



Seducing the Billionaire

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Connor: It's all on me now. The billion-dollar company I just inherited from my late father. The public eye waiting for me to slip up. The pressure of keeping it all together. At least there's one bright spot in my life—my new assistant, Emma. My dream woman come to life if I didn't know better. It's too bad the paparazzi would have a field day if they discovered something going on between us. I can't afford for anything to jeopardize my new role as CEO of Bishop Industries. Even if she is temptation personified.

Emma: It was supposed to be a simple assignment. Become Connor Bishop's new assistant and convince him to buy my father's company, Montague Media. So how do I do that? By any means necessary, according to my dad—including seduction. Otherwise, I lose everything. But no one told me how hard it would be to seduce a billionaire who insists on acting like a perfect gentleman, especially when real feelings start to emerge. At what point do I stop the charade and tell him who I really am? Before or after I fall in love with him?

Total Pages (Source): 101

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Chapter One

Connor

“Are you ready?”

I glance over at my brother, Gabriel, and beyond him, my other brother, Archer, each giving me identical expressions of concern.

I wish they'd stop walking on eggshells around me. I'm in the same boat they are.
“Yeah, I'm fine.”

Archer's lips purse as Gabriel lets out a soft grunt of disbelief.

“Okay, I'm not fine.” How could I be after what's happened? “Let's just get this over with.”

Archer nods and tells the estate lawyer on the other side of the boardroom table we're ready to begin.

The man clears his throat and pulls a stack of papers out of his briefcase, handing us each a copy of the will. Was he at the funeral? I can't remember. The entire morning is a blur.

“I wanted to gather you together in case there was any confusion about what's set forth in here,” he says. “Your father submitted this revised version of his will to me three weeks ago, and as far as I know, was in sound mind as he did so. If anyone feels

the need to challenge its validity—”

“We’re not contesting anything,” Gabriel interrupts. “We’re prepared.”

He nods and begins to read from the top of the document, but Gabriel cuts him off again. “Could you skip all the legalese and just tell us what we got?”

Archer side-eyes him but stays quiet, slipping on his reading glasses to look over the papers for himself. Since when does he need those? How much has changed since I’ve been away?

“Gabriel and Archer, your father has given you each one hundred dollars,” the lawyer says bluntly.

I blink, a part of me unable to believe Dad really cut them out of the will like that. Even as mad as he was at the two of them for defying him, I’d hoped it would eventually blow over.

“A hundred dollars? Why even bother leaving anything?” Gabriel asks.

Archer sighs, taking his glasses off to pinch the bridge of his nose. “It’s a tactic to ensure we were purposely included in the will, so if we take it to court, we can’t claim we were left out.”

“One final fuck you, huh?”

“Essentially.”

“So Connor gets everything, then?”

“Yes.” The lawyer turns to me, his expression sober. “Mr. Bishop’s shares in Bishop

Industries, his real estate, and stock holdings are all yours. He also appointed you as CEO of Bishop Industries. The company is yours to run now.”

My jaw trembles for a moment before I firm it. I was supposed to be Chief of Operations one day, not CEO. My background is in project management, not running the whole thing.

I glance over at Archer, who gives me a weary smile. “Congratulations.”

This must be crushing for him. Bishop Industries was supposed to be his. He was groomed to be the successor.

I shake my head before pushing my chair back from the table so I can rest my elbows on my knees, blowing out a long breath. “I don’t want it. You take it.” Seriously, how am I going to run a billion-dollar corporation? I’m twenty-six years old. I’m not prepared for this.

“I’ve moved on,” he says simply. “And I’m sure Dad put some kind of clause in there that prevents me or Gabriel from having anything to do with the company.”

“That’s correct,” the lawyer says.

“You deserve the money,” Gabriel exclaims, clapping me on the back as I sit up. “You stuck him out the longest.”

“I’ll give you both—”

“No,” they say in unison.

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“Serena and I are fine for money,” Archer insists.

I turn to Gabriel, who needs it more than any of us, but he staunchly refuses. “I’ll make it on my own. I don’t want anything to do with Dad’s money anymore.”

“It’s not like he’s giving it to you. I am. Dad is... dead.”

It still feels so weird to say that. He’d survived the first heart attack he had last week, but the second one he’d had hours later was too much for his body to handle, despite his indomitable will. I’d been on a flight back here to New York from the Philippines when he passed, only receiving the news once I’d disembarked from the plane.

The days since have been a blur with funeral arrangements and well-wishers, most of whom I’ve never met. Thank God for my brothers. Without them, I wouldn’t know how to handle any of this.

“I have paperwork for you to sign at your earliest convenience,” the lawyer continues, “and the keys to his residences here for you.” He clears his throat, not meeting my brothers’ eyes as he says, “And it was specifically stated that Gabriel and Archer are not to reside in their former households.”

“Jesus Christ,” Gabriel mutters. “Sticking it to us from beyond the grave. That’s just like him.” He rolls his eyes and looks at the ground, shouting, “We don’t want your stupid apartments, Dad.” He points downward. “Because he’s in Hell, you know?”

Archer groans, but not before I catch his lips quirking at the edges.

“You guys can have your places back,” I tell them. They lived in those apartments for years. It’s only right. “I don’t know what kind of legal action anyone can take—”

“They’re yours,” Archer says firmly. “We’ll abide by the terms of the will. We both knew what we were doing when we told Dad we wouldn’t live by his rules anymore.”

Gabriel nods his agreement but holds up a hand. “Can I just put out there that I miss having a housekeeper? It sucks doing laundry and dishes.”

A burble of laughter builds within me. “That’s it? That’s all you’re asking for? Someone to fold your clothes and wash your dishes?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. Mackenzie’s dishwasher just broke, so I’ve been having to wash them by hand. It’s awful.”

Wow, okay. “Anything for you, Archer?”

“No,” he says quietly. I take a closer look at him, the grooves bracketing his mouth deeper than they used to be. “I’m fine.”

“It’s okay to be sad,” I tell him. “Or mad. Or anything.” He’s always kept his cards too close to his chest.

He nods. “I’ve already talked to Serena about it.”

Well, at least he’s finally opening up to someone. I don’t know what she did to break through to him, but I have to hand it to her.

“Oh, and we’re getting married,” Archer continues. “For real this time.”

