn’t want to take them home, and we didn’t want to deflate them all.

“Sheryl, thank you for your help.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m grateful you got me away from my desk for a bit.”

“I think we’re finished cleaning up. What are you getting into this weekend?” I ask.

“A little of this and a little of that. In other words, a brunette tonight and a redhead tomorrow night.” She waggles her eyebrows.

“You’re an inspiration, girl.”

She raises her palms. “I try. What are your plans?”

“Laundry, cleaning my room, grocery shopping, and, if I’m lucky, I’ll get to the book on my Kindle I downloaded last month.”

Randy appears in the doorway. “Are you two ready?”



“Yeah, we’re all set.”

He moves back into the hallway as we leave the break room, and then the three of us get on the elevator together.

The awkward silence on the ride down has a name—Randy. He’s the reason for it.

Even Sheryl must feel the weirdness because she never goes this long without speaking.

When the doors part on the first floor, I hook my arm through hers so I won’t get stuck talking to Randy by myself. He must get the message.

“See you later. Enjoy your weekend,” he says, walking away.

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I wait until he's out of hearing range before I glance at Sheryl. "That was fun."

She laughs. "Yeah, fun as in awkward as fuck."

"Right? So it's not in my head?"

"Definitely not. He stared at you the entire time. I don't know what his problem is."

"Me either, but I hope he gets over it soon."

We walk to the parking lot together, and once I'm in my car, I dig through my purse for my phone. I'm thinking of ordering a pizza.

There's a text waiting for me from James.

My pulse speeds up as I open the message.

I hope you're enjoying your day. I really wanted to see you again this week, but work kept me busy. How about Tuesday?

My heart rate increases until I think I'm having full-blown palpitations.

Hey. I had a nice day, but I'm glad the weekend is here. I'd love to see you on Tuesday.

I'll see you at seven. Enjoy your weekend.

Sounds good. Have a great weekend with Gwen.

I place my phone in the cup holder and squeal with excitement.

He wants to see me again!

## CHAPTER 12

### TREY

Being in my new office for the first time feels strange. It feels like I've been dropped off in a foreign country where I don't know anyone. I've officially found myself in the proverbial bigger pond. Unfortunately, I'm also expected to be the biggest fish in these waters.

You'd think it would get easier by my age, but it's still uncomfortable. I'm already missing my usual routine and my familiar employees, but life is about taking risks.

Not that being handed a professional hockey team from my dad qualifies as a risk. I didn't buy the team; he did. But there is an enormous amount of pressure on me to keep the team thriving like it has been.

Over the years, my father has built a first-class operation and solidified himself as a legend among team owners. And I can't be the owner's son who inherits the team and then ruins the success of the Coyotes.

Not gonna happen.

I take a deep breath and look around the large space, checking everything out from my new perspective behind the desk. I've been here so many times over the years, but not for the last six months or so.

My mom redecorated this office for my dad since my last visit, so it's all new to me. I see her touches in the perfectly trimmed moulding panels equally spaced on the lower walls around the room, and the colorful assortment of throw pillows spread out on the couch. Everything looks elegant yet comfortable, which I'd also say is an accurate description of my mother herself.

I tilt my head back and sink into my chair. It's made of soft, supple leather that feels as if it conforms to my body; it'll make all the long hours I'll have to spend here easier.

I guess it's time to meet my assistant, Maeve.

My dad never told me anything personal about her. Just that she's been efficient and I should keep her on. I press the speakerphone button and dial her extension.

"This is Maeve."

"This is Trey. Can you come to see me, please?"

"I'll be right there."

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Sliding my chair back, I stand and move toward the wall of wooden cabinets lining the back of the room. Behind one of them, there's a small refrigerator I know my dad keeps stocked with bottles of water.

Knuckles rap on the open door as I'm reaching inside the fridge. "Come in," I say, grabbing a bottle before turning around to see my new assistant for the first time. My eyes bulge. "Mae."

Her expression mirrors mine. "James."

"What are you doing here?" we ask simultaneously.

"It's my first day," I say.

Her brow furrows. "Are you the new owner?"

I nod. "Yes. Why are you here?"

Her eyes briefly close, and she presses her lips together. "I'm your assistant."

"Your name's Maeve?"

She nods.

"You lied about your name?" I ask, sounding judgmental.

"So did you, Trey." She's clearly annoyed.

I realize it's the first time I've heard her call me by my name, and I like it. I walk past her to close the door and then stop in front of her. With only inches separating us, all I want to do is touch her. Hold her. Kiss her. But I force myself to ignore my urges and clear up any misgivings.

"James is my middle name."

"My friend set up my Finder account. I didn't realize she hadn't put Maeve until we'd already matched."

I take my time looking her over. She's the picture of professionalism in her short-sleeved blouse, skirt, and high heels. Somehow she makes it look unbelievably sexy. "So, you're the infamous Maeve."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"My dad raved about his assistant and told me how much I was going to love having you work under me." I laugh. "Ironic, huh?"

She takes a few steps away from me, drops into one of the chairs in front of my desk, and rubs her hand over her forehead. "This is a mess. What are we going to do?" She looks and sounds devastated.

I return to my seat, thankful for the space between us. Leaning forward on the wooden desktop, I ask, "Do you like working here?"

"I love it," she answers without hesitation.

Fuck me.

I'm glad she likes her job, but I don't like what that means for us.

Goddammit.

It figures when I finally find a woman I'd actually like to continue seeing, a monkey wrench gets thrown into the mix, completely fucking it up.

"Then you'll keep your position, and I'll be your new boss."

Her eyebrows pinch together. "What about...?" She doesn't voice the rest.

"That happened before you were working for me. Technically, we've done nothing wrong." She remains silent as we unblinkingly stare at each other. "Do you have anything you want to say?" I finally ask.

"Pizza," she mumbles, staring straight ahead.

"Pizza?" I repeat after her.

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“Pizza.” Maeve gets up and walks back out of my office, shaking her head in disbelief.

Pizza? What the...

And then I remember our first night together and her safe word.

\* \* \*

I’ve got my head leaning back, after what might be the craziest first day of work anyone has ever experienced, and I’m about to close my eyes when there’s a knock on my office door.

“Come in,” I call out.

Isaac struts in with a bunch of balloons in his hand, kicking the door closed behind him. “Happy first day at your new job,” he shouts, walking toward me.

He sets a bottle of bourbon down on the desk and releases his hold on the balloons. They immediately drift up to the high ceiling, but the long ribbons attached to them hang low enough to reach. I read the messages printed on the shiny, large round ones. Congratulations. Good Job. Keep it Up. The rest are made up of a rainbow of bright colors.

“Thanks, man. This is really nice of you. I don’t think anyone’s ever gotten me balloons before.”



“I figured they were better than flowers.”

“Definitely. And the bourbon is needed. I could really use a drink right now.”

“Uh-oh, sounds like your first day didn’t go as well as you’d hoped.”

I nod. “You could say that.”

He opens the bourbon while I dig through the cabinets until I find a couple of glasses. I set them on my desk and he pours a generous amount into each.

“Tell me about your day,” he says, settling into the same chair Maeve sat in earlier.

I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose. “You’re not gonna believe this.”

“Try me.”

“My new assistant is none other than my Finder hookup.”

His brown eyes flash with surprise. “The one you were thinking of seeing more of?”

“Yep. That one.” Raising the glass to my lips, I take a long pull and then another. I hope the liquor helps numb the pain of losing Mae, I mean Maeve, as a lover.

“How the fuck did that happen?” Isaac laughs.

“The universe is shitting on my love life like always.”

“Stop your pity-party bullshit and give me the details.” Isaac is always more than happy to call me out on my shit.

“She was my dad’s assistant and I inherited her. She didn’t know I’m his son.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yeah, she was too stunned when she saw me for it to be an act. Plus, my Finder account is under James, my middle name.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Any involvement we had before she was my assistant doesn’t matter. We’re going to keep things professional moving forward.”

“That’s gonna be tough to do if she’s as sexy as you said she is.”

“Tell me about it. I’m fucked without actually getting fucked.”

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He snickers. “You could fire her, and then you could still be involved with her.”

“That wouldn’t be fair. She loves her job, and she’s good at it.”

“You’ve always been so careful not to cross any lines with employees, and now the one woman I’ve heard you express interest in beyond a quick screw, turns out to be working for you. If you have any luck with love, it’s bad luck.”

I chug down more of the bourbon and lick my lips. “Thanks for your inspirational words.”

He shrugs. “What? It’s true. I’m merely stating facts.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t need the reminder at the moment.”

“This is some bad romance movie shit; that’s what’s happening here,” Isaac says.

“You’ve lost me.”

“I feel like Hallmark would make a movie like your story. The heroine starts a new job and finds out her new boss is the one-night stand she recently had.”

I’ll bite at his theory. “So how does it end?”

“If you were a character in the movie, you would try to keep your distance, but the pull between you would be too much to resist, and you would inevitably succumb to your desires.”

“Sounds about right. I’m fucked no matter what I do,” I say, gulping down the remaining bourbon in my glass.

“Yeah, but one of those fuckings is better than the other.”

“For sure. But I need to think about what’s best for Maeve too. I can’t be a selfish asshole and ignore what she wants.”

“Yeah, you’re fucked,” Isaac says.

“Why are you saying that?” I add a shot’s worth of bourbon to my glass and knock it back.

“Because you like this woman. You really like her, and no matter how you look at it, the situation you’re in sucks. There’s no way around it.”

“Yep.”

“I have a great idea. You could send her over to be my assistant, and then she wouldn’t work for you anymore,” he suggests, smiling.

Narrowing my eyes, I shake my head. “Yeah, that’s never gonna happen.”

He shrugs. “I didn’t think so, but you can’t blame me for trying.” Sitting forward, he raises the bottle to add more to my glass, and I raise my hand stopping him.

“I have to go soon. Gwen’s at my house tonight.”

Isaac twists the cap back on and slides the bottle across the desk to me. “Take it with you. You might need it later.”

\* \* \*

“Is everything okay, Dad?” Gwen asks. “You seem out of sorts.”

I smile at her. “I’m fine, sweetie. It was a busy day at the new job and I’ve got a lot to deal with. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Did you meet a lot of your staff?” she asks.

“I had meetings all throughout the day to get to know some of them.”

The first one was disastrous.

“How’s your new assistant? The one Gramps liked so much.”

Talk about rubbing salt in my wound.

“That’s Maeve. She seems great.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-five.”

Too young for me anyway.

“What does she look like?”

“Why does that matter?” I ask.

“I’m curious.”

“She’s got long blond hair.” It’s the shiniest, softest hair in the world. “And blue eyes.” A vibrant blue that grabs hold of your attention and never relinquishes its hold.

“Hmm. I pictured her being a brunette when Gramps talked about her.”

“That’s funny. I did too.”

“Now that you own the team, does that mean I get to go to the home games?” she asks with a hopeful expression on her face.

“I suppose you can go to some of them. It depends on when they fall. You can’t

attend any game that's on a school night."

"That's okay. When is the first game?"

"Preseason games run the last two weeks of September and the regular season starts the second week of October."

She wrinkles her little nose. "But that's so far away."

"It's less than three months until the season opener."

"Awesome."

"And between now and then, you have your summer break from school to enjoy."

"Good point." She shoots to her feet. "I'm going to tell my friends." She leans in for a hug. "Night, Dad."

"Night, Gwennie."

She bounds out of the room like an excited puppy, leaving me alone with my thoughts of Maeve. I want to call her more than anything, but I know I shouldn't. I could send her a text. What harm would that do?

I'm sorry about what happened this morning.

I send the message before I can stop myself or delete it.

Thankfully, she doesn't make me wait for a reply.

You don't need to apologize. It's not your fault the circumstances are shitty.

You're right, they are shitty. I wish I were with you right now.

You can't say things like that to me anymore.

I know, but I mean it. I wish I could hold you in my arms right now and tell you everything will be all right.

You want to lie to me?



No. But I'd want to take away your pain.

It is what it is. We need to deal with our new roles. I'm your employee now. You're my boss. And you need to stop texting me because it's only going to make this fucked-up situation harder. Goodnight.

She's right. I'm in the wrong here. I shouldn't have contacted her. But goddamn, if this isn't hard.

You're right. This isn't making it any easier. Goodnight.

I pitch my phone across the couch and it bounces to the floor. With any luck, it broke. Dropping my head to the back of the couch, I stare up at the ceiling. I've known Maeve for just under two weeks and we've gotten together a total of three times.

So why is the idea of never holding her in my arms again so fucking devastating?

## CHAPTER 13

### MAEVE

I press a hand to my nauseous stomach as the elevator climbs. I don't like feeling nervous about coming to work. This place has been like a second home to me for the past six months, and in an instant, all of that has changed. Now I'm worried about seeing Trey and all the conflicting emotions I'll be assaulted with.

When he messaged last night, I acted as though I wasn't as affected as he was, but

that's not the case at all.

How am I supposed to think of him as only my boss when I've had his cock in my mouth and know what his cum tastes like?

How can I forget what it feels like to have him buried inside me?

Or to have his mouth between my thighs?

I don't know how I'm supposed to deal with any of this fucked-up situation. All my life, I've tried to do the right thing, make prudent choices, and put responsibility above having fun. And when I finally decide to do something a little risqué, this is the end result?

Fuck my life.

The door slides open and I step out to find Randy lurking in the hallway. He smiles when he sees me. "You're just the person I wanted to see."

Can't say the same about you.

"Hi, Randy."

"How have you been?"

"I'm good. Is there something in particular you need?"

He takes a step forward, placing himself a little too close for my comfort. "I was thinking we should go out for a drink sometime."

"I thought I was clear about not wanting to give you another chance."

“You were, but can’t we get together as friends?”

“Maeve,” Trey calls my name from just outside his office.

“Yes, sir?”

“Can I speak with you for a moment?”

“Sure.” I start toward Trey, calling over my shoulder to Randy, “See you.”

“Yeah, we’ll talk later,” he says.

Not if I can help it.