“Uh, didn’t we already do a wedding?” Gabriel asks, referencing the infamous event

that brought us all to this point. “Remember, first I was the groom, then you were. Is it Connor’s turn now?”

I grin, glad that Gabriel can joke about it, but Archer isn’t as amused. “It’s going to be small, but I’d still like you both to be there.”

Gabriel shakes his shoulder. “Yeah, of course we’ll be there. Let me know what you want, and me and Mackenzie will put it together.”

The lawyer clears his throat, reminding us he’s still there, and I take the paperwork from him. “I’ll just look this stuff over, yeah?”

My eyes skim over the pages, and it’s only because I’m used to reading contracts for work that it makes sense. It’s true. Everything is mine.

Now to figure out what to do with it.

* * *

The elevator gives a soft ding and I step off on the sixtieth floor of Bishop Tower to the small lobby outside of Dad’s office.

Vivian, my dad’s long-time assistant, rises from her desk, her dark eyes filled with kindness. “How are you holding up?”

I must have seen her yesterday at the funeral, but it’s hard to remember all the faces. “I, um... well, you know how he was.”

“I do,” she replies, seeming to understand what I can’t voice aloud. “Now, do you want to take it easy your first day or get to work?”

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“Work. Please.” Thank God for Vivian. There’s a reason she’s lasted so long in the company with her no-nonsense attitude and ability to not take things personally.

She gets up from her desk and strides over to Dad’s office, pushing open the heavy double doors.

I follow behind her, studying the familiar space. Everything is the same as I remember it. The massive desk I was never allowed to sit behind. The incomparable view of the Manhattan skyline out of the floor-to-ceiling window spanning the length of one wall. God, even the scent of his Armani cologne still seems to linger in the air. Am I going crazy? “Does it smell like him?” I whisper before I catch myself.

Pity flashes in her eyes and I look away, not wanting to see it.

I make my way to the leather chair behind the desk, hesitating for a moment before sitting. So this is what it feels like to be the big man at the office. “Do I look like the CEO?”

She smiles kindly, but it almost seems worse than if she hadn’t smiled at all. Dad’s probably rolling over in his grave, shouting at me to assert my authority in the office.

A knock at the open doorway interrupts us, and my breath catches for a moment as an attractive redhead walks in. I stand and round the desk, unable to help looking my fill at the newcomer. Her curly hair streams past her shoulders and halfway down her back, her form-fitting black dress showing off her curvy figure. Striking green eyes meet mine as her steps slow, her full lips giving me a half-smile. “Mr. Bishop,” she murmurs in a husky voice. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Who is this woman? I definitely would have remembered seeing her around here before.

“Oh, that’s right,” Vivian says. “You haven’t met Emma yet.”

And who exactly is she? A consultant? Client? Temptress come to life?

She steps closer, a warm, exotic scent filling my nose as she shakes my hand, her fingers delicate. A spark flares between us as we briefly touch, my stomach dipping low in excitement. I’ve never particularly thought about having a type, but if I did, it’d be... her.

It takes a moment for my tongue to unstick from the roof of my mouth. Seriously, I can’t remember having such a visceral reaction to someone before. “Call me Connor. Mr. Bishop is—”

I cut myself off when I realize what I was about to say. When will it be normal to talk about him again?

“Emma’s going to be your new executive assistant while I’m gone,” Vivian rushes to say in the awkwardness of my clipped statement.

Come again? Assistant? I blink, momentarily distracted from the enchantress who walked into my office. “Gone?” What does she mean gone?

“During my leave.”

“You’re leaving?”

A grimace flashes over Vivian’s face. “I guess no one told you. My daughter’s having her first baby,” she explains. “So I’m taking some time off to help her.”

“How long?”

“A month.”

“A—”

She holds up a hand to cut me off. “I already got into it with your father. I haven’t taken a vacation in three years. I’m taking this month off to spend with my grandbaby.”

A vise grips my chest, squeezing tightly. I can’t do this job without Vivian. She’s been Dad’s executive assistant for the last fifteen years. She knows everything. How am I supposed to depend on someone who’s brand new?

“I, um... Okay.” What else can I say? I can only imagine how hard she fought in the first place for the time off. Dad never believed in vacations. A waste of productivity, in his opinion.

“You two will be fine,” Vivian assures me, bustling over to the door. “I promise. Now let me get my list of things to go over with you.”

She leaves and my gaze cuts to Emma, standing awkwardly with her hands clasped in front of her. “My condolences about your father,” she says in that husky voice. “I’m sure he’ll be missed.”

I nod, not knowing her well enough to tell her he wasn’t a good man. He was respected around here, or feared, at least. To him, the two meant the same thing.

“Losing a parent must be rough,” she continues. “Especially on top of all this change for you.”

I look into her eyes, getting lost for a moment in the sincerity shining within them. “It is.”

She reaches a hand out, briefly squeezing my arm in comfort. I’m sure she means it as a friendly gesture, but a tingle races down my spine at the contact, my body physically swaying toward her until I catch myself and step away.

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She doesn't comment on my retreat, instead offering, "If there's anything I can do, just let me know. I'm here to help."

My eyes shut, blocking out everything I can't focus on right now. Her electric touch, the low timbre of her voice, the innate sensuality she seems to radiate.

None of that matters. It can't matter. She's my assistant. It's wrong to notice those things about her. I'm not the kind of boss who takes advantage of his employees.

I've got bigger things on my plate, anyway. Like figuring out how to run the billion-dollar empire Dad created. Appearing competent to the thousands of employees, board members, and stockholders as the new CEO. Coming to terms with the reality that my emotionally abusive, morally corrupt father made me his sole heir to spite my brothers.

Yeah, that's not a lot to unpack.

A simple attraction to my new assistant is the last thing on my mind.

No sweat.

Chapter Two

Emma

I kick off my heels and place them on the worn wooden shoe rack by the front door, being careful not to shift it too much or the whole thing might fall apart. Bending

down, I rub my feet, hoping the ache goes away soon, then unzip my dress the tiniest bit to relieve the pressure. I have to get used to wearing nice things again after being stuck at home for too long.

“Emma? Is that you?”

I sigh, pasting on a smile as I make my way into the back bedroom to greet my mom. “How are you feeling?” I never know what kind of reaction I’ll be met with when I come home.

“Do we have any more Vicodin? I’m all out.” She shakes an empty pill bottle at me, and I take it from her, tossing it in the wastebasket by her bed.

“The doctor said you shouldn’t take it too often. You’ll get dependent otherwise.”

She grimaces, pain clouding her blue eyes. “I need it, though.”

I keep my smile going, my heart breaking at the pleading in her voice. But I have to stay firm. She needs me to be her rock. “I’ve got some ibuprofen in my medicine cabinet. Do you want some?”

She shakes her head, gripping her temple. “It’s not strong enough. What about morphine?”

“You used all of that last week.”

She shifts on the bed, wincing. “Can you call the doctor? Tell him I need a refill.”

I stroke her curly, red hair back from her forehead, so like mine, and make a mental note to brush it for her later. “Mom, I understand you’re in pain, but they prescribed what your dosage should be for a month and you’ve used it all already. I can get more

in another two weeks.”

Her bottom lip trembles and she rolls over, turning away from me. “You don’t believe me either. I finally recover from chemo, finally get a diagnosis for my fibromyalgia, and you still won’t take my pain seriously.”

I firm my mouth, not wanting to get into it again with her. “Mom, I believe you. You know that. But I don’t have any other pills to give you. I’m just trying to make do with what we have.” You know, what I’ve been doing my whole life.

She lets out a muffled sob, still facing away. I reach out to rub her back and she flinches, scooting over more, and I remind myself she’s hurting and it has nothing to do with me personally.

At least, that’s what I tell myself.

I get up and softly shut the door behind me, a heaviness settling in my chest as I return to the living room. It’s been like this with her more and more lately. How can I make her see my side of it?

A key sliding in the front door lock has my head turning, on high alert. Can’t I catch a break?

“Did Harold leave Connor the company?” Dad asks, barging in without even saying hello. I don’t know why I expected otherwise.

I plop down on the couch, the springs poking me. “Yes.”

“And did you convince him to buy Montague Media?”

“I just met him.”

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“So what are you waiting for?”

Jesus Christ. I cross my arms over my chest so I won't throttle him. “It's been one day. And I'm already way out of my element. I've never even worked in an office before, let alone been an assistant. I appreciate you getting me the interview—”

“Interview? You think that's all I did?” He paces in front of the coffee table, an unsettling manic air about him. I'm not sure what's been going on with him for the last few months, but it's nothing good. “I bribed the hiring manager. You'd never have gotten that job on your own.”

A sickening pull tugs at the pit of my stomach. “Oh.” No, I don't have a lot of experience, but I assumed my personality and willingness to learn qualified me.

“Your one job is to convince him to buy my company. Got it?”

“But Dad—”

“I don't want to hear any buts.”

I roll my lips between my teeth to contain my groan. Has he ever actually talked to me rather than at me? “Why go to all these lengths? Just have someone else buy it if you need to sell it that bad.”

He stops his pacing, coming over to perch on the other end of the couch. “Emma, I'm going to be real with you for a minute.” He grips his hands together, so hard his knuckles turn white. “Harold Bishop got some wild idea in his head that I was trying

to get one over on him, so he blacklisted me. And now no one will do business with Montague Media because they're afraid Bishop Industries will blacklist them too. They're that powerful of a company."

I blink, staying silent. Dad's never spoken to me about his business before. Just one more thing he's kept me in the dark about.

"Now we're going bankrupt. Fast. I need you to get Connor to agree to renew the buyout."

"Even if I ask him, it won't mean all that much. I barely know him."

After Vivian had come back in the room, we'd spent hours reviewing her master list of things to catch him up on until it was time to go home. I hadn't even had another chance to speak with him alone.

He stands, pacing again, past the living room window and to the front door with his hands gripped around the back of his neck. "We need a faster way for you to gain his trust so he'll listen to you."

"Maybe I can pass myself off as some kind of business expert."

The look he gives me clearly conveys what he thinks of that idea. Yeah, I don't blame him.

"No, something not even you can screw up. Something that comes natural, something..." He trails off, studying me. I cross my arms tighter over me, trying to appear smaller. "Something like your mother did to me."

Uh, what now?

“You’re going to use your feminine wiles on him. That’s the quickest way to get him under your thumb. Do that and he won’t be able to refuse whatever you suggest. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

Feminine wiles? Is he living in the 1950s? “There’s no way I’m pimping myself out—”

“Don’t be crass. I’m not saying you actually have to sleep with him. Just make him think you will. He’ll do whatever you want him to.”

Is he being serious right now? “Look, I agreed to get a job at Bishop Industries and try to convince some higher up to buy Montague Media, but this is going too far. You’re asking me to seduce someone when I don’t have the first clue about any of that. Besides, he’s ridiculously out of my league.”

I admit, when I’d seen pictures of him in the tabloids, I thought someone had photoshopped them. No one is that handsome in real life. High cut cheekbones. Strong jaw. Piercing blue eyes. They’d obviously accentuated his features to sell more magazines.

But as it turns out, they hadn’t. And a magazine could never recreate the warmth of his handshake, the crisp, woodsy scent emanating from him, the rich baritone of his voice.

Dad waves his hand to dismiss my concerns. “You’re the spitting image of your mother twenty years ago. You’ll have no problem bagging him.”

Ew.

Yes, I look just like my mom. The big boobs and small waist. The sexpot voice and looks. But I don’t know what to do with any of that stuff. I’d rather stay home and

sew, not go out and pick up guys. And definitely not seduce them.

“Maybe you should get Serena to talk—”

“No,” he shouts, so loudly I startle. “No,” he repeats more evenly. “You’re the perfect person. No one knows you’re my daughter. They’ll never suspect where your loyalties lie.”

Wow, the one time being the bastard child he’s never publicly acknowledged is a good thing.

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Although, at this point, I'm not sure I want anything to do with this situation anymore. What he's asking me to do is way outside my comfort zone.

"I don't know..."

"This isn't a request, Emma. This is something you're doing, no question. I've let you and your mother live comfortably on my dime for years. You owe me this."

Owe him? He's rich. Paying for our meager expenses is a drop in the bucket for him compared to his normal lifestyle.

He cuts off my protest by continuing, "If you don't convince him, there won't be any money. No phone, no health insurance, no house."