I brush past Trey as I walk into his office, and he closes the door behind us.

“What the hell was that?” he asks, a muscle ticking in his cheek.

“What are you referring to?”

“The conversation with Randy.”

“Nothing.”

“I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Saw what? I don’t have time for word games.”

“I could tell something was wrong when you were talking to him. Are you okay?” He peers down at me with concern, melting my annoyance away.

“I’m fine. I just don’t like him or talking with him.”

He steps toward me, looking concerned, and grips both of my arms, igniting every nerve ending in my body. “Has he been bothering you?”

“No, not like you’re thinking anyway.”

“Then explain it to me, please.”

I may like his concern a little too much.

The sobering thought has me tugging my arms from his grasp. “Last month, he asked

me out, and at the urging of his cousin, who happens to be my friend, I accepted.” Trey scowls, and I raise an eyebrow as if to say you wanted to know. “He ended up standing me up and didn’t even text or call. When I saw him the next day, he said he got scared because I’m the marrying type. Whatever that means.”

“It means he’s a boy and not equipped to deal with someone as phenomenal as you.”

“Thank you. Anyway, he asked me for another chance, and I said no, but I think he’s trying to get me to spend time with him, hoping to change my mind.”

“You’re not going to go out with that tool, are you?”

My lips twitch. “Should you be talking about one of your employees that way?”

“Lately, there’s a lot of things I shouldn’t be doing,” he quips.

“And no, I’m not giving him another chance. I deserve better.”

He moves forward, and I hurriedly step away. The back of my thighs hit his desk, foiling my retreat. I hold one of my hands up like I’m stopping traffic, but stopping a speeding tractor trailer would be easier than stopping Trey’s imminent approach.

His hands clasp mine, holding them to his chest. “You deserve the best,” he says. “Don’t settle for less.”

I let out an irony-filled laugh. “What’s the best? Or should I say who? Are you referring to yourself, because we both know that ship’s sailed.”

He releases my hands and rakes his hands through his hair. “Fuck!” He starts pacing across his office. “After we had dinner together the other night, I made up my mind that the next time we got together, I was going to suggest we start dating each other.”

“Like going out places together?” I ask.

“Yes. Dating, and hopefully settling into a relationship.”

“Oh.” I’m elated to know I wasn’t the only one experiencing deeper feelings, but I’m fucking sad that nothing will ever come of it.

He stops pacing and stares at me with earnest gray eyes. “So if I seem like I’m struggling with our new dynamic, it’s because I am. Every second in your company, I’m fighting the urge to kiss you.”

“Trey,” I whisper, my eyes filling with moisture. “I feel the same, and if you had asked me to date you, I would’ve said yes. But all that’s changed now. Maybe not as far as our feelings go, but the rules of the game certainly have. You’re my boss, and not the man I was falling for, and that’s the way this has to be. Maybe if we act as if James and Mae are different people than us, it’ll make this easier.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think I’m capable of thinking of you as anyone but the woman I want with every fiber of my being. But I’ll do my best not to make this situation any more difficult than it already is. You can go now, Maeve.”

I don’t want to leave. I want to step into his arms and have him tell me everything will be okay. But I push away from the desk and walk to the door. Pausing with my hand on the knob, I glance over my shoulder. “No matter how difficult our situation is, I’m glad I got to know you.” I’ve stepped into the hall and I’m closing the door when I hear his soft reply.

“Me too.”

\* \* \*

Sheryl is already at my brother’s house when Lucy shows up with a pitcher of margaritas that she sets on the kitchen counter.

“Thank God you’re here,” I say, hugging her.

“Whoa.” She hugs me back and then exchanges a quick greeting with Sheryl. They’ve met briefly a couple of times when Lucy has stopped by to see me at work.

“I have so much to tell you both.” I eagerly start filling them in right away. “You know how I met James on Finder?”

“And he’s hot as fuck?” Sheryl confirms that I may have mentioned him.

“Well, it turns out he’s my new boss.”

Lucy’s mouth is hanging open and she’s speechless.

“Wait, I’m confused,” Sheryl says.

“James is actually Trey, my new boss. James is Trey’s middle name,” I try to explain.

“Holy shit. James and Trey are the same guy?” Sheryl finally understands, I think.

And I feel like I'm having a conversation with Joey from Friends. "Yes, they are one and the same."

She makes an explosion sound and gestures as if her mind's blown.

"How did you find out?" Lucy asks.

"When he called me into the office to meet me."

"Oh Lord." Lucy covers her mouth.

I share the details of what's happened since yesterday morning, and by the time I'm finished I'm breathless and thirsty.

Lucy pours us each a drink.

I gulp most of mine down in one long swallow. "God, I needed that."

"Here, have some more," she says, filling my cup. "What are you going to do about Trey?"

"I don't know. We don't really have a choice but to keep things purely professional."

"Pfft, good luck with that. I've seen that man and he's hot as the sun," Sheryl says.

"Right? How am I going to stay strong when I'm up against all his..." I struggle to find an adequate word.

"Daddiness," Sheryl inserts.

Lucy laughs. "That's hilarious, but it's true. Now that I know James is Trey, I



remember what he looks like. I met him and his dad at a fundraiser I went to with Niall.”

“I wish I’d shown you his picture. You could’ve stopped me from getting involved with him.”

“Yeah, but then you wouldn’t know how amazing it felt to be with him,” Lucy points out.

“True, but I’d have saved myself some heartache.”

“You really like him, huh?” Sheryl asks.

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I nod slowly. “I do.” I drink some more margarita, hoping it’ll numb the ache in my chest.

“Is there a reason why you can’t be together?” Lucy asks.

“I don’t know if there’s a rule that states we can’t be or if it’s just that ethically it’s the wrong thing to do. I didn’t pay attention when I signed my paperwork when I got hired. I wanted a job so badly, I would’ve signed my life away.” I take another sip. “I can’t very well contact human resources and ask them what their stance is on me fucking my boss.”

Sheryl and Lucy laugh, but I can’t. There’s nothing remotely funny about this situation.

“I think you need a game plan for how you’re going to handle seeing him every day,” Lucy says.

“Okay, do you have any ideas?” I ask.

Lucy holds up her thumb. “One. Try to keep at least four feet of distance between the two of you at all times.” She raises her index finger. “Two. Avoid looking at him whenever possible.”

“I’ve got number three,” Sheryl says, holding up her middle finger. “Keep your meetings with him as short as possible.”

Lucy’s ring finger raises. “Four. Only talk about work-related topics.”

“Five.” Sheryl adds her pinky. “Don’t wear sexy clothes.”

My nose wrinkles. “I never do.”

“Okay, let me clarify that. Don’t wear dresses or skirts. Or fitted pants. Your legs look too sexy. I’m a heterosexual woman and even I’ve noticed how long they are.”

“Jesus, Sheryl. What am I supposed to wear?”

“Baggy clothing. We can go shopping after work tomorrow,” she says.

“I don’t have the money for a new wardrobe, and I don’t think I should have to change what I wear. Maybe he should be the one to buy new clothes. Then I wouldn’t have to look at his muscular ass or how his dress shirts hug his torso.”

“I think you should suggest it to him,” Sheryl says. “Men never get criticized for how they dress; it’s always the women’s fault. Our skirts are too short, our shirts are too low cut.”

“I don’t know about mentioning this to Trey. I think number five can be used as a last resort. Try the other four options out first,” Lucy says, doing her best to be the voice of reason.

Usually, I don’t need someone else to be that for me, but these margaritas are strong, and I’m currently on my third one.

“Okay,” I agree.

“Do you mind if I call Niall?” Lucy asks. “I told him we’d talk when I got home and I still haven’t contacted him.”

“Go for it. Where is he anyway?”

“Out with the guys,” Lucy says.

“I’d like to be out with all the guys he hangs out with,” Sheryl says.

I laugh. “Let’s get comfortable. Grab the pitcher,” I say as I head to the living room.

“Got it,” Sheryl calls out.

The two of us get situated on the couch with the margaritas on the coffee table in front of us.

Lucy enters the room and turns on the TV.

“Wow, that was a quick call,” I say.

She smiles. “He and the guys are busy watching a replay of the final championship game.” She changes the channel. “Here it is.”

“Oooh, yeah, hockey players,” Sheryl says, shimmying her shoulders. She pokes my arm. “You need to introduce me to one of those fine-ass men.”

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“Ha. I barely know them. Niall doesn’t want them anywhere near me. Little does he know his team’s owner has been all over this body.”

“And inside it,” Sheryl adds, the two of us erupting in laughter.

Lucy’s focused on the TV and doing her best to ignore us. “Get him,” she shouts just before Niall slams a player on the opposing team into the boards. “Yes!” She pumps her fist.

“Lucy, you do realize this game was weeks ago, right?” I ask.

And I thought I was the buzzed one.

She laughs, placing her hand on her chest. “Yeah, I know. I just got caught up in the emotion all over again.”

“That’s so cute. I want to be in love too. Which players are single?” Sheryl asks.

“Most of them are in relationships,” Lucy says, never taking her eyes off the screen. She clasps her hands in front of her. “Get the puck out of there,” she shouts as Niall battles another player for it. He gets the puck loose and passes it off to Kaiden.

Lucy is an example of what love does to people. It makes them lose their minds. Raising my glass, I swallow a large mouthful, appreciating the burning sensation on the way down.

Lucy jumps to her feet and shouts, “Score!”

“Dammit, I missed it,” I droll.

Sheryl leaves while the replay’s still going, but Lucy and I continue watching until the end. Well, Lucy does. My eyeballs may have been aimed at the TV, but my thoughts were occupied with Trey.

Lucy shuts the TV off once they show the final score and ensuing celebration as the Coyotes come out on top by two goals, which gave them back-to-back championship wins.

I’m so proud of Niall. After all he went through on his last team, for him to come here and have so much success is amazing.

When Lucy’s ready to head home, I wrap my arms around the large pitcher and won’t relinquish my hold. She rolls her eyes, and before she walks out the door, she tells me I’m going to regret it in the morning. I probably will, but I’ll take a headache over a heartache anyday.

As it turns out, there are only two drinks left in the pitcher. I drink them both down too quickly while sitting on my bed. When I’m finished, I place the empty glass on my nightstand and flop back onto my pillows. When I close my eyes, it feels like the mattress is wildly spinning. “Whee.” I laugh. I like this. It’s like a private amusement ride in my bedroom. I’m not drunk, but I’m definitely not sober either.

Okay, maybe I’m drunker than I thought.

After a few more minutes of my world spinning, I’m feeling slightly nauseous, and the novelty of the effects of the alcohol have worn off.

“Fucking James—Trey—whoever you are. All your fault,” I grumble, picking up my phone. Time to tell His Daddiness where he can go. I type out a text and send it off.

You need new clothes.

What's wrong with my clothes?

When I read his reply, I realize I never changed his name in my phone. I take care of that before I reply.

They fit you too well.

That's a bad thing?

My eyes squint as I tap the screen.

It is for me. Your pants show off your ass and your shirts show off your arms and flat stomach. For fuck's sake, buy some looser clothes.

Have you been drinking?

Yep, but not enough.

I'd say you've had plenty. We can talk about my clothes tomorrow. Go to sleep, Sunshine.

I am. But not because you said so.

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I hold my middle finger to my phone, as if he can see it, before I drop the cell on the nightstand. My heavy eyelids fall closed, and the last thing I see in my mind before sleep takes me is Trey's smiling face.

\* \* \*

When I enter Trey's office, he says, "Close the door."

Pushing it shut, I walk toward his desk while he smirks at me. "What?" I ask, but I'm pretty sure I know what he's going to say.

"Someone had a little too much to drink last night."

Yep. I knew it.

"Yeah, I did." I tuck a lock of hair behind my ear. "Can we not discuss that?"

He chuckles. "I think I want to talk about it, though. You drunk texted me."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. It was completely inappropriate."

"I rather enjoyed it, myself. Drunk Maeve is funny." He grins and I scowl.

"Don't get too attached, because she won't be making another appearance."

"That's too bad."



I clasp my hands together in front of me. “It’s for the best. People make bad choices when they drink. I certainly did.”

“That’s why I prefer weed. It doesn’t have that effect. You just sit there and chill out.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Can we get down to business now?” It’s been approximately twelve hours since my friends helped me devise the five ways to make this situation easier, and I’m already forgetting about numbers two and four.

I haven’t taken my eyes off him since I walked through the door, and we’ve yet to talk about work stuff. I suck at this.

“Sure. I called you in because I’m trying to print out quarterly reports for the players’ expenses and operational expenses, and I can’t figure out what I’m doing wrong.”

“I can help you with that. Let me sit down in your chair, and I’ll show you what to do.”

Standing, he moves aside so I can slide in behind his desk. “So you need to select ‘Reports’ from the menu.” He leans in, watching.

There goes rule number one.

“Then you’ll search for the one you want to print.” I move the cursor. “See, it’s right here.”

He leans even closer. “You smell wonderful.”

I pretend as though I didn’t hear him. “Then you click on where it says Run Report. To print it out, you click on the printer icon,” I say, demonstrating. The machine

comes to life. He rests his hands on my shoulders, massaging my tight muscles as the pages stack up in the tray.

“That seems easy enough, but while I have you here, can you print out one for advertising expenses too, please?”

“Sure.” I don’t want to agree. I want to get away from him as quickly as possible. He smells amazing, and his magical hands are working the knots from my trapezius muscle. It feels divine.

I walk him through the steps once more, finding the report and showing him how to print it out. Before I escape from his chair, he winds a strand of my hair around his index finger, then lets it slide free. “Your hair is so soft.”

Pushing my feet against the floor, I shove the chair back, bumping into him, and jump from the seat. “If that’s all you need, I’ll head back to my desk. I’ve got work to do.”

“Thank you for your help, Maeve.”

“You’re welcome. Just doing my job.” My hand fumbles with the knob as I open the door. I step into the hallway and see Sheryl down at the other end. She points to the break room, and I hurry toward her. The two of us scamper inside, and, thankfully, we’re the only ones here.