No house? He'd evict us? And Mom needs that insurance. The cost of her prescriptions is bad enough as it is and she hasn't qualified for disability yet. Plus, if her cancer comes back...

"Dad—"

"I'm not bluffing. I... I've already had to put my apartment up for sale."

Again? He just downgraded his condo in Manhattan earlier this year.

"Okay, I'll try." I can do that. I've got nothing to lose, I guess.

"No, not try. You'll do it."

“Yes, sir,” I whisper, just wanting this conversation to be over.

“Good. I have a meeting with some business associates in two days, so I need this taken care of by tomorrow. I expect results by the time you come home from work.”

By tomorrow? Yeah, right. He must be delusional.

I’m quiet as he takes his leave, slamming the door behind him, and I sit in silence for a minute, ruminating over everything he said. He expects me to flirt with Connor Bishop and make so much of an impression, he’ll do whatever I say? The man just suffered the loss of his father, had his whole world upended, became CEO of one of the biggest social media companies out there. I highly doubt he’ll be paying the least bit of attention to me, his temporary assistant.

I glance up as Mom peeks her head into the living room, furtively checking the area. “Was that Greg?”

“Yeah. The coast is clear.” It kills her to have him see her this way. Like he said, in her prime, she could have had her pick of men. But for some reason, the only man she’s ever had eyes for is my dad. Too bad he stopped looking her way long ago.

“Look, I’m sorry for snapping earlier.” She gingerly sits by me on the couch, brushing the hair back from my face. “I know you’re trying your best, baby. I appreciate it.”

I nod, accepting her apology. I don’t want to get into it again. “How about I make us dinner? I put some chicken in the fridge to defrost this morning.”

She smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes, pain still lingering there.

I guess I need to take Dad’s commandment seriously. Mom is depending on me. If he

actually kicked us out... what would we do?

Now to just figure out how to fake seduce a man.

Chapter Three

Emma

“Hello?”

I press my phone to my ear as hard as I can, but it’s still difficult to make out Vivian’s voice through the noise of other New Yorkers exiting the subway.

“Daughter... labor... early...”

I only understand every third word, but it’s enough for me to get the gist of what she’s saying. “Your daughter went into labor early?” No, no. I need more time. To shadow Vivian and learn the job. To figure out how I’m going to convince Connor to buy Dad’s company.

To... seduce.

I walk as briskly as I can, trying to escape the crowd to hear better, but it’s no use. “I’ll call you back later,” I tell her, hanging up and stowing the phone in my purse.

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Just what I need. Vivian can't leave yet. I'm not ready.

But it looks like I have to be. It's showtime.

I race to my desk as soon as I step off on the sixtieth floor and freeze when I realize Connor is already in his office. Crap. Late on the first day out of training.

I knock on the open door to get his attention, his gaze pinning me in place as he glances up, a vivid blue even from this distance. Does he have colored contacts in or something?

"I, um, I'm sorry for being late. I thought I was supposed to be here at eight."

"Oh, you are." He waves me in, indicating for me to take a seat across from him.
"I'm an early bird."

"I can come in to match your time, if you prefer."

"No, no. Eight is fine. It's not fair to ask you to start earlier when I won't normally have a commute."

My eyebrows knit. What's he talking about?

He points above us. "There's a private apartment on the top floor."

I blink. "Oh, I thought this was the top floor. The elevator only has sixty buttons."

“There’s a special elevator in here.” He gets up and walks around the giant desk, opening an unmarked door on the wall.

“Cool. A secret elevator.”

He gives me a sidelong glance and I realize I sound like I’m in fourth grade.

“I mean, that’s very... fancy.”

He shrugs. “I guess.”

Silence stretches between us and I rack my brain to think of a way to initiate my seduction plan. You know, the one I’m totally winging and have no idea how to do.

“Could you give me a tour?” I ask, saying the first thing that pops into my head. Yeah, that’s good. The two of us alone up there, sharing a private moment. It’s perfect.

And with the time crunch I’m on, also necessary.

“Of the elevator?”

My cheeks heat. I need to get my blushing under control if I’m supposed to be seducing him. “Your apartment. Vivian said the job isn’t only work-related. She helped with personal things too.”

Damn. I should have emphasized personal.

“Oh, yeah. Of course.”

He presses the call button and ushers me forward as the silver doors open, the fabric

of his suit soft as I purposely brush against him. It's time to lay the groundwork.

Now if I only knew what the hell I'm doing.

"I'll just—" I reach past him to hit the up button on the elevator, pressing my breast against his arm.

He steps back to give me more room, and I hold in my huff of disappointment. He needs to work with me here.

In the small confines of the car, his woodsy cologne weaves itself around me, and I take shallow breaths, not wanting to get caught up in how good he smells. But I'm momentarily distracted as the doors open at our destination, the apartment seeming to stretch out endlessly. I didn't know they made places this big in Manhattan.

Everything is immaculate, not a speck of dirt on any of the white furniture, severe almost in its minimalism. "Did you grow up here?" I ask, my heels clicking on the marble floor as I walk over to the enormous windows with the same view as the office downstairs.

"No. Dad started the renovations on this floor after I'd already left for college."

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I turn around, something off about his voice, and realize he's still at the front entryway, his face ashen.

I rush back over, only able to walk so fast in the skirt I tailored last night to be tighter fitting than usual. "What is it?"

His gaze finally seems to focus, zeroing in on me. "Hmm?"

I grip his arm, no thought to seduction but only making sure he's all right. "Are you okay? You look a little pale."

"Oh, um..." He looks around, and it's like he's seeing everything for the first time. Isn't this his apartment, though?

I lead him over to the couch and take the seat next to him, our knees brushing the slightest bit. "Don't you live here?"

He clears his throat, looking down at his hands in his lap. They're pressed together tightly, the knuckles nearly white. "I do. I mean, I will."

"Where have you been staying?"

"The Four Seasons. That's where I always stay when I'm in town."

So he doesn't live here normally? "But you're in New York permanently now, right?"

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows heavily. "Yeah. I guess so."

“So, when will you move in?”

He rubs at the back of his neck, staring down at his lap. “I don’t know.”

What’s the delay? I’d kill to live in a place like this. The view alone is to die for. “You want me to call a moving company or something?” That’s the type of thing an assistant does, right?