“How’s it going?” she asks.

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“Badly. I couldn’t follow the five rules. He invaded my space while I was printing out reports. It was all I could do to focus on the task at hand.”

“You’ve got it bad, girl.”

I rub my aching forehead. “Tell me about it. I’m so screwed.”

She snorts. “Not yet, but soon you will be. Right on Daddy’s desk.”

“Oh God, don’t say that.” My cheeks heat as I picture him bending me over the wooden surface.

She knowingly nods. “It’s inevitable. The only question is how long will it take for the two of you to reach that point?”

Rule number six: Avoid going near his desk.

## CHAPTER 14

### MAEVE

It’s been ten days since I learned who Trey really is. We’ve settled into a reluctant boss and employee relationship. I say reluctant because neither of us wants to be a part of this situation, but our hands are tied.

So far this week, Trey’s been spending a lot of time in meetings, acclimating to being the new owner. When we’ve been together in his office, I’ve been putting the rules

my friends and I came up with to use, and it's somewhat helped. But aside from a few accidental touches, he's also been on his best behavior. Which is surprising and, to be honest, confusing.

Maybe he changed his mind about being attracted to me? It wouldn't be the first time a guy has sent me mixed signals or his feelings flipped with no warning.

I don't know why I'm having mixed feelings about him keeping his distance. If anything, I should be thankful he's making our situation easier.

My phone rings, and it's Trey's line.

Speak of the devil.

"Hello," I say.

"Maeve, I need you to work late and help me with something."

"Did I miss a 'please' in there somewhere?"

"Will you please help me?" He softens his tone.

"Yes, I will."

"Thank you. I'll order food. I know you can't yell at me if your mouth is full."

I can think of another way to fill my mouth.

I ignore my slutty subconscious that wants to make up for all the years of dull sex I had before I met Trey. "Sounds good."

I hang up and send Sheryl a text.

Help! Trey wants me to stay late and help him with something. I couldn't say no. What should I do?

Undo the top three buttons on your blouse and see what happens.

Now isn't the time for jokes!

Who's joking? I've seen the way he looks at you. All that pent-up desire has to go somewhere.

You're not helping the situation any.

Sorry. Just don't sit close to him. His dick can't reach you if you're more than nine inches away. Am I right? Or is it ten inches?

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She's not wrong, but I need a new work friend. I need someone serious and pious in my life. Someone who'll talk me out of doing inappropriate things instead of encouraging me.

Fine, don't tell me. I'll remember this when you want details of one of my hookups.

That'll never happen.

Some things are meant to be private.

I put my phone away and get back to taking care of the emails I didn't read earlier. When I'm done replying to all of them, it's after five o'clock, and I've procrastinated long enough.

Dammit. I don't know why I have a bad feeling about this.

He's been nothing but professional this week, so why would tonight be any different? If he tries something, it's not like I can't say no.

I just don't know if I'm that strong.

I miss James and Mae so much. My chest aches with longing. But that version of us is gone.

I log out of my email and head to Trey's office. With the door open, I see him staring at his computer, looking bleary eyed.

“Knock, knock,” I say.

He doesn’t glance away from the screen. “Come in and close the door, please.”

I do as he asks, and walk over to the front of his desk. “What do you need my help with?”

“I’m arranging a retirement celebration for my dad and I have to figure out the guest list. I’ve enlisted my mom’s help and she sent me the names and addresses of their closest friends. I need you to track everything on an Excel sheet or whatever method you want to use.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“Also, I need you to help me make this celebration amazing. Whatever details or personal touches you can come up with would be a huge help. The first thing we need to do is find a venue to hold it at. And it needs to be ASAP because, apparently places get booked like a year in advance. Who fucking knew?” He shoves his fingers through his hair.

“I could’ve told you that,” I say. He unblinkingly stares at me. “What? Don’t you know anyone who’s planned a wedding? A good venue is hard to find.”

He shakes his head. “Fucking fantastic.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure we can find somewhere that’ll work.”

A knock interrupts before he can reply. I walk over and open the door.

“I have a delivery for Trey,” the young man says.

I smile. "I'll take it, thanks." He hands over a bag and disappears down the hallway. I nudge the door closed with my hip and deposit the bag on the coffee table. "What did you order?"

"Cheeseburgers, fries, and onion rings."

"I haven't had a burger in ages." My stomach rumbles with anticipation. I immediately empty the contents of each bag onto the table and sit on the couch. Trey joins me, passing over a bottle of water. "Thank you," I say, placing it on the wooden surface.

I slide a box with a burger and fries toward him and take the other for myself. The onion rings are situated in the middle of the table for sharing. "Have a napkin," I say, placing it on his leg. It's the closest I've come to touching him since he became my boss.

"Thank you, Maeve."

"It's a napkin, not a venue for the party," I joke.

"I appreciate you staying late with me. Especially on such short notice."

"Don't worry about it. I'm getting a delicious dinner out of it." As if to prove my point, I bite into the juicy cheeseburger and chew.

Trey adds onion rings to his burger before taking a bite, and it looks delicious.



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Why haven't I ever tried that?

I add a few to mine and take another bite.

Holy Mother of God.

He watches my reaction and grins. "Good, right?"

"Yes, amazing." I don't say another word until I've eaten every single bite of my meal.

Trey cleans up our trash while my eyes eagerly drink in the way his dress pants hug his ass as he walks to the trash bin. He unexpectedly peers over his shoulder, and my gaze leaps away, but I'm busted. He saw me ogling him.

"Are you checking out my too-tight pants?" he teases. My cheeks flush with embarrassment at being caught, and for the reminder of the drunk texts I sent him last week. Damn him.

I focus on peeling the label off my bottle of water. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He laughs as he approaches the couch. I'm ultra cognizant of his proximity as he lowers next to me. His thigh presses to mine, burning through my thin skirt like a brand on my skin.

He cups my chin, turning my face toward his and locking eyes with me. "You're

fucking adorable.” He smiles, but then his lips flatten, and his expression turns serious. I suck in a startled breath as his mouth dips toward mine, then sigh with relief as our lips meet.

All the reasons we shouldn’t be doing this vanish with the sweep of his tongue against mine. He pulls me closer, winding his arms around me as our kiss deepens.

God, I’ve missed this.

His mouth moves to my neck, teeth raking down to the curve of my shoulder. “Wish we were in my bed.” His words trigger a momentary blip of reality to flicker through my kiss-fuddled mind.

We can’t do this.

Slipping my hands between our torsos, I press my palms to his chest. “Pizza.”

Trey draws back, freezing in place. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “We can’t kiss each other anymore. It’s not right.”

“You’re right. I got carried away and I’m sorry.” He moves over, placing more distance between us. Leaning forward, his hands dangle between his knees. “We should call it a night.”

“We can finish up first,” I say.

“We’re done for now. It’s for the best,” he says. His tone leaves no room for disagreeing.

“Okay.” Rising, I make my way across the room. “See you tomorrow.”

“See ya.”

As I pull the door closed behind me, I chance a final look at Trey. His head is lowered in his hand, and he looks as disappointed as I feel.

I didn't want our kiss to end, but had we continued, the situation would've escalated until neither of us was strong enough to stop.

## CHAPTER 15

### TREY

Since I arrived at work this morning, I've been avoiding calling Maeve into my office. Last night's kiss left me feeling more torn than ever and in a bit of a funk, but I've delayed seeing her for as long as possible.

Dialing her extension, I speak as soon as she answers. “Come in here, please.” And I hang up the phone right away.

I'm taking a sip of my coffee seconds later when she appears in the doorway. Her expression is reserved as I usher her inside. “Please close the door.” She hesitates for a second before pushing it shut. “Sit, please.”

She drops into one of the chairs in front of my desk while I study her expression. On closer inspection, I notice the purple smudges beneath her eyes.

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Did she toss and turn all night, like I did?

“I owe you an apology for kissing you last night. I’m sorry. I crossed a line I shouldn’t have. I’m finding the adjustment to being your boss is a complicated process. All I can do at this point is strive to be a stronger man when it comes to you. And maybe you can help me out by being a little less irresistible.”

Maeve’s lips twitch, hinting at a smile.

“This is for you.” I slide a ceramic pot toward her. “I looked up what flowers were symbolic for saying I’m sorry and for forgiveness. Turns out it’s the purple hyacinth.”

Her blue eyes soften as she gazes at the plant. Her fingertips delicately touch one of the flowers. She leans forward, breathing in the spicy floral scent of the petals before sitting back once more. She smiles at me. “Thank you, Trey. This is a thoughtful way to apologize.”

I rub my hand over my chin. “Maybe I should’ve bought them in bulk in case I need to apologize some more.”

She laughs. “Let’s think positively.”

“It can’t hurt.”

“And just so you know, I’m struggling with our new relationship too. I can only assume it’ll get easier with time.”

“It has to, right?” I ask.

She shrugs. “We can only hope.”

“You can get out of here now,” I say, smiling.

Picking up the ceramic pot, she curls one arm around it and walks to the door. She turns to me, pausing. “Thanks again. You don’t know this, but purple happens to be my favorite color.”

“I’m glad it worked out so well,” I say.

She flashes a quick smile my way before exiting my office. I’m glad she likes the plant and that it happens to be her favorite color.

Bracing my elbow on my desk, I rest my forehead in my palm. Being Maeve’s boss means losing out on the chance to learn more about her. A feeling of gloom invades me, permeating every cell in my body and turning my thoughts maudlin.

I’ll never have the opportunity to learn about all her favorite things. Or all the idiosyncrasies that make Maeve who she is—and that fucking sucks.

\* \* \*

Over the last few days, Maeve has done her best to avoid me at work, and I’ve allowed her to have some space. But yesterday before leaving the office, I informed her I needed her help with something tonight. Of course she argued, mentioning she had other plans. I had to play the boss card and act like it was about work, which it’s technically not. But it inadvertently is because we need to be able to spend time together without sucking each other’s faces. When I informed her what time I’d be picking her up, she didn’t take that news well either.

“Are we almost there?” Gwen asks from the back seat.

“Yep, it’s the house on the right with the yellow door.” I pull into the driveway, and almost immediately, Maeve steps onto the landing. While she locks the door, I get out and move around the front of my SUV to open the passenger side door.

Her lips curl slightly. “Hi.”

I flash a wide smile. “Hi back.”

“Hi!” Gwen yells from the back seat.

Maeve ducks her head around me and aims a genuine smile at my daughter. “Hi yourself.”

“I’m Gwen.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Maeve.”

“I know who you are. You work for my dad.”

“You’re right, I do.”

“We should get going,” I say, placing a hand on her arm. She darts away from my touch and into her seat. Shutting her door, I retrace my steps back to the driver’s side and slowly slide behind the wheel.

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I immediately feel the weight of her stare burning into the side of my face. I peer over and make eye contact with her.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“You’ll see.”

“I’m here under false pretenses.” Her hand goes to the door handle.

“Don’t go. I shouldn’t have said I needed you for a work thing. But if I hadn’t, would you still be here?”

She rolls her lips inward for a moment, then shakes her head. “I wouldn’t have come.”

“I’m asking you to trust me and to spend a few hours with my daughter and me. Can you do that?”

She needs to agree. But I won’t force her.

“Yes.”

I exhale a relieved sigh. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she says as I back from the driveway. “You might regret bringing me wherever we’re going.”

“Maeve, do you root for the Coyotes?” Gwen calls out.

I’m happy for the change of subject.

“Yes, I do.”

“I wore my favorite Coyotes t-shirt. My grandpa got it for me.”

“Let me see.” She peers into the back seat. “I love that. I only have a sweatshirt. I should get some more gear, but it’s expensive. You’d think with me working for the owner himself, I’d get some free stuff.”

I chuckle. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Dad, you need to give Maeve a cool t-shirt like mine.”

Maeve laughs. “She’s definitely your daughter.”

I nod. “She’s not afraid to express her opinion.”

“Hello. I’m right here.” Gwen lets us know she’s listening.

The rest of the ride passes quickly and silently. I park in the designated lot, and we head down the sidewalk.

“Don’t I get a clue about where we’re going?” Maeve asks.

“We’re almost there,” Gwen says.

Maeve dismissively waves her hand. “Pfft. That’s not a clue.”



“Actually, it is,” Gwen states.

“Oh, look, we’re here.” I open the door, ushering the two of them inside.

“We’re painting?” Maeve asks.

I nod. “We are.”

Maeve smiles. “Okay, maybe I forgive you for lying to get me here.”

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“Thank you. I can’t say I enjoy you being angry with me or avoiding me.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Really? I’ll tuck that information away for another time.”

All I hear is “another time.”

“We need to pick what we want to paint. There are a few choices,” Gwen mentions.

Before she can add anything more, a shop employee comes over.

“Hi, Mr. Ledger. I’m Lori. I spoke on the phone with you.”

“Hi, Lori. This is my daughter Gwen and my friend Maeve. We’re ready to get started.”

“If you’ll please follow me, I’ll show you to your private space.” She moves toward the right side of the room where there are three doors. Opening the third one down, she waves us in after her. “You all get an easel and a canvas. The paints and brushes are on the table,” she says, pointing to the back wall. You can wash your brushes in the sink, and there are paper towels to dry them. You choose what you want to paint. There are some examples hanging on the wall if you need something to follow, or you can go wild and paint whatever you’d like. Does anyone have any questions?” The three of us remain quiet and shake our heads. “Okay, I’ll leave you to it, then.”

“Thank you,” I call out as she closes the door.

“I thought she’d never leave,” Gwen says.

Maeve laughs. “Me too.”

“You two are horrible,” I tease, grinning at the sight of them together.

Gwen is the first to choose the easel she wants. “Maeve, paint next to me.”

She nods. “Okay.”

My daughter doesn’t realize it, but she helped me out. By getting Maeve to use the middle easel, she’ll be between Gwen and me. I’ll be able to interact with her in a way I don’t have the freedom to at work. I’ve missed spending time with her. Since I became her boss ten days ago, everything has changed—everything except my desire for her. I’m not sure anything could make that dissipate.