He flinches, getting up and walking to the twelve-seat dining table, his hands gripping the back of a chair.

Okay, there are obviously deeper issues going on. He was fine when we were in the office. So why...

Oh, God. I’m an idiot. This is all his dad’s stuff. His dad that just died. And here I am demanding he show me around, asking him all sorts of invasive questions.

I follow him to the table, keeping my distance this time. It feels wrong to manipulate him in this moment. “We can leave. I didn’t realize—”

“No, no. It was time. I’ve been avoiding it.” He straightens his shoulders, looking around again. “I always wondered what this place looked like. He never invited me up here.”

Really? His dad left him a billion-dollar company but didn’t have him over to his apartment? I guess it’s not so far-fetched, though. “I’ve never been to my dad’s house either,” I find myself saying.

He looks over at me, and I immediately regret my words. I don’t need him asking questions about my father.

“Why don’t you redecorate?” I ask in an attempt to redirect the conversation. “Just gut it and design it the way you want.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. He’s still... here.” He runs his fingers through his dark hair, tugging slightly on the ends. “I’m sorry, we should be talking about work, not this.”

“No, it’s fine. We’ll be working closely together and—” My stomach does a slow roll as I realize this is the perfect chance to try something. I step in nearer, lightly brushing my hand down his arm. “We should be comfortable with one another.”

He studies where my hand rests on him, the moment stretching out.

“Right,” he finally says, moving over to the foyer, my arm dropping. “Probably time to get to work.”

I nod, ducking my head down so he doesn’t see the heat spreading over my cheeks from my epic fail.

I still have the rest of the day to get close to him. This isn’t a strike. It’s just the beginning.

* * *

As the morning wears on, I employ every trick I can think of to sow the seeds of seduction. Bending over in front of him in my too-tight skirt. Undoing a button on my shirt so the girls are a little more on display. Showcasing said girls as I lean over his desk asking him to sign documents. And with the company missing a CEO for over a week, there are a lot of papers that need his signature.

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But he won't take the bait. No surreptitious glances at my ass or cleavage. No change in his demeanor if I accidentally brush against him. I must not be his type or something based on his lack of interest.

Oh God, he's not gay, is he? That'd be just my luck.

I drum my fingers on my desk, double-checking Connor's office door is closed, then open a private browser on my computer to do a quick search. Has Connor previously dated? Been photographed with anyone in particular? I need a clue as to what his type is.

I scroll through images, mostly of him at various charity events over the years, but the only person he's regularly shown with is a man I assume is his brother based on the similar dark hair, blue eyes, and facial structure.

Damn it. Seriously, how are there no pictures of him with a significant other? Has he never had one? Or always been super private about it?

With hours already wasted, I need to take more drastic action. All of my earlier attempts must have been too subtle. But what can I do? I don't go after guys.

I need to be daring. Bold. In other words, completely unlike myself.

I make a split-second decision and grab my water bottle, untwisting it. It's do or die now. Taking a deep breath, I tip it upside down over my chest, the cold liquid making me jump. I immediately pull my shirt away from my skin, then realize that defeats the purpose. I need it to be plastered.

Getting up, I knock quickly on his office door and let myself in, his eyes widening as he looks up at me from his desk.

“Connor, I’m so sorry, but my whole water bottle spilled. I mean, look at me.” I spread my arms out wide, making sure he can take in the entirety of my soaked chest, my nipples beading with how cold I am.

His gaze flicks down, but I can’t read his expression. Either there’s no reaction or he’s a master poker player.

“Do you, uh, need to change?”

What I need is for you to want to rip my shirt off. “I guess. I don’t think it’ll dry anytime soon.”

I lean over more, but he averts his gaze, meeting my eye instead.

“Go upstairs and take anything out of Dad’s closet. You can wear it until your shirt dries. See if there’s a dryer up there too.”

I press my lips together, part of me disappointed he came up with a solution so quickly, the other part impressed, then smile coyly at him. At least I hope it comes across that way. “Okay, thanks. Do you want to come up with me?”

He blinks, my words not seeming to register. “Come up with you?”

Goosebumps race over my torso, a combination of my chilly shirt clinging to my chest and his low voice. Get yourself together, Emma. Nothing’s actually happening between you two.

“To show me where the closet is.” God, I hope he doesn’t call me out on how stupid I

sound. It's obviously in the master bedroom.

"I trust you can figure it out."

He tilts his head down, returning his attention to the spreadsheet in front of him, and my stomach sinks. One more failed attempt.

I turn and march to the door with the elevator, jabbing the call button. I knew trying to seduce him was a stupid idea. I'm horrible at it.

It'd be different if I could be blatant about it, but we're at work. If I come on too strongly, he might fire me. Then I'd have no chance of convincing him. And honestly, I think I could be good at this job. Plus, I could really use the money.

Maybe Dad will give me an extension. I just have to come up with a new plan.

Chapter Four

Connor

The elevator doors shut and I glance down at my lap, my hard-on straining against the fly of my pants.

Thank God she left. It was tough enough being around her all morning. Her repeatedly getting close, that delicious scent of hers muddling my brain. Her innocently touching my arm, gazing up at me with those gorgeous green eyes, unaware of the effect it has on me. Her bending over in that skintight skirt, oblivious to the way she's moving in front of me. Her leaning over my desk requesting my signature, unwittingly giving me a show to the most perfect pair of breasts I've ever laid eyes on, practically spilling out of her bra.

But her standing here with a dripping wet see-through top, nipples beaded, asking me to stare at her chest? That was too much to handle. Especially when she'd asked in that low, throaty voice if I'd join her upstairs. My dick didn't stand a chance against that.

I've never in my life had trouble working with a woman. I've prided myself on my ability to always stay friendly and professional with others. But I've never met someone like her.

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Okay, how long will it take her up there? Five minutes? Ten? I have until then to get this damn erection down and myself under control. I just have to think about something else.

Like where she is. Dad's apartment. His presence seemed a tangible thing there, evident in the awful minimalist furniture and abstract art on the walls. How can such impersonal furnishings so accurately reflect him? I'd never even been there before, and yet it was as if I could feel his presence.

Oh, look at that. My dick's back to normal.