“Gwen, do you know what you want to paint?” Maeve asks.

“Yep. I like the field of flowers with the rainbow in the background. Which one are you doing?”

“The lake with the island in the middle.”

Gwen looks at me. “What about you, Dad?”

“The dragon, of course.”

“Are you sure you shouldn’t pick something with less detail?” she asks.

“What are you trying to say, daughter?”

Her nose wrinkles as she forms a reply. “You might want to choose a simpler design.”

I laugh. “You’re being so diplomatic. I’m assuming it’s for Maeve’s benefit.”

Gwen’s grin is rueful. “Maybe.”

“I appreciate your effort, but Maeve’s going to see my poor rendition of whatever I choose, so I may as well paint what I like.”

Maeve laughs. “I’ll keep my expectations low.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Gwen says.

I roll my neck and then my shoulders. “I’ll just have to shock you with my painting.”

“Oh, you’ll shock us all right,” Gwen quips, giggling.

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Maeve joins in on the laughter.

“Don’t you two have some painting to do? We only have this room for two hours.”

Gwen scrambles over to choose her colors and brushes.

“You have a great kid,” Maeve tells me.

“Thanks. I think so too.”

“It’s sweet how the two of you are so close.”

“Being her dad is my favorite job.”

She smiles. “I can tell.”

Gwen returns to her easel, ready to begin. “What are you two waiting on?”

“We got sidetracked, talking,” Maeve says.

I follow her over to the side table to choose my colors, and edge up beside her. “I think I’m gonna go with red for my dragon,” I say.

“Sounds good.” She takes her time selecting paints and brushes, paying me no mind until I press my arm into hers.

“Do you need something?” She doesn’t even look at me.

“I can think of a few things, but now isn’t the time or place,” I whisper and smirk.

“Hmm. Seems like there isn’t a good time or place, boss.”

Maybe I like it a little too much when she calls me that?

She’s right, but there really isn’t a time or place for me to do what I want. Of course, that didn’t stop me from forcing her to come with us. My common sense doesn’t seem to have a say when it comes to Maeve. My behavior changes direction as often as a ping pong ball. It’s erratic and unpredictable, which is nothing like me.

She returns to her easel, and I amble over to mine. We fall silent as we get lost in the creative process. I take my time, trying to follow the sample painting. I’d like the finished product to actually resemble a dragon.

It’s nice having this room to ourselves. I can focus on having a great time with my daughter and this woman who’s captured my interest from the moment we met.

Speaking of, I sneak a glance at Maeve. Her tongue is tucked into the corner of her mouth as she slowly strokes the brush over the canvas. Her wide blue eyes are intently focused on the small green rowboat she’s adding, and she looks adorable.

“Maeve,” Gwen calls her name, gaining her attention. “Who’s your favorite boss, my grandpa or my dad?”

Maeve’s shoulders shake with laughter. “Definitely your grandpa.” She gives me a side-eye.

“What do you have to say about that, Dad?”

Unconcerned, I shrug. “I don’t think a total of ten days of working for me is long

enough for Maeve to be making such a bold declaration. We'll have to ask her how she feels a few months from now. I bet I'm her favorite by then." I wink at Maeve as if to say I've got this. You don't stand a chance at resisting me.

God knows, I can't resist you.

"Maeve, have you ever been for a ride on a Zamboni?"

"And out of left field," I tease.

Maeve glances at her, shaking her head. "No, I haven't. Have you?"

She nods. "When I was little, my dad took me for a ride."

I smile at the memory. She sat in my lap while I drove her around.

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Maeve's lips form a soft smile. "I bet that was fun."

"I was only like six at the time, so back then it was one of the coolest things ever. But it's not anymore."

"That's how life goes. Say you went back to your kindergarten class. You're a teenager now, so everything would look much smaller than you remember. Your perspective changes as you grow and also as you get older," Maeve tells her.

Gwen's eyes sparkle with rapt interest. "I never thought about that. Now I want to go visit my kindergarten teacher so I can see."

I laugh. "Don't tell your dad it was my suggestion," she says, barely moving her lips.

The fact that she's hitting it off with Gwen so well makes me like her even more.

By the time the two hours of our allotted time have passed, we've all finished painting. Once again, Gwen's artwork looks professionally done, and Maeve's is almost equally impressive.

And then there's mine...

My dragon looks like a Rorschach test. It's easy to imagine a psychologist asking me "What do you see in the ink blot?"

I may have painted this disaster, but I don't know what I see. It's certainly not a dragon.



Gwen and Maeve scoot over to look at my masterpiece.

“That’s a dragon?” Gwen asks.

Maeve makes a choking sound as she struggles to hold in her laughter.

“Sure, pick on the guy who has no artistic ability,” I say, pretending to be offended.

“I thought you were exaggerating when you told me how bad your last painting came out, but I see you weren’t,” Maeve says.

“My strengths lie in physical activities,” I say, pressing my hand on her lower back. The warmth of her skin bleeds through her shirt, heating my palm and stirring my blood.

Her head turns, and her eyes spark with interest. If we were alone, I’d slam my lips on hers and remind her who her body responds to.

But we’re not.

“I’ll take care of putting everything away,” Gwen says. She collects our brushes, then washes and dries them. She returns the paint bottles to the table where they belong. “All set.” She removes her canvas from the easel while Maeve and I do the same.

We leave the room and wave goodbye to Lori as we pass through the main area. I hold the door open for them, and we walk to the parking lot. I place the canvases in the cargo area, and then we settle inside the vehicle.

Gwen and Maeve keep up a steady stream of chatter as I drive. Listening to them warms my heart and makes me wish the circumstances with Maeve and I were different. If I wasn’t her boss, we’d already be consistently spending more time

together.

The ride passes much too quickly, leaving me silently cursing as I pull into the driveway. I'm not ready to let Maeve go yet.

"Gwen, it was so nice meeting you."

"You too."

I climb out, make my way around to the back, and open the hatch. Removing Maeve's painting, I close the door, and meet her as she climbs from the passenger side.

"Dad, can we hang out with Maeve again sometime?" Gwen asks.

"I don't see why not."

Maeve gives a quick wave toward Gwen and closes the door. I walk beside her to the front door, then place a hand on her arm.

"Thank you for coming with us."

"Thank you for forcing me." She laughs, but then turns serious. "Why did you?"

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“I wanted to spend time with you. I’d like for us to be friends, so I figured if Gwen was with us, I’d be able to behave.” I drag in a deep breath. “But I really want to kiss you, and it’s killing me not to.”

“I want that too,” she admits, rustling up hope in me. It’s nice to know these feelings are mutual. “But we can’t,” she reminds me.

I drive my fingers through my hair. “Goddammit, this sucks.”

This time she’s the one placing her hand on my arm. “You’re right. It does. I really did have a great time with you and Gwen. She’s a wonderful, intelligent girl, and you’re both lucky to have each other.”

“Thank you. Maybe we can do this again sometime. Or something else?”

She nods. “I’d like that.”

“See you Monday, Sunshine.”

“See you, Trey.”

## CHAPTER 16

### MAEVE

Sheryl perches on the edge of my desk. “So you’re saying he kissed you and then a few nights later took you out with his daughter?” Her forehead furrows.

“Yep.”

“Am I the only one who’s confused?” she asks.

“No. You should try being me.” I laugh, but I want to cry. “I think he was hoping that spending time together outside of work would make us more comfortable with our situation.”

She snorts. “Well, it helped that his daughter served as your chaperone.”

“I can’t deny that. It was impossible not to think about her witnessing something she shouldn’t.”

“Maybe she needs to be homeschooled from Trey’s office every day,” she suggests, laughing.

“That’s not happening, so maybe he and I need to learn self-control.”

“If that were so easy, you wouldn’t have kissed him back.”

My head flops onto the back of my office chair. “Good point.”

“How did things go today with you two?”

“He had meetings outside of the office, so I only saw him in passing.”

Sheryl’s stomach growls loudly. Snickering, she slaps her hand over her belly. “Want to grab dinner? I don’t feel like cooking.”

“I wish I could, but I’m going over to Greg and Lillith’s. She emailed me last week and asked me to dinner.” Now I wish I’d said no. All I want to do is go home and

chill in my pajamas.

“At least you’ll get a great meal out of going.”

“That’s true. And it’ll be nice seeing them both. I miss Greg being my boss, and Lillith is so nice.”

“Ooh, I have a hypothetical question for you. If you and Trey hadn’t met before he became your boss, would you still miss Greg?”

“Hmm. Yes, I would because he’s a great guy. But I’d enjoy having Trey as a boss a lot more if I didn’t know what he looks like naked.”

She laughs. “But then you’d never know what he looks like naked. Would you want to give up all the memories of the hot sex you had together?”

Would I?

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Even though our complicated past makes being his employee difficult, I wouldn't want us to have never met on Finder.

"No. I'm glad for the time we spent together."

"At least you don't have regrets," she says.

"No, not about meeting him."

Kissing him back the other night? That's another story.

\* \* \*

Really, God? How can you do this to me?

Climbing from my car, I slam the door shut and march up the Ledger's driveway.

"Ugh." An annoyed grunt passes between my lips as I walk past Trey's SUV. Had I known he would be here, I'd have made an excuse not to come. But at this point I'm stuck and have to commit to having dinner before I can leave.

I ring the doorbell, and my heart gallops behind my rib cage like a herd of wild horses while I wait for someone to appear.

Lillith opens the door, greeting me with a wide smile and a motherly hug. "Maeve, I'm so glad you could make it. You look wonderful, dear."

“Thank you. So do you. Having Greg around more must agree with you.”

She nods. “At least for now. Maybe he’ll drive me mad in a few more months.” She hooks her arm through mine. “Come right this way.” We walk through the large foyer and into the open kitchen and living room.

“Maeve!” Gwen calls my name and jumps to her feet. She races over like a blur and crashes into me with a hug.

“Hi, Gwen.”

Her thin arms squeeze me before she steps back. “What are you doing here?” she asks.

Before I can answer, Lillith steps in. “Didn’t I tell you Maeve is having dinner with us?”

Gwen turns her head from side to side. “Nope.”

“There’s my favorite employee,” Greg calls out as he heads toward me.

I smile. “Oh, look. My favorite boss.”

Greg chuckles and draws me in for a brief hug. “Trey, did you hear that? I guess your charm isn’t working on Maeve.”

Trey approaches with his hands shoved into the front pockets of his dress pants. His tie is missing, and the top two buttons on his shirt are undone. Jesus. He looks good enough to eat, but I’m definitely not supposed to notice such things about my employer.

“She just needs more time to realize how lucky she is to have me as a boss.” He smirks.

Funny, I don’t feel so lucky at this moment.

Greg laughs and pats him on the back. “Sure, son. You keep trying.”

“That’s the plan.” Trey answers his father but stares directly at me.

“Let’s adjourn to the dining room. I bet Maeve is hungry after a long day at work,” Lillith suggests.

“I’ve been looking forward to this meal since you first invited me,” I confess while I wait for everyone to choose their seat. I take the closest available chair, which happens to be next to Trey.

“Maeve must be the reason you made lasagna and meatballs. I can’t remember the last time we had that,” Greg says.

Lillith nods. “Yes, she is. I gave her a few choices.”



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“Wonderful idea, Maeve. I don’t get to eat cheese very often, but any time I do, it's a great day,” Greg says.

“Help yourselves,” Lillith says, waving her hand at the food in the middle of the large table.

“Maeve, what would you like?” Trey asks, picking up my plate.

“A little of everything, please.” I watch as he dishes out lasagna, meatballs, and garlic bread. He sets the plate in front of me. “Thank you.”

Once everyone has taken their share, I dig in.

And it’s just as good as I anticipated.

“Lillith, everything is delicious,” I say.

“Thank you. I’m glad you think so.”

“Maeve, want to know who my favorite player on the Coyotes is?” Gwen asks.

“Of course I do. Who is it?”

“Niall O’Rourke. He’s an enforcer, which means he’s really good at checking other players.”

I laugh. “I’m also a big fan of Niall’s.” A small, secretive smile settles on my lips. I

haven't told Trey about my brother playing for his team yet, but it seems like it's about to come out.

"Maeve, tell Gwen why you're such a big fan of his," Greg chimes in like I assumed he would.

A flash of annoyance hits me, but I dispel it just as quickly. This was bound to come out sooner or later. And if Trey and I were dating, I'd have told him long before now.

"Please tell me," Gwen prods for a reply.

"He's my older brother."

Gwen beams at me. "Really?"

I nod. "Really. I also have a younger brother who plays football in college right now. But I think there's a good chance he'll end up in the NFL."

Gwen's eyes are as large as quarters. "Wow!"

Trey nudges his leg into mine. "Why didn't you tell me who your brother was?"

Turning my head, I meet his curious gray stare. "At first, for obvious reasons. And then, I figured I'd tell you at some point, but I hadn't worked out when."

"Now that I know, I can see the resemblance between you," he says.

"Yep, we all have blue eyes. But my little brother Rogan has dark brown hair."

"You're a wealth of secrets, Sunshine." His voice goes soft as he whispers my nickname.

I laugh. “I’m really not. I’m an open book to most, but you’re my boss, so…” I shrug.

“Niall has been a great addition to the team,” Greg interjects.

“He loves playing for the Coyotes,” I say.

“I’d love for him to finish his career with us,” Greg adds.

“As the new owner, I’ll keep your opinion in mind, Dad,” Trey drolls.

Greg chuckles. “I’m sorry, son. I’m still adjusting to this retirement gig. That’s why the saying ‘old habits die hard’ exists.”

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“I get that. I still have to remind myself to drive to my new office every morning instead of my old one.”

“How’s Isaac doing with his new role?” Greg asks.

“Great. We had a meeting last week, and he’s handling his promotion like a pro. I’m pleased with how smoothly everything is running.”

“Are you missing your old company?” I ask.

“Sure, in some ways. But I have a fantastic assistant now who makes my new job more enjoyable.” He winks.