The elevator lift runs after a few minutes, and I control my response to seeing her as she walks back in the room, the way I have all morning, slipping my professional mask over my face. I can act respectably around her. As long as she doesn't spill water all over herself again.

She's wearing an oversized white button-down, the sleeves hanging well past her hands, though she has the bottom tucked into her skirt.

"Could you help me roll these up? I can't for the life of me do it myself."

My jaw clenches, steeling myself for her approach as she rounds my desk, awaiting my help.

I turn my chair, hesitating for a moment before starting in on the right sleeve. Her inner forearm is unbearably soft as I roll the fabric to her elbow, unable to help touching her the slightest bit as I continue.

This close, her body heat warms me, the subtle rise and fall of her chest distracting. I can't stop myself from inhaling that intoxicating perfume of hers, noticing how her red curls are tucked away in a clip on top of her head today, a few tendrils loose, making perfect spirals past the porcelain skin of her neck. If I leaned in a little more, I could press my lips to that neck, find out how she tastes...

I jerk back, realizing I was swaying toward her, and quickly do the left sleeve, concentrating on finishing the task as fast as I can.

"You're all finished," I tell her, returning my chair to its place and turning away so I don't have to look at her anymore. I've got some Marilyn Monroe bombshell vision of her in my head, when the poor woman is just trying to do her job.

"Thank you." She rests her hand on my arm lightly and I jerk back, my body too sensitive to accept her touch.

"Listen, Emma." My voice is shakier than I'd like, but I need to get this out now before it keeps happening and I slip up. "I know it's unintentional, but you're getting a little too far in my personal space. I'd like to keep this a professional work environment."

Though I'm not looking directly at her, I still catch her mouth opening and closing several times, her lower lip trembling the slightest bit, the hurt expression across her face. "I—I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable—"

"I know you didn't," I cut her off. "I'd just like to establish our boundaries now. I wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea about us."

She nods, her head cast down, fair skin flushed with embarrassment. This is the awful part about managing people.

“It doesn’t have to be a big thing,” I continue. “We can still work together like normal.”

“Right,” she whispers. “Thank you for telling me.”

There’s an awkward silence in the air as neither of us knows what to say next, and she eventually turns and exits the room, returning to her desk.

I rest my head in my hands, massaging my temples. As bad as it was in the moment, it was the right thing to do. It’s better to set the tone for our working relationship at the beginning.

I mean, under other circumstances, would I be interested in her? Absolutely. But these aren’t other circumstances. She’s my employee who reports to me. I’m in a position of power over her. It would be terrible publicity if it got out. And I’m not that kind of boss. That kind of man.

I won’t be.

* * *

I leave the office for lunch, needing to clear my head, and drag my feet as I head back in, unsure what kind of reception I’ll receive.

Thankfully, Emma gives me a bright smile as I step off the elevator, all earlier discomfort gone.

“Hi,” she says, standing and rounding her desk as I approach. “I, um, just wanted to apologize and promise I’ll keep my hands to myself. I hope there are no hard feelings.”

“No, not at all.” Something within me eases, the tension between us clear, even as another small part of me mourns the loss of knowing she won’t touch me again.

God, what’s wrong with me? I ask her to stop, and then when she says she will, I’m disappointed? Get a grip.

“I really want to be a good assistant for you. Especially now that it’s just me and you.”

Right. She’d told me about Vivian officially starting her vacation earlier. With the two of us brand new to these jobs, it’s like the blind leading the blind. We don’t need any kind of awkward tension added to the mix.

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“I even spent the last hour going through the files Vivian has here,” she continues. “I’m trying to learn all I can about the company.”

“That’s great. Thanks for being proactive.”

I head into my office, half surprised when she follows me in. “Do I have messages or something?”

“Oh, no. I actually had a question for you about one of the files. Some kind of buyout.”

I sit down, moving my mouse to wake up my computer. “What?”

“It had to do with Montague Media.”

“Oh, that.”

She cautiously takes a seat on the other side of my desk. “Why do you say it like that? From what I could tell, it seemed like a good idea.”

I look up, her smile blinding in its intensity. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but there’s something about it that’s... off. Am I seeing things? “Well, Dad killed it because of the owner, Greg.”

She blinks, the edges of her mouth dropping. “What happened?”

“Basically, he’s shady as hell. Dad put a P.I. on him and found out he was stealing

from his company, that he was in major debt to some mafia, and that's why he wanted to sell the company so bad. And why he forced his daughter to marry into the family and try to leverage our name to keep himself safe."

The color slowly drains from her face, and she whispers, "He did what?"

I tilt my head, studying her. It's almost like she's taking the news personally. "Are you okay?"

She shakes her head, seeming to come back to herself as pink blossoms in her cheeks. "Oh, sorry. I just had no idea someone could be so... deceitful."

I shrug. "You see it more often than you'd like in big business."

She fiddles with the edge of her too-large sleeve, looking down at her lap. "But that's separate from buying the company, right? There had to be a reason your dad wanted to buy it to begin with."

I fold my hands together, contemplating her words. "I honestly don't know why he was hellbent on getting it to begin with. I could ask Archer about it, I guess."

"Maybe you should still consider it. If the company is solid, look into reopening the merger."

I take a closer study of her, but she won't meet my eye. "Why are you so interested?"

Her eyes flick up and away again, so quickly I almost miss it. "I... just wanted to get familiar with the business. Show you I'm learning. So I can help you out."

"I have advisors for that. You don't have to worry about it. It's not part of your job duties."

She stands, twisting her hands together in front of her, cheeks pinkening. “Right. Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. It’s always good to show initiative.”

She smiles before seeing herself out, but it doesn’t quite seem to reach her eyes.

What was all that about?

The answer hits me, and I almost smack my head at what an idiot I am. She was trying to prove herself after I chastised her earlier, and I shot her down again. Great timing.

But I don’t have any interest in doing business with Greg Montague. Not even taking into account his poor decision to siphon money from his company by creating a whole fake department and pocketing the salaries, Archer strongly implied he didn’t treat Serena too well either. We don’t need the company that badly that he should benefit from it.

But Emma had no way of knowing that. She was only trying to help.

And maybe now that we’ve got all the awkwardness out of the way, it’ll be smooth sailing.

Now to just figure out everything else.