Aware that everyone suddenly looks my way, I roll my eyes and play off his compliment. “If it weren’t for your dad, I’d probably be out of a job right now.”

Trey laughs. “I wasn’t planning to fire you or anyone else. At least not until I had a chance to evaluate everyone’s performance.”

“Maeve, I bet you’ve already proved how invaluable you are to Trey,” Greg says.

“Oh, for sure,” Trey says, nudging his thigh into mine once more. Except this time, he leaves it. The warm, steady pressure reminds me of how solid his muscles are under his skin. “There are dozens of tasks Maeve simplifies for me daily.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but I think that’s a gross exaggeration,” I counter.

“What’s my dad like as a boss?” Gwen pipes in.

I let out a quick laugh.

Trey pretends to loosen the collar on his shirt and rolls his neck from one side to the other.

“He’s a good boss. He can be demanding at times, but he says please and thank you for the most part. And he hasn’t yelled at me yet.”

“Sounds like you’ve got some room for improvement, son,” Greg teases.

Trey throws up his hands. “I guess I’m still a work in progress.”

“You’ve been doing great,” I say, smiling. I don’t want him to think otherwise. No one realizes all he’s been dealing with behind the scenes.

I know how difficult it’s been for me, and I’m not holding the future of an entire professional sports franchise in my hands.

His eyes are filled with warmth as he looks over at me and gently bows his head. “Thank you.”

After we’re finished with dinner, I help Lillith load the dishwasher.

“My son seems taken with you,” she says, catching me off guard.

“I don’t think that’s the case at all. He probably wishes he had a meek assistant who isn’t so free with her opinions.”

“I mean, he’s personally taken with you,” she clarifies with a smile.

“Oh.”

What should I say?

“You don’t seem surprised,” she continues.

“It’s not one sided, but we’re keeping things professional between us.”

For the most part.

“I see.” Though her reply is calm, she looks worried, and I feel compelled to elaborate.

“We met before he became my boss. The first day he was in the office, I realized who he was, and it was extremely shocking. But now I’m used to it.”

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There's a fine line between elaborating and flat-out lying. In my rush to alleviate Lillith's concern, I've drifted into the latter territory.

"I'm glad things are working out. Greg misses going to the office, although he'll never admit it," she says.

"You can tell him he's missed by many—myself included."

"I'll do that. Knowing he may be gone but he's not forgotten will be nice for him to hear."

"Trey told me about the retirement celebration and he asked for my help. Is there anything you had in mind? Do you want it to be a black-tie affair or something more casual?"

"Preferably black tie, but that will depend on what venues are available on such short notice." She shakes her head. "You'd think with all the time I've been waiting for him to retire, I would've planned this party well in advance."

"Don't worry. Trey and I will find the perfect place to hold it."

She smiles. "I already feel better knowing the two of you are working on it together."

Trey walks into the kitchen and moves up beside me. His arm brushes mine, making my skin tingle. He glances between Lillith and me. "You two look like you're up to no good. What are you plotting?"

I snicker. “Don’t be paranoid, Trey.”

“We were discussing your dad’s party,” Lillith says.

“Mom, I told you it’ll be taken care of.”

She pats his cheek. “I know you did. And now that I realize Maeve is helping you, I feel less concerned.”

Trey glances at me and shakes his head. “Do you believe this?”

I laugh. “In your mom’s defense, guys aren’t usually the best party planners.”

“That might be true, but I was smart enough to ask for your help,” he points out.

I nod. “Fair enough.”

Lillith unwraps two pies she must’ve baked earlier. “Would you like some, Maeve?”

Glancing at the clock on the wall, I check the time. “Actually, I hate to cut out early but I need to get going.”

“I’ll send some pie home with you, then,” she says, adding some to a plastic container before I can object.

“Thank you. I’m sure Niall will be trying to get his greedy paws on it before I can.”

“I sent enough for both of you.” She winks.

Greg and Gwen wander into the kitchen to see what’s going on, giving me the perfect opportunity to say my goodbyes to everyone at the same time.



I hug everyone, with the exception of Trey, and profusely thank Lillith for the delicious meal.

“I’ll walk you out,” Trey offers.

“There’s no need. I can find the door.”

He opens his palms. “Help me out here. My parents will kick my ass if I don’t.”

My gaze swings between Greg and Lillith, finding them both nodding. “Fine,” I relent.

“Thank you for sparing me,” Trey says, wrapping his hand around my arm.

“Bye, y’all,” I call out just before we disappear from sight. Their shouts of goodbye follow me to the front door.

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When we step out into the night air, Trey's palm slides down my arm, and his fingers close around my hand, and for a minute we're James and Mae once more. We walk together in silence and stop beside my car.

Trey earnestly stares into my eyes. "Is there anyone who doesn't fall under your spell, Sunshine?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"No, you wouldn't, because it's not something contrived that you do on purpose. It's just who you are deep down inside. You're a ray of sunshine everyone gravitates toward. Even my mom loves you."

What about you?

"I don't know what to say. 'Thank you' seems inadequate."

"You don't need to thank me." He raises his free hand, skimming the back of his fingers down my cheek. "I'm glad you're in my life."

My throat fills with emotion. "I'm glad too," I husk.

He leans forward, his lips slowly lowering to press a gentle kiss to my forehead. He straightens up to his full height and takes a step backward, opening my door. "Drive safe, Sunshine."

"I will." I slip behind the wheel. "Goodnight."

“Goodnight.” Shutting me inside, he moves away from my car as I back out. And just like the nights when we first met, he watches me drive away.

But unlike those nights, I know this really has to be the last time, and I can’t keep putting myself in these situations.

It’s just too painful.

## CHAPTER 17

### TREY

When I walk back inside my parents’ house I find everyone still in the kitchen, having dessert at the island. I make a beeline for the pie and add a hefty slice to a plate. Grabbing a fork, I take a bite and remain standing across from everyone else. “Mom, this is amazing.”

“Of course it is,” she says, laughing.

“So, Trey, you seem to be fond of Maeve,” Dad says, grinning.

“I am. You were right; she’s a great assistant.”

“It sounds like Gramps means you like Maeve,” Gwen says.

This is starting to feel like a dating intervention.

“I do like her. I said she’s great,” I say, feigning ignorance.

“Don’t be deliberately obtuse, son. You know exactly what we mean.” Dad calls me out on my attempt.

I set my fork on the side of my plate with a little too much force. “That doesn’t mean I want to have a discussion about Maeve.”

“Don’t get worked up, Trey. We only want the best for you,” Mom reassures.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s best for me?” My sarcasm can’t be missed.

“Maeve is best for you, Dad.”

“Gwennie, what are you talking about?” I tone down the bass in my voice.

“It’s so obvious you have feelings for her. I’ve seen you with her twice now, and you’re so happy around her.”

“I don’t know, I feel like I’m a happy guy in general.” I try to defend myself.

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“You are, but this is different,” Gwen says.

“You look lovesick, son.” My father laughs.

“The hell I do.” I slap my hand down hard on the countertop. “And thank you all for the advice, but I’m not some twenty-year-old inexperienced and love-struck kid.”

“Why are you so defensive, Dad?” Gwen asks with a giggle.

A growl of frustration breaks free of my throat. “Why are you three giving me such a hard time about Maeve? It’s not like we can be together, even if we wanted to. She’s my employee.”

“You’re the owner of the team. Can’t you make the rules?” Gwen asks.

“I’m also supposed to lead by example.”

“May I ask you something, son?” my mother calmly requests.

I send her a knowing glance. “If I say no, will it really matter?”

She laughs. “Not likely.”

“Then let me have it,” I concede.

“Maeve told me the two of you met before she knew you would be her boss, but she didn’t tell me the details. Did the two of you date?”

I can't get into the details of how we met in front of my thirteen-year-old daughter.

"Yes, but we only went out a few times."

"And that was enough to develop feelings for her?" Mom continues.

"Yes. I was about to propose that we date regularly when I found out she works for me."

Gwen gives me a sympathetic look. "Oh man, that's a rough one, Dad."

"Since the two of you met before she was your assistant, I don't see a problem with you being in a relationship—provided it doesn't interfere with either of you doing your jobs well," Dad offers.

"Really?" I ask, trying to suppress my hope, but it's impossible.

My father's opinion on this matter carries more weight than anyone else's—except maybe Gwen. I don't want her to think poorly of my actions.

"Yes. You don't need to announce that you're dating each other. Just let it evolve naturally. People will figure it out on their own. Or if you'd feel better about getting it out in the open from the get-go, you could share the news. Informing HR either way would be a good idea."

"I don't think Maeve will want anyone to know. At least not at first." My gaze moves over to Gwen. "How do you feel about Maeve and I dating?"

She points to her beaming smile. "What do you think?"

"Are you sure? It's only been you and me until now. You've never had to share our

time with anyone before.”

“Maeve is awesome, Dad. And she’s too hot for you, so you better grab her while she’s interested.”

“She is awesome,” I agree. “And this time, I don’t plan on letting her get away.”

My family cheers, and their support fires me up. I want to drive straight to Maeve’s house and drag her home with me.

But one of the benefits of being older is having more patience. I also know it never hurts to take some time to think about things before acting on them.

Maeve might need some convincing, so I’ll need to bring my A-game. But more than anything, I need to be honest and maybe even bare my soul to her. It won’t be easy, but she’s worth whatever it takes.

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Sixteen... Sixteen... Sixteen...

Sixteen steps is the number of steps it takes me to get from one side of my office to the other. I know this because I've been continually pacing and counting my steps since I arrived thirty minutes ago. I even had to crank the air conditioning and roll up my sleeves to keep from working up a sweat. I honestly don't remember the last time I was this nervous.

Last night as I lay in bed, I worked out everything I wanted to say to Maeve this morning. But now the time is fast approaching, and the words are tangled up in my head like last year's Christmas lights. And no amount of pacing seems to help.

I need to settle down and get my brain to cooperate before she arrives.

I drop down into my chair with a frustrated sigh. I'm not sure how she's going to react to what I have to say, and at the same time, I can't wait to say it. Fuck.

As a business owner, I've given many talks about real estate in front of large crowds and never suffered from a bout of debilitating nerves. But thinking about baring my soul to my golden goddess, is currently making my stomach turn and my knees weak.

Then again, my happiness has never before felt like it hinged on the outcome of a single conversation. It feels like Maeve literally controls our future. If she doesn't agree to give us another chance and can't be persuaded to, I'm fucked.

And not in the way I want to be.



I hear a knock on my door, and I'm sure it's Maeve. I left something on her desk, knowing she'd need to ask me about it.

"Come in."

She steps inside and closes the door. "Did you get this for me?" She walks toward me, holding up a white coffee mug that has a red dragon painted on it.

"Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"I wanted to remind you of how much fun we had that night at the art studio, and I thought it looked a hell of a lot better than the dragon I painted."

She smiles at me. "Thank you. And you're right; it's one million times better than your dragon." She laughs and tips her head toward the door. "I better get to work."

"Hey, while I have you here, can we talk about some things?" Rising, I make my way around the desk.

She nods. "Sure."

"Let's sit on the couch. It'll be more comfortable." We also won't have a desk between us.

We settle side by side, and she places her mug on the coffee table.

"Did you want to talk about the retirement celebration?" she asks.

"No." I nervously tug on my earlobe. "I want to talk about us."

“Us?” Her brow furrows. “Am I getting fired?”

“No! Fuck no. Why would you think that?”

“You look so somber, like something’s on your mind. I just assumed you weren’t happy with our situation.”

“You’re right, something is on my mind. And I’m not happy with our situation. I’d like to make a change, and I’m hoping you’ll agree with what I have in mind.”

Her brow furrows even more. “Okay.”

“I want to be in a relationship with you,” I awkwardly blurt out.

Not as smooth as I was hoping for, but there it is.

“But we can’t,” she whispers.

“I know you’re my employee, and it might not seem like the ideal situation for us to be together, but I’m tired of pretending I don’t have deeper feelings for you. I’m tired of not being able to touch you whenever I want. I’m tired of not kissing you. And most of all, I’m fucking tired of depriving myself of your company when you’re all I think about every moment I’m awake. And even when I’m asleep, my dreams are about you.” Pausing, I run my fingers through my hair.

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“I don’t understand what’s changed. You’re still my boss,” she says. “It’s still taboo for us to be together. Last night on my drive home I made the decision to finally accept that we’ll never be more than an employee and her boss. And now you’re telling me you want to be more.” She throws her hands up. “I can’t keep doing this. It’s not healthy to waffle back and forth like we’ve been doing. We need to be strong and put an end to all the line crossing.”

“No, we need to do the opposite.” I take hold of her hand, clasping it between mine. “Last night, my parents asked me about us. They could tell I’m crazy about you.”

“You are?” she whispers.

“Yes, can’t you tell?”

“I hoped you felt something for me. But it doesn’t matter. I finally made up my mind that I’m only your employee.”

“And there’s nothing I can say or do to change your mind?” I ask, releasing hold of her hand.

Her front teeth dig into her bottom lip, and she shakes her head.

“I guess you leave me no choice, then.” Cupping the nape of her neck, I fasten my lips to hers. My tongue makes a deep dive, caressing the sinuous length of hers. All the stress and worry melts away and it’s just the two of us. Nothing has ever felt so right. Her hands clutch my shoulders, pulling me closer, and when our mouths finally part, she dazedly stares at me.

My hands cradle her face as I peer into her beguiling eyes. “You stole a piece of my heart the first night we met, and every minute we spend together you steal a little more. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, and I’m done trying to convince myself we can’t be together.”

“But what about it being professionally unethical?” she asks.

My thumbs whisk back and forth over her cheeks. “We were involved before you worked for me. I didn’t take advantage of you being my employee.”

She grips my wrists. “We know that, but no one else does. There’ll be a lot of office gossip about us. How long before someone asks you about it in an interview?”

“I don’t care what anyone else says or thinks. You and I are what matters. We’ve been stuck in some limbo stage where we’re more than employees but can’t be in a relationship. I’m done fighting how I feel about you. It’s an impossible battle.”

Her fingertips caress my forearms. “I don’t want to fight how I feel anymore either. It’s too painful. But how are we going to handle this?”

“We don’t have to throw our relationship in people’s faces. We can be professional at work and be together the rest of the time.”

She nods. “At some point everyone will find out.”

My hands slide from her cheeks to her neck and then come to rest on her shoulders. “Yes, but we’ll control the when and the how.”

Her mouth parts in a stunning smile. “Are we really doing this?”

“Fuck yes. We’re really doing this.” I lean in, pressing my mouth to hers, and it’s the

most right thing I've ever felt. One kiss turns into two then three as our lips and tongues get reacquainted.

When I finally draw back, Maeve smiles at me. "God, I've missed kissing you."

"Now you won't have to." I point to my mouth. "These lips are yours anytime you want them."

She grabs her mug from the table. "I guess we should get to work now, huh, boss?"

I stand and pull her up next to me. "Unfortunately, yes. We have a party to plan. The sooner we knock that out, the better."

"I'm gonna try out my new cup, and then we can buckle down. Do you want a coffee?" she asks.

"I do. I'll meet you in the break room."

She leaves first while I retrieve my mug from my desk. As I wander down the hall, a grin takes over my face. I feel like I could conquer anything right now. It's a good thing I don't pass by anyone else.

Maeve is alone and washing out her dragon mug in the sink. I head over to the coffeemaker and get my coffee brewing, then turn around, leaning back against the counter. She wanders over and stands in front of me. Plucking her mug from her hand, I place it on the counter next to me. I give a cursory glance toward the doorway before I tug Maeve to me and slam my lips onto hers. I know we shouldn't be doing this. I know this is unprofessional and a bad example for others. But I don't give a fuck. All I can think of is her sweet taste and how soft and pliant her lips are yielding to mine. My hands cup her ass, squeezing two handfuls of perfection, and I never want to let go.

We kiss for longer than we should, until Maeve pushes on my chest. “Trey, we can’t do this.”

My hands fall from her ass, and she steps back from me. I turn toward the counter and adjust my dick before I grab my coffee. When I pivot back to face her, I clear my throat and say, “I’ll see you in my office, Miss O’Rourke.”

“Yes, sir.” She smirks.

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I retrace my steps and sit behind my desk, sipping my coffee. I shouldn't have kissed her in a public work area. Anyone could've seen us, and we're lucky they didn't. I need to exercise restraint if we're going to keep this quiet for now. But that's easier said than done when it comes to Maeve.

### CHAPTER 18

#### MAEVE

I don't know how we made it through the rest of the workday without laying our hands on each other. But we barely make it through the side door of Trey's house before he's on me, slanting his mouth over mine. His hands roam over every inch of my ass before he cups and squeezes each cheek. I taste his hunger and desperation in our kiss and echo it back. Our lips never parting, he walks me backward, picks me up, and sits me on the kitchen table.

His mouth slides across my cheek, his teeth nibbling on my earlobe. He dots warm, wet kisses down the side of my neck, making my toes curl. He grips my blouse, tearing it open. Buttons fly free, pinging the tabletop and floor.

I gasp. "Don't ruin my clothes."

"I'll buy you new ones," he says, burying his face in my cleavage. He nuzzles his nose deeper, and his hair tickles my skin. I bury my fingers in the thick strands, urging him lower.

"Fucking gorgeous. Every inch of you." His tongue swirls over the top of each breast

before he tugs the cups down, exposing my nipples. He latches on to one, sucking and nibbling before moving over to feast on the other side.

“Lie back,” he commands, and I lower to the hard surface. He tugs my shoes from my feet, dropping them to the floor with a thud. His hands glide up the outside of my calves and thighs, lifting my skirt and they don’t stop until they hook in each side of my panties. Then his hands begin the descent back down as he removes the scrap of lace. He pulls out a chair and sits down, then places both of my feet flat on the table, giving him a clear view of just how eager I am for his touch. Feather-light, he traces a fingertip back and forth over my seam. “So wet for me.” His hands slip under my ass, raising me up. The intensity in his silver gaze is almost feral as he stares between my legs. “This pussy is mine.”

“Yes,” I husk, trembling with the need to feel his mouth on me.

His head lowers, and his warm breath wafts over my center. I take in a deep lungful of air and hold it, anticipating the first swipe of his tongue, but he moves over to nibble on my inner thigh. I feel his breath again as he passes over on his way to the other side. His teeth press into my soft flesh and then his lips soothe the sting.

“Please.” I’m about to beg some more when his tongue slices between my lips, dipping inside me. An unintelligible sound leaves me. I thread my fingers through his hair and clutch his head. His lips slowly trace over every inch of my pussy until my legs are shaking.

And when I feel as though I can’t take it any longer, his mouth wraps around my clit. His tongue gently flicks and circles, as if he could do this all night. But when my hips start to rock, he picks up the pace, driving me higher and higher until I shatter.

Trey rises, tearing at his belt and pants. I’m still trembling from my orgasm when he thrusts inside me. “Need this pussy,” he grits between clenched teeth. “Mine.” He



growls as he aggressively proves his ownership of me. He slams into me a few more times and then his hips jerk as his own orgasm takes over. Every muscle in his body tightens before he slumps down over me.

“Jesus. I needed that.”

I laugh. “Me too.”

He raises his head. “I’ve missed you. Not just this but being with you. Alone.”

My hands wander over his back. “I know what you mean. I’ve missed you too.”

“We may have a problem, though,” he says. “I forgot all about a condom.”

I smile. “I’m on birth control.”

His grin lights up his face. “Best news ever. I’m never wearing one again.”

\* \* \*

Trey and I have effortlessly settled into our relationship over the past few weeks. We’ve kept our new status to ourselves aside from his parents and Gwen, and of course, I’ve told Lucy and Sheryl.

Sometimes, things in life feel like they’re just meant to be, and that’s how it’s been for us. I still make sure Gwen gets plenty of alone time with him, but she often wants to include me when they do things together.

Sitting next to Trey and watching him get a pedicure might be one of the highlights of my life. I didn’t realize his feet were ticklish until now.

He grits his teeth as the nail tech uses a large file to remove the calluses on his heel. He looks like he's in pain, but he's really fighting to hold back his laughter. I snap a pic of him with my phone to remember this moment, and Gwen giggles.

"Blackmail picture," she says.

"Exactly. I'll send you a copy," I say, winking.

"Which color do you like better?" she asks, pointing between a bright yellow and a dark purple.

"I like the yellow. It's happy."

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“Trey, what color are you having your nails painted?” I tease.

“Whatever color you want, Sunshine.”

I smile at him. “Good answer.”

“You should pick some obnoxious color,” Gwen suggests.

I shake my head. “It’s enough that he’s willing to paint them. I won’t make him go through with it.”

Trey grunts, and I glance over at him. His teeth are once again gritted as the nail tech goes to work on his other heel.

I point to his face. “Gwen, that expression right there is proof of just how much your dad loves you.”

“And you,” she says.

“Oh, well... I mean... we haven’t...” I trail off.

We haven’t exchanged those three words yet, but I feel every bit of it in my heart.

“Dad, do you love Maeve?”

“Yes, but I haven’t told her yet.” He sends a contrite look toward me.

“Well, that’s dumb. If you love her, why haven’t you told her?” Gwen gets right to the heart of the matter.

“You’re right. It is dumb. Especially since she was so easy to fall in love with.”

“Dad!” Gwen says, sounding exasperated. “Tell her now.”

He reaches over, taking hold of my hand. “Maeve O’Rourke, I love you. I think I’ve loved you since the first time I looked into those beautiful, deep-blue eyes.”

Said eyes are filling with tears.

“I love you too, Trey.”

Gwen lets out a whoop of happiness while the nail techs ignore us and keep doing their job as if this is normal behavior.

Crooking my finger, I call him closer. He leans toward me. “I think I’ve loved you since the first time you called me good girl.”

\* \* \*

I walk into the kitchen where Lucy and Niall are sitting. “Hey, you two.”

Lucy smiles. “Hi, Maeve.”

“Oh, hey, I didn’t think you lived here anymore,” Niall says.

Lucy smacks his arm. “Leave her alone. She’s an adult.”

“You’re just in time. We’re about to FaceTime with Rogan.”

“Awesome. I haven’t spoken to him aside from texts in ages. We keep missing each other.”

Niall picks up his phone and makes the call. I move around behind him and Lucy so I can be part of the conversation.

“Hello,” Rogan answers, smiling at us.

“Hey, brother,” Niall says.

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“Hi, Rogan,” Lucy says, waving at him.

“Lucy, are you ready to leave my brother for me yet?”

She shakes her head. “Sorry, but it’s not gonna happen, my young friend.”

He winces. “Why do you always have to bring up my age, Luce?”

“Hello, Rogan,” I say. “How have you been, little brother?”

“Hey, Maeve. I’ve been good. I’ve been working out a lot, as you can see.” He flexes an arm to show us.

“Are you excited for your senior year of college?” I ask.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to be done and make lots of money playing for the NFL.”

“I like your confidence,” Niall says. “Just don’t get cocky. Nothing’s a sure thing until it happens.”

“Cocky is my middle name, but I back it up with actions, so it’s all good.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t be an insufferable asshole, Rogan. Humbleness is where it’s at.”

He shrugs. “I’m humble when I need to be.”

I rub my forehead. “How’s football going?” It was either I change the subject or reach through the phone and strangle him.

“Practices have been ballbusting, but our team already looks strong. I’m making a bold prediction. Are you ready?” He pauses. “We won’t lose more than two games.”

“That is bold,” Niall says.

“When’s your first home game?” I ask.

“The first week of September.”

“That’s so soon,” I say. “Good luck.”

“Yeah, good luck, bro,” Niall says.

“We should try to go,” Lucy suggests.

“I knew you missed me,” Rogan teases her.

“I know I can’t get away from work,” I say. The retirement celebration is coming up and then the preseason starts.

“How’s your job going with the new owner?” Rogan asks.

“It’s great. I’m loving it.”

Lucy’s foot nudges my leg as if to say I know why you’re loving it so much.

“I hate to cut this family reunion short, but I have to hit the gym again tonight. Thanks for calling. I miss you all. Especially you, Lucy.” He winks.

“Miss you too. Love you, little brother,” I say, waving.

“Love you,” he calls out.

“Make smart choices,” I add.

“If we don’t get to talk before your first game, good luck. Give them hell,” Niall says.



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Rogan flashes a grin. “You know it. Bye!” He hangs up.

“He looks great,” I say.

“I hope he can hold his shit together for the rest of this year. He’s so close to being done with college,” Niall says.

I nod. “I know. But then we’ll be worried about him playing for the NFL.”

“O’Rourke siblings, only one worry at a time,” Lucy says.

“You’re right,” I agree. “What are you two doing tonight?”

“We’re going to the movies. You want to come?” Lucy asks.

“No, I’m going to get caught up on my laundry.” Having a boyfriend means less time to take care of things like having clean clothes. But who needs clean clothes when your boyfriend prefers you naked?

## CHAPTER 19

### MAEVE

“Maeve, are you almost ready?” Trey calls out from the other side of the door.

I’ve been in one of Trey’s guest bathrooms for the past hour, doing my makeup and curling my hair.

“I’ll be out in five minutes.” I shuck the bathrobe from my shoulders, carefully stepping into my dress. I slowly draw the delicate material upward, slipping the thin straps over my shoulders. Reaching around, I tug up the short zipper that starts beneath my ass and ends at the small of my back.

Sitting on the vanity bench, I slip my feet into the silver stilettos and fasten the narrow ankle straps. Standing, I spin to face the mirror and take in my reflection. I smooth my hands down over the icy-green material, and check out my profile view on each side. This dress fits like a glove from my chest to my upper thighs and then it flares slightly. There’s a slit on one side that exposes a large portion of my leg.

I open the door and find Trey with his hand raised to knock. “Here I am.” I smile.

His gaze skims up and down the front of my body like a heated caress. “You’re beautiful,” he says.

“Thank you.” Turning my back to him, I ask, “Will you please fasten the two sides into a neat bow?” The back of the dress has a thin lace that crisscrosses over my bare skin.

“I’d rather be undoing the zipper and getting you out of this dress.”

“Mmm, as much as I like that idea, I know it would be a bad look if you missed your dad’s retirement celebration.”

He growls with frustration. “I know. I’ll be spending my night thinking about what I’m going to do to you once we get back here.” He drags his fingertips down my spine, making me shiver.

“I can’t wait.” I hold still as his fingers deftly fasten the bow. He slaps my ass, taking me by surprise. “Ow!”

His lips tease the shell of my ear. “Later, I’ll kiss it better.” His teeth nibble my neck, and my knees go weak. “Are you ready to leave, Sunshine?”

I grab my small purse from the vanity and nod. “I’m all set.” When I spin around, my gaze slowly scrolls over his tuxedo-clad physique. I try to whistle, but it sounds like a sputter of air, so I settle for saying, “Hello, sexy.”

He laughs. “You can’t whistle?”

“No, not well, anyway.”

“That’s okay, Sunshine. Your mouth is good at the important things.”

Holding hands, we slowly walk down the staircase together. “I hope I don’t break an ankle in these heels.”

“If you do, I’ll carry you around,” he says.

“I know you would, babe.”

We step out onto the porch, and the air is so muggy it’s like walking into a damp wall. “Ugh, why did I move here again?” I ask.

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“Obviously, to meet me,” he says, locking the door.

“If you want me to stay here, we need to get in your SUV and turn on the air conditioning.”

“Relax. I’ve got it under control.” He takes my hand, escorting me down the porch steps to the driveway. That’s when I notice the idling limousine parked along the side of the street.

My head snaps toward him. “You got us a limo?”

He grins. “I figured we’d travel in style.”

The driver is waiting and opens the back door. I carefully climb in and slide over on the leather seat. Trey moves over beside me, and the door is pushed closed.