Chapter Five

Emma

I slide my purse down my arm, dropping it at the front entryway, and immediately go in my bedroom so I can take off this ridiculously huge shirt. Why in the world did I think that'd be a good idea? The whole plan is shot.

I have to admit, though, it was admirable how skillfully he handled the situation. There's no easy way to tell an employee to stop throwing herself at you.

I did my part suggesting he buy Montague Media, and that's all I can really do. Even after what he told me about what Dad did. Stealing from his company? In debt to the mafia? It sounds crazy.

And yet, it makes sense when I think about it. Dad mentioned having to sell his old condo months ago. To pay off debts? And he's been ridiculously pushy about getting me to convince Connor to renew the buyout. He even texted me twice today for updates. Henevertexts. This is probably the most contact I've had with him... ever.

How could he put me in this position? He set me up to fail. Of course Connor wouldn't want to do business with someone like him.

"Emma," a voice yells from the living room. "Are you home yet?"

Oh, God. It's Dad. He needs to stop letting himself in like this, even if it technically is his house.

I throw on a fresh shirt and head out to meet him, making sure Mom's bedroom door is closed first. She doesn't need to witness this.

"Did he agree to buy it?" he asks as soon as he sees me, not bothering to say hello.

I take a seat on the couch, getting as comfortable as I can on the lumpy cushions before crossing my arms over my chest. "No."

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose dramatically. "You had one job. I'm on a time crunch here."

"Because of the mafia?"

He whips toward me, panic flaring in his eyes briefly. "Where did you hear that?"

"Connor."

He snaps his fingers at me. "Explain."

I keep my scoff to myself, hating when he treats me like I'm a dog to do his tricks on his command. "Harold Bishop put a P.I. on you and found out you were stealing from Montague Media and owed money to some mafia. That you tried to use his name to protect yourself and that's why you wanted Serena to marry his son." How could he do that to his own daughter?

His teeth grind, but he stays quiet, digesting my words.

"Dad, this is serious. You need help."

He holds a hand up to stop me, his arm shaking. "I've got it under control. I just need you to get Connor to buy the company. Once the sale goes through, I can pay off my

debts and everything goes back to normal.”

“Normal? There’s nothing normal about any of this. How did you get involved in this? Why are you in debt?” And how much is it that he needs to sell his company? It’s worth millions.

His face reddens as he sputters out, “I won’t stand here and be judged by you of all people.”

I shrink into the cushions. What’s that supposed to mean?

“You owe me your life. Without me, you wouldn’t be here.” His voice raises in volume, to the point where I’m sure Mom can hear him in the back room, but I know she won’t be coming out to defend me. “So don’t start some holier than thou speech with me. Everything you have in this house is because of me.”

He picks up a ceramic owl we’ve had on the side table for years. “Paid for with my money. And if you don’t want to help me, I’ll just take it back.” He drops it, the knick-knack shattering as it hits the floor, and I flinch, tucking my legs underneath me on the couch. What the hell is he doing?

“These books?” He grabs a paperback from the bookshelf, some Nora Roberts that’s probably a decade old. “I paid for them.” He rips the cover off, flinging it across the room.

“Dad, what are you doing?” I yell. “Stop being crazy.”

“You don’t want to see how crazy I can get.” He turns around, seeming to search for something, and suddenly strides toward the kitchen.

My gaze shoots to where he’s headed, and I scramble off the couch, realizing he has

his sights set on my laptop. “No, I need that.” The thing is six years old and on its last legs, given as a high school graduation present after I’d begged him, but it still works. It’s our only computer and there’s no money to buy another.

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He picks it up, spinning around so I can see him hold it above his head, threatening to drop it. “What’s done is done, Emma. It doesn’t matter how I got here, but I need your help. So will you help me or not?”

I take the last few steps toward him cautiously, afraid to make any sudden movements. “I never said I wouldn’t. I’m trying. I promise.” No need to tell him now about how Connor made it clear he wasn’t interested in buying. It’ll only trigger him further.

I wrap my hands around the laptop and tug, sending up a silent prayer of thanks that he lets go of it easily. I hug it to my chest, stepping back until I bump into a chair, and realize I’m breathing harshly, adrenaline coursing through me.

He points a finger at me, a smirk lurking on his face. “Remember what you owe me. All of this is gone if you don’t deliver.” He straightens his hair back from where it’s gone disheveled. “I’ll be gone for about a week. Have it done by the time I get back.”

Where is he going for that long? Who are these business associates he talked about seeing?

I nod, silently watching him leave, my legs shaking as I sink into the chair. What the hell just happened? Is he on drugs now too? I’ve never seen him act so erratic.

I wait till my pulse stops pounding in my ears before I stride over to the front door and lock it, not that it does much good. He has a key.

Maybe I should get a chain lock too for when I’m home. Or would that set him off

even more if he tried to come in and was barred? It's true that he bought most everything in here. He gave Mom a monthly allowance for years in exchange for her not pushing for legal child support. He'd have to acknowledge me if he did that.

And he's reminded me repeatedly in recent years how lucky I am for him to keep paying our household expenses after I turned eighteen, how I owe him so much, even though he could more than afford it. But who else was I supposed to ask when we needed things? Mom has never worked a day in her life, relying solely on him.

When she started having strange symptoms a few years ago that turned out to be ovarian cancer, things got even worse. Getting a job myself wasn't an option because she needed me for all sorts of things at all hours of the day. Taking her to appointments. Conferring with her doctors on best treatment options. Making sure everything was taken care of around the house. It was practically a full-time job and I even ended up dropping out of college to do it all.

Then when she developed fibromyalgia on top of that, with the constant fatigue, muscle aches, and sleeping issues, all bets were off.

I'm not as needed now that her cancer is in remission, so I started a small Etsy shop making custom clothes for people, but it's not enough to pay the bills.

I stow my laptop safely in my room and go get the broom and dustpan, carefully sweeping up the owl, now in pieces on the floor. It's too shattered to salvage, and honestly, I wouldn't want to see it anymore even if it could be saved. It would only remind me of Dad going unhinged.

The creak of Mom's bedroom door hinge sounds, and I spy her a few moments later, watching me clean up from the edge of the hallway. "He's gone?"

"Yes." I sigh, scooping up the last of the pieces.