I sigh as the cool air hits my heated skin. “I feel like I’m going to my senior prom again. But you’re way hotter than my date was.” I wiggle my eyebrows. “Are you going to feel me up on the way to the venue?”

“You’re with a man now.” He slips his hand inside the slit on my dress, curling his fingers around my bare thigh and squeezing. “I’m going to make you come.”

“Here?” I squeak. The divider between the driver and us is up but still...

He turns sideways on the seat, skimming his hand up my inner thigh. “Spread your legs.” I immediately comply, and his hand cups my panty-covered pussy. “So warm.

Are you wet for me?”

“Yes.”

His hand burrows under the lace, gently gliding back and forth over me, spreading around my arousal. I’m already soaked and throbbing, and he’s barely touched me. He slides two fingers inside and continuously pumps them, then groans. “So fucking perfect. I can’t wait to fuck this sweet cunt later.”

The heel of his hand presses against my clit, making me moan. “Yes, more,” I say, rocking my hips.

His thumb rubs all around the sensitive flesh, avoiding direct contact and edging me closer to orgasm. With taut thighs and clenched fists, I balance on the precipice of ecstasy. A needy whimper slips from my lips as I beg, “Please.”

He closes his mouth over mine, his tongue sweeping along my bottom lip before dipping inside. At the same time, his thumb rubs my clit with the perfect amount of pressure to drive me over the edge. My legs quiver, and my mouth parts beneath his as I cry out from the overwhelming pleasure.

“That’s my good girl,” he husks. Slipping his fingers from me, he shoves them between his lips, sucking them clean. “Fuck, you taste good,” he says while I recline against the seat with the strength of a cooked noodle. Reaching over, he pulls a few tissues from the box on the side of the limo and uses them to wipe between my legs.

“You might need to carry me around all night,” I warn.

He laughs. “You’ve got a few minutes to get the blood flowing before we arrive.”

“I’m not complaining. An orgasm trumps steady legs any day of the week. But do I

look like I just came? I don't really want to advertise what we just did. Especially since we haven't announced we're together."

He skims his fingers over my cheek. "You're flushed."

I smirk. "And you have lipstick on your mouth."

He takes another tissue and wipes all around his mouth until he's in the clear while I reapply the red shade to my lips. I smooth a hand over my hair, and it feels like it's holding up well. I'm thankful I arranged it in a neat knot on the back of my head.

Glancing out the window as the limo turns, I notice we're pulling into the vineyard entrance. "Ooh, we're here. I'm excited and nervous at the same time," I say.

"What are you nervous about?"

"You and I worked on this together. I just want everything to go smoothly."

"It will." He takes hold of my hand and gives me a reassuring squeeze.

The limo driver pulls up in front of the area where the party is taking place. He pops around to open the door for us. Trey steps out first, helping me out of the vehicle.

"Thanks, babe," I say.

He thanks the driver, and we head inside. I tug my hand from his. "We can't act like we like each other."

"Sunshine, what I feel for you goes way beyond like."

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“Trey, you know what I mean.”

He laughs. “I do. I promise I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“I don’t need to promise. You know what a rule follower I am.”

“I prefer to think of it as a need to please me.”

“There’s that too.” I glance at him from the corner of my eye. His chest is puffed up with pride.

“Maeve.” Lucy calls my name from up ahead, where she and Niall wait.

I wave, and we make our way to them. “Hey, fancy meeting you two here.”

“Hi,” Lucy says, pulling me into a quick hug. Then she looks me over. “Look at you. You’re gorgeous.”

“So are you,” I say. Lucy is stunning in her strapless black gown. My gaze moves over to Niall. “Big brother, you clean up nicely.”

He shrugs. “You look beautiful.”

“Aww, thanks. Niall, you must know my boss, Trey.”

“Yes, we’ve met. How are you?”

Trey shakes his hand. "I'm great, thanks. How's everything been?"

"Practices have been going well and we retained all of our team, so I think we could have another great year."

"That's the plan," Trey says.

"I think I need some alcohol to make it through this party," I say.

Trey nods. "That sounds like a good idea."

"We'll catch up with you two later on," I say.

Lucy nods. "Sounds good."

Trey and I walk toward the bar set up along one side of the large white tent. We exchange greetings along the way with some of his parents' friends. Each time, he introduces me as his employee, making me regret my reluctance to be open about our relationship. But I really think it's best to keep it private for now.

We finally make it to the bar. "What would you like?" Trey asks.

"I'll take a mojito, please."

While he orders our drinks, Sheryl sidles up beside me. "Hi." She flashes a toothy grin.

"Hey, you," I say, giving her a brief hug. "Did you just arrive?"

"Yes. I can't believe I'm here."



“Well, you helped me put the slideshow together. It’s only fair you get to be here and see the fruits of our labor.”

“There are so many famous hockey players all over the place. I might lose my mind.”

“I put you at the same table with me and Trey.”

Her eyes flash wider. “Does that mean it’s Greg’s table?”

“Yes, it does.”

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“Holy crap. I feel so important. I might pass out.”

I laugh. “You’ll be fine.”

“Maeve, here’s your drink,” Trey says, handing me a glass. “Hey, Sheryl. Can I get you a drink?”

“Yes, please. I’d love a glass of white wine.”

Trey turns back to the bar to order, and Sheryl fans her face. She mouths, “He’s so hot.”

I nod. “I agree one hundred percent.”

Sheryl leans closer to me. “How are things going?”

“Amazingly well. Despite our differences, we just click.”

“No problems with his daughter?”

“Not at all. She’s great.”

She glances around to make sure no one is listening. “When will you two go public with your relationship?”

“I don’t know. Things have been so wonderful that I want to keep it private for now. I don’t want to invite any outside influences in.”

“That’s understandable. It’s not like your boyfriend is some average guy no one knows.”

“Exactly. And I am some average girl, so I may be slightly insecure about it.”

She nudges her shoulder into mine. “Shut up. You’re awesome.”

I lean my head on her shoulder. “Aww, thanks. But you’re my friend, so you’re obligated to say that.”

“Trey Ledger can choose anyone in the world,” she says.

My head cocks as I look at her. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

She rolls her eyes so hard, I’m concerned her fake lashes might fall off. “Let me finish. My point is, you’re obviously special if he chose you.”

“Sheryl,” Trey interrupts, handing her a glass.

“Thank you,” she says before taking a sip. “Mmm.” She taps her fingernails against the side of the glass. “This is some expensive wine. You know how I can tell?”

“How?” I ask.

She whispers, “It tastes like shit.”

I laugh too loud, then cover my mouth. “I don’t know if I can handle sitting next to you all night. You might make me choke on my dinner.”

“And when you go home, Trey will make you choke on his?—”

“What are you two getting into?” Trey asks.

“That’s classified,” Sheryl says.

He grins. “I don’t think I want to know anyway.”

“Have you seen your parents yet?” I ask him.

“No, but I was talking to a bunch of people while I was waiting for our drinks. It looks like the turnout is great.”

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“We lucked out with the weather. I was worried when we booked this place that it might rain or be too hot and humid.”

He shrugs. “If it rained, we’re under a giant tent.”

“I know, but it’s a decent walk from the parking lot to here. No woman wants to carry an umbrella while wearing a gown.”

He smiles at me. “I’ll take your word for it. We should head to our table.”

“Okay.” I hook arms with Sheryl. “Come on, date. Let’s go.”

“Yay, look at me. My girl’s hot as fuck,” Sheryl says.

“Yes, she is,” Trey agrees, sending me a heated glance.

I send a cautionary one his way. “Behave.”

“That’s not easy when you look fucking edible,” he says quietly. His compliment sends a burst of flutters through my stomach.

We reach the table at the same time his parents do. I hurry over to embrace them both, and Trey does the same.

Sheryl hugs Greg, and he introduces her to Lillith. We all settle in our seats. It’s not long before some of Greg and Lillith’s close friends join them on the other side of the table.

Trey's hand possessively grips my thigh under the cover of the tablecloth while I sip on my mojito. My gaze moves about the crowd as I look for familiar faces. A couple of my brother's teammates give me a quick nod. While I don't know them well, we have been introduced.

"How do you know Ryder and Murphy?" Trey asks.

"My brother."

"Are they nice to you?"

"Trey, I barely know them. But they were polite when we met and just now."

"Just making sure they're good guys on and off the ice," he says.

"Hey, little brother."

Trey's head whips around, and he jumps from his chair, smiling.

"Phil. I was wondering where you were." They shake hands and slap each other on the back. "Hi, Terry," Trey says, pulling her in for a quick hug.

"Trey, how are you? We haven't seen as much of you lately. We heard you're busy." Her eyes move to me, and she smiles.

"Phil and Terry, this is Maeve." He introduces us, and I rise and shake their hands.

"It's nice to meet you both," I say.

"You're even prettier than Lillith mentioned," Terry says.

I place my hand on my chest. “Thank you. That’s so nice of you to say.”

“We better go say hello to the parents before Mom gives us the stink eye,” Phil says.

Trey chuckles. “Too late.”

Phil shakes his head and mutters something as he and Terry walk away.

“They seem very nice,” I say.

“Yeah, they’re great. I would’ve liked to introduce you to them before tonight, but there hasn’t been time.”

“Better late than never.”

All the guests take their seats, and the servers start going around to each table, placing bowls of salad in front of each person. I move my fork around the greens.

“What’s wrong with your salad?” Trey asks.

“I’m afraid I’ll spill on my dress.”

He laughs. “It can be replaced.”

“If I don’t spill on it, I won’t need to replace it.”

Trey and I have different views on money. Because he has plenty, he doesn’t worry about every dollar he spends like I do. And as much as I love how he spoils me with thoughtful gifts, it’s going to take a while for me to get used to it.

The main course gets delivered, and I dig in. Soft music plays in the background, and the conversations lower to a hum as everyone eats.

“This meal is amazing,” Sheryl says.

“It’s better than I expected. We lucked out when we found this place on such short notice.”

“This would be a great place to hold your wedding reception,” she whispers, wagging her eyebrows.



I shake my head. “Talk about premature.”

When I finally put down my fork, it’s almost time for the slideshow to begin, which I’m really excited about. Greg doesn’t know about it, and Lillith gave Trey a bunch of pictures to include. I’m predicting by the end of the slides, Greg will be tearing up.

The vineyard staff turns on the massive white screen at the back of the tent. One of the staff members, holding a tablet, turns on the slideshow. “What a Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong starts to play, calling everyone’s attention to the screen. The pictures start when Greg was a baby, which elicits a lot of “Awws” from the guests. When “My Way” by Frank Sinatra, the second song we used, starts to play, it’s the beginning of the pictures from when he became the team owner. Images of him and some of hockey’s biggest legends flash on the screen. The song ends with a pic of him holding the large silver championship cup after the team won this season.

The third and final song was going to be “(I’ve Had) The Time of My Life,” but Trey thought it should be something funny to lighten the mood. He chose “Take This Job and Shove It” by Johnny Paycheck. I’d never heard it, but when I looked it up online and listened to it, I had to agree with him. Judging by all the laughter, I’m guessing I’m one of the few who wasn’t familiar with it. All the images for this song are from the party we threw him in the boardroom on his last day of work.

Trey nudges my thigh with his, and I smile at him. “Good choice.” I hold my fist up, and he bumps it. We’re halfway through the song when an image comes up on the screen that makes me gasp—Trey and I engaged in a kiss in the break room.

“Oh my God,” I whisper behind the hand covering my mouth.

“What the fuck?” Sheryl says, seeming to be genuinely shocked.

Trey rubs my back. “Relax, Sunshine. It’s okay.”

“Okay? That’s not the word I’d use.” It feels as though every pair of eyes in the room is no longer focusing on the slideshow and instead are watching us.

He shrugs. “It’s too late to do anything but lean into it.”

“Are you all right?” Sheryl asks.

“I don’t know what I am.” I’m panicked and sick to my stomach. It’s all I can do to remain in my seat until the slideshow is over. But once it is, I jump from my chair and speed walk from the tent.

“Maeve!” Trey calls my name, hurrying after me. I slow down, allowing him to catch up. “Where are you going?” he asks, grabbing my hand.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t stay in there with everyone’s judgy eyeballs on me any longer.”

“No one cares that we’re together, Maeve. They’ve all got their own lives to worry about.”

“People love gossip and scandal.”

“What’s so scandalous about two people meeting and starting to fall for each other before they end up working together?” he asks.

“Nothing, but that picture makes us look bad.”

He squeezes my hand. “No, that picture shows everyone we’re in love. What could be wrong about that?”

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“Maeve, are you okay?” Niall calls out as he walks toward us.

“Yeah, I’m just embarrassed and humiliated.”

“You two are together?” Niall asks.

Trey nods. “I’m in love with your sister.”

“You love him?” Niall asks.

I nod. “I do.”

“I hope you’re both happy together. But, Trey. I know you’re my boss, but if you ever hurt my sister, I’ll make you regret it.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” Trey says.

“Maeve, march back in there with your head held high,” Niall says.

“I don’t want to,” I whine. “Can’t we go home?” I ask Trey.

“No, your brother’s right. There’s no reason for you and me to feel ashamed. We’re going to return, listen to my dad give his speech, and eat some cake.”

“Ugh. Fine,” I relent.

“I’ll be with you the whole way.” Raising our joined hands, he kisses mine, and we

start retracing our steps.

“Walk in with a smile on your face, sis. Act like nothing’s wrong.”

“I’ll try.”

“Think about Rogan and what he’d do in your position,” Niall suggests.

I laugh. “He’d be happy to have all the attention on him.”

Niall nods. “He would. So pretend you like it.”

We’re almost to the tent. I drag in a deep breath and exhale slowly.

“Ready?” Trey asks.

“Yeah.”

“Come on, sis. You’ve got this,” Niall says.

I relax the crease between my brows right before we step inside. All the guests don’t fall silent like I imagined they would. In fact, as I glance around, I notice hardly anyone is looking our way. My smile is genuine as we cross the floor. “Thanks, Niall,” I say. He squeezes my arm before he returns to his table, and Trey and I take our seats once more.

“You good?” Sheryl asks.

“Yeah.” My head swivels to the man I love, and I smile. “Actually, I’m great.”

CHAPTER 20

TREY

“Are my girls excited for the first game of the season?” I ask, pulling into my designated parking spot.

“Yes!” Gwen yells. “I don’t think I could have more Coyotes gear on if I tried. I’ve got my socks, my leggings, and my sweatshirt.”

“Don’t forget the logo on your cheek,” Maeve reminds her.

“Oh yeah.”

“Are you excited?” I ask Maeve.

She nods. “I am. I’m more excited that I’m spending the day with my two favorite people than about the game itself.”

We enter the arena through a special entrance reserved for suite owners, and take the private elevator up to the fifth floor.

“Swanky,” Maeve says.

I tap her nose. “I’ll show you all the finer things in life, Sunshine.”

She smiles at me. “You already have.”

My parents are already in the suite when we arrive, and Gwen rushes over to hug them.

“Maeve, honey, I’m so glad to see you,” Mom says. She walks toward her with her arms outstretched, and Maeve meets her halfway. I can tell how fond my mom is of her by the way she embraces her.

When Mom is moving toward me, I notice my dad is waiting for Maeve.

“My favorite boss is here,” Maeve says, loud enough for me to hear, then she hurries toward my dad.

He leans in for a hug, chuckling. "I'm never going to let my son live that down."

"I don't think you should," she says like the vixen she is.

My dad comes over to shake my hand and pull me into one of his backslapping hugs.

"Who else is coming?" Gwen asks.

"No one. When you said you were bringing Gwennie, we figured we'd keep it simple."

"This suite can get rowdy sometimes with our family and friends," Mom explains to Maeve.

Spending the day with the entire Ledger family is a lot, especially when you're all stuck in one room. They're my family, and I love them, but they still drive me crazy sometimes.

Maeve moves to the bank of glass that runs from one side of the suite to the other, looking down at the shiny ice surface with the Coyotes logo painted dead center.

"You're welcome to get comfortable." I gesture to the row of chairs lining a large portion of the windows.

Gwen grabs her hand, tugging. "Sit next to me, Maeve." She lets my daughter lead her to a chair. I smile as I watch them.

"Trey." Mom calls me over to the other side of the room where the refrigerator is located. "Gwen seems to really love Maeve," she says.

I nod. "She does. Almost as much as I do."

My gaze swings over to find their heads bent close together as they talk, and it fills my chest with emotion.

“I’m glad that picture that was in the slideshow wasn’t the end of you two,” Dad says.

“Yeah, me too, but Maeve’s tougher than she looks. She’s the kindest person, but she’s got an iron will.”

“Did you ever find out how that picture got in there?”

“Yeah. I knew when it was taken because there was only one time I kissed her outside of my office. I reviewed the security footage, and it turns out it was taken by one of our employees, Randy Waverly. He had a crush on Maeve and wasn’t happy when she wouldn’t go out with him.”

“Did you fire him?” Dad asks.

“Hell yeah. Not for taking the picture, because we were in the wrong for kissing at work. But he went out of his way to add it to the slideshow, and for that, he had to go.”



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“Good riddance,” Mom says. “He would’ve done something else eventually. It’s better that you removed the problem altogether.”

“That’s what I figured.” I grab two bottles of water and an iced tea from the fridge, then amble over to take the open seat next to Maeve. “Gwen, this is yours.” I hand over the lemon iced tea, and she thanks me. “And this is for you.” I pass one of the waters to Maeve.

“Thank you, Trey.”

I wrap my arm around the back of her chair. “You’re welcome.”

My parents take their seats on the other side of their granddaughter, and we wait for the game to start.

There’s a knock on the door before one of the serving staff wheels in a cart filled with a plethora of treats: chicken tenders, pretzel bites with beer cheese, nachos, and much more.

“Yay,” Gwen cheers when she sees all the choices. “Can I have whatever I want, Dad?”

“Within reason.”

Gwen fills her plate with more food than she’ll be able to eat, but I don’t say a word. She’s having fun, and that’s what matters to me.

“Your turn, Sunshine,” I whisper.

“I don’t know where to begin,” she says.

“The pretzels and beer cheese are my favorite, so don’t take any of those,” I joke.

“You made my mind up for me.” She snatches one of the salty bites and dunks it in the cheese before raising it to her lips. Her teeth tentatively dig into the dough, and her eyes snap open wide as she chews. “So good.”

“Here you go.” I set the platter on the ledge below the window in front of her.

“I can’t eat all of those,” she says.

“Don’t worry, I’ll help.”

“What if your parents want some?”

“My mom doesn’t eat cheese very often, therefore my Dad doesn’t eat it in front of her.”

Sometimes she makes an exception. Like when she made lasagna for Maeve.

She laughs. “I bet retirement is going to be a lot harder than he thought.”

“Absolutely,” I say, adding some food to a plate and then pushing the cart over to my parents. “This is for both of us, so help yourself to whatever you want.” She eyes the mound of food and reaches for a chicken tender.

“Not that one,” I say. She pulls her hand back, and I laugh. “I’m just messing with you.” She rolls her eyes and plucks a golden tender from the top. I do the same before

placing the plate on the ledge.

Another server appears with a drink cart. “What would you like?” I ask Maeve.

“I’ve got water.”

“I’m the one driving.”

“Good point.” She taps her finger to her lips. “May I please have a margarita?”

The server nods. “Salt or sugar on the rim?”

“Salt, please,” she says.

“You’re salty enough already.” My teasing earns me an elbow to the ribs. “Vicious too.”

She turns her head, surveying my face with a cool stare. “Only when provoked.”

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“I’ll keep that in mind.” I wink. I like salty Maeve, so cue the provocation. But then again, she doesn’t have a bad side—literally or figuratively. I’ve come to realize just how deeply in love with her I am.

The server hands me the margarita and I pass it to Maeve.

“Thank you,” she says.

“We’re all set,” I tell the server, and he moves over to serve my parents.

Maeve takes a sip from the glass and then licks the salt from her lips, humming at the taste. She moans. “Yum.”

My dick twitches. “You did that on purpose,” I say.

She laughs mischievously and shrugs.

Shifting my weight, I lean forward and focus on what’s happening on the ice. The game’s about to start. We’re playing a division rival that always gives us a tough run. Getting this win is important if we want to begin the season off on the right foot. Plus, as the new owner, I don’t want my first game to be a loss.

Maeve scoots forward on her seat, setting her drink on the ledge. She snatches a pretzel from the platter and dips it in the smooth cheese. She bites it in half and notices me watching her. She offers the remainder up to me as she chews. Closing my lips around her fingers, I take it, flicking my tongue against her skin. She gapes at me, and I snicker.

“Consider that payback for the moaning.”

Her eyes flash a warning. “Behave.”

“Behaving is overrated, Sunshine.”

And damn near impossible when she’s near.

If we were alone, I’d show her how fun misbehaving can be. I could be between her legs, thrumming my tongue against her clit while she watches the game, and no one would be the wiser.

How do I get rid of everyone and make that happen?

My dick grows harder at the thought. Trying to be discreet, I adjust myself, urging it down. She has a power over me I’m still not used to. But how does one become accustomed to getting the wind knocked out of them? That’s what happens when I look at Maeve, and it’s not just because she’s so fucking stunning. I love everything about her, and I know I always will.

When the game starts, we all have our faces pressed to the glass as we watch. The first two periods pass, and with both teams playing tentatively, there’s no scoring. Things pick up in the third with Kaiden scoring a goal, but then one of the opposing players slips the puck past Murphy.

“Dang,” Gwen yells.

“It’s okay. There’s still plenty of time left,” Maeve reassures her.

My eyes jump to the game clock. With two minutes remaining, there’s plenty of time to score another goal.

Maeve grabs my hand and bounces in her seat. “I’m so nervous. I don’t usually watch the games.”

“That’s going to change, Sunshine.”

“Yeah, but I never had an owner’s box to sit in before. It doesn’t get better than this.”

As the clock ticks down, my heart races faster. Niall strips the puck away, sailing it across the ice to Ryder. “Come on, guys,” I mumble to myself. “Get the job done.” And like they can hear me, Ryder passes the puck to Darius, and he slaps it right past the goalie and into the net with less than ten seconds left on the clock.

Maeve and I leap to our feet. Wrapping my arms around her, I lift her up and spin around. When I set her down, I move over to Gwen and whirl her around too. I put Gwen down and step in front of my mom. “Are you ready for your turn?” I ask, holding my arms out.

She laughs and shakes her head. My dad stands. “I’m ready,” he says, holding his arms out. He doesn’t expect me to take him up on the challenge, and when I do, the surprise on his face is worth the effort it takes to lift his two-hundred-twenty-pound frame up and spin him around.

When I set him down he laughs and wraps his arms around me. He hugs me tightly. “Congratulations, son. You and your team are off to a great start.”

EPILOGUE

TREY

SIX MONTHS LATER

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:10 am*

Standing on the hotel patio, I look out at the bright and clear day. The vivid-blue, cloudless sky reminds me of Maeve's eyes. But everything reminds me of her these days. I'm a lovesick fool when it comes to her.

The Atlantic Ocean is rough, and the whitecaps are plentiful as the tide rolls up onto the shore. A gentle breeze, carrying the scent of salt water, ruffles my hair. The smell of the sea is soothing and helps to calm the rush of emotions whirling around like a tornado inside of me.

Why am I so nervous?

There's no reason she'd say no to me. We've known each other for nine months and been in love with one another for almost as long. I'm forty-three years old. I've had plenty of time to gain enough wisdom to know Maeve is the love of my life, and I want to spend every day with her.

"I'm ready," Maeve calls out as she steps outside next to me.

I can't help but stare at her, from her head to the red-tipped toes peeking out of her sandals. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." She smiles, preening. She brushes her hands over her knee-length sundress. "I love this so much. Thank you for surprising me."

"You know I like to spoil you."

"I know you do. I also know how much this designer charges for her clothes. I'm

almost afraid to wear it—almost—but it’s too pretty not to.”

“Do you still want to take a walk on the beach?”

She nods. “Let’s go.”

We step from our patio onto the path that leads straight to the beach. When we reach the sand, I kick my slides off and set them to the side, and she places her sandals next to mine. I slip my hand around hers, and we start down the beach. The soft, dry sand is hot under our feet, so I steer us closer to the shoreline.

“I love it here, but I love all beaches,” she says. “One of the hardest things about growing up in Northern Virginia was not being close to the ocean. I know there’s the Chesapeake Shore, but it’s not the same. And don’t mention Virginia Beach because that was hours away.”

“We could always move to Folly Beach. It’s not far from Charleston. And it’s not like we both can’t work from home sometimes.”

“Really? You’d consider moving? I love your house, though.”

“You mean our house?” I remind her.

“I know, I know. But I just moved in, and you bought it. Getting acclimated to a new place takes time. I’ll get there, don’t worry.”

“What would your ideal beach house look like?”

She rolls her lips inward, rubbing them together. “I’d want something with character and charm. It wouldn’t need to be large, but I’d like vaulted ceilings with exposed beams.”



“What about a fireplace?” I ask.

“Yes, and lots of windows to let all the sunlight in. If there’s a view of the ocean from the house, then I’d want a deck to sit on and stare at the water.”

“And when you picture this dream home, who do you see living there with you?” I interrupt.

She smiles up at me. “You and Gwen and maybe a little dog or two.”

She’ll be an amazing stepmom to my daughter.

We reach a bend in the shoreline, and the beach becomes much less populated. The farther we walk, the fewer people we see. My heartbeat turns erratic from nervous energy. I know this area is as perfect a place as I’ll find to propose to Maeve.

“Let’s move up to the dry sand and see if we can find some seashells,” I suggest.

“Ooh, good idea.” She tugs her hand free and immediately begins her search. She picks up a small one and brushes the sand off.

I find a small white shell. “What about this one?”

She takes it from me. “That’s cute.”

“Anything in particular you’re looking for so I can help?” I ask.

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Her lips twitch side to side as she thinks. “Something bigger. I’ll know it when I see it.”

I move away from her and peer over my shoulder to see if she’s looking.

She’s not.

Reaching into my pocket, I remove the clam shell I stashed there and hold it in my palm.

“Hey, what about this?” I offer it up for her inspection.

She hurries over to check. “That’s perfect.”

“Maybe there’ll be a pearl inside,” I hint.

“Check.” Her eyes light with anticipation.

I open the two sides of the shell so it’s facing me, remove the ring, and hold it up.

“Look what I found.” Her eyes widen, and when I drop to one knee, her jaw falls open.

“Maeve,” I begin, my voice cracking slightly from nerves. You’ve owned me from the moment I first looked into your eyes. There are so many reasons I fell in love with you. Your kind heart, your sense of humor, your delicious pussy, your beautiful smile, the loving way you treat Gwen. I could continue on endlessly. I’ve spent forty-

three years without you, and I don't want to spend another day without knowing you'll be by my side forever. Maeve O'Rourke, will you do me the honor of becoming Maeve Ledger? Will you marry me?"

"Yes. I will. Yes! Yes! Yes!" She holds out her hand and I push the ring I searched high and low to find onto her finger. She stares down at it in awe. The tears welling in her eyes overflow, trailing down her cheeks. And she's never looked more beautiful to me.

She throws her arms around me, and I hold her close. When we finally separate, I say, "I can't wait to marry you."

She smiles up at me. "Can we get married on the beach?"

"If that's what you want."

She holds her hand out, studying her ring. "What kind of stone is this? It's gorgeous."

"It's a purple diamond. They're pretty rare but then so are you. I wanted you to have a ring worthy of you. And since purple is your favorite color..."

"Trey, I don't even know what to say. How did I get so lucky?"

"We got lucky, Sunshine."

Her eyes are filled with love when she looks at me. "You're so good to me."

"I hope you know I'll give you the world if you let me."

She smiles. "You already have."

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