“You’re fighting about money?”

“Something like that.” I haven’t bothered to tell her about what he’s tasked me to do. It’s too embarrassing. Especially after I crashed and burned today.

“But you have a job now.” There’s a hint of resentment in her voice, but I’m not opening that can of worms again. It was already hard enough explaining how I can’t stay home all day now if she needs me. I mean, it’s not like I can be her full-time caregiver forever.

“Dad’s not giving us money anymore.” She deserves to know that much, at least.

Her brows knit together. “No, our allowance—”

“Is about to be gone. I’m trying to fix it, though.”

“But we need that money. How are we supposed to live otherwise?”

I dump the pieces in the trash, mourning the loss of a perfectly good decoration. “Mom, I’m twenty-four. Not a kid anymore. How long did you expect to mooch off him?”

She steps back, hurt in her gaze as she whirls around, a muffled sob escaping her just before she closes her bedroom door.

Crap. I should have kept my mouth shut.

But seriously, why am I the one who always has to deal with him now? If she still wants his money, she should talk to him.

Guilt burns deep in my belly as I tie up the garbage bag and take it around back to the

outside trash can. What is it about family that causes the most visceral reactions?

What I need to focus on is a new plan for Connor. Obviously, seduction won't work if he doesn't even want me to touch him.

My cheeks heat just remembering how awkward that conversation had been, as well as my lame attempt later to convince him to renew the buyout.

No, I'll have to get close to him another way. Subterfuge won't work, so I'll be myself instead. If I'm an amazing assistant, he'll have to trust me. He'll listen to my proposal to buy Montague Media again.

If Dad can wait that long.

Chapter Six

Connor

The shadows on the wall gradually shift as the sun rises, and I rub my eyes, sitting up to lean against the headboard. My plan to fall back asleep after waking at four didn't happen, but it's not any different than the last few mornings.

I grab my phone off the nightstand, pulling up my calendar only to sigh. Emma has each minute scheduled, from my meeting bright and early at eight to the full hour at the end of the day dedicated to authorizing various projects and signing my approval. A never-ending parade of tasks to check off my list, only to do it all again tomorrow. If this is how Dad spent every day, no wonder he was in such a crabby mood all the time.

I get ready on autopilot, dressing in the same variation of suit and tie as all the others, eating the same breakfast room service sends up every morning, dragging my feet down the same set of stairs to my waiting town car.

Traffic is lighter than usual as my inherited driver, Allen, navigates through the streets to Bishop Tower, the knot in my stomach tightening the closer we approach. Did Archer have this same sense of dread coming to work? Or was it different for him since he wasn't in charge of everything?

It was never like this when I worked here during the summers while I was in school.

Even after graduating and starting here full-time, it wasn't bad. Then again, I was only in the office when I was in-between projects overseas.

I nod at the few employees milling about the lobby as I trudge toward the elevators, letting out a long breath as I press the call button. Who is it I'm meeting with first? Legal? Or Marketing?

The silver doors slide open, and I get on, pausing as I turn and catch a flash of red.

"Can you hold that?" Emma calls out, her hair streaming out behind her as she makes her way to join me, clutching her purse to her side. Her breaths are slightly labored as she steps in next to me and presses the button for floor sixty, fanning her face. "I need to start doing cardio."

She smiles up at me, the action knocking me askew. I'd comment on how she looks to be in great shape, but not after what I told her about staying professional.

After that initial day together, there have been no more innocent touches, no cleavage on display, no bending over in front of me. She's being respectful of my request, but there's a terrible part of me that... misses it. That wishes I could have acted on those urges. That the situation was different.

But it's not.

"At least we don't have to take the stairs," I comment, looking straight ahead so I won't admire the scarlet dress that hugs her figure like a second skin.

"Oh my gosh, can you imagine?" She chuckles, the sound all husky allure. I shut my eyes, blocking it out as best I can even as I find myself leaning in, wishing for more. She's stopped the blatant displays, but it's the smaller things that hold me captive now. Her scent lingering in my office long after she's left. The curve of her lips as

she smiles. The porcelain skin of her neck as she tucks her hair behind her ear.

Fuck. I have to stop thinking like that. She's my employee, not someone to lust after.

The elevator pauses on the fifth floor, and I welcome the opportunity to turn my attention, focusing on the digital readout of the floors as we ascend.

Okay, so meeting with either Legal or Marketing first, then a meeting with the board of directors, then... I rub at my jaw, drawing a blank, and realize I forgot to shave this morning.

"What is it?" she whispers.

"I'm trying to remember my schedule for the day."

"Your meeting with Legal is in fifteen minutes, then you're addressing the board of directors at ten. At eleven-thirty, Angelina's coming to prep you for the CNN interview at noon. I have lunch set to be delivered at one, then time set aside for you to go over the proposed changes to the Vancouver project you requested."

She goes on detailing the afternoon's schedule, my stomach sinking with each additional thing to do. When does it ever let up? When is there a break? At least tomorrow is Saturday. I'm not expected to work then, am I?

"Oh, and I was checking my email on the subway and saw Dave asked for a meeting. I think I can fit him in if I rearrange—"

"No," I interrupt her, unable to bear one more thing to do today. "I mean, just make it for another day. I'm already worried that going to the bathroom will throw off the whole schedule."

I meant it to come out as joking, but it only sounds bitter.

The corners of her lips dip down, and I wait till the other elevator rider exits on the twenty-seventh floor to tell her, “I didn’t mean that as a slight toward you. You’re doing an amazing job. I wouldn’t have the first clue about where I need to be without you.” Emma’s really stepped up over the last few days trying to fill Vivian’s shoes.

Now if only I could do the same regarding my predecessor. Every time I even think about doing something differently, someone is quick to tell me that’s not the way Dad did it.

She nods, turning toward me. “I know your schedule is ridiculous. But you’re allowed to turn down some of these things. Or delegate them.”

“No, it’s my responsibility.” If Dad could do it all, so can I.

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She looks like she wants to say more, but keeps her mouth shut, leading the way out of the elevator as we reach the sixtieth floor.

She stops at her area and I continue to my office, hesitating for a moment at the sight of the massive desk, then sit and open my folder with notes for my meeting to review.

Ten hours later, I pull at the tie at my neck, unbuttoning the top button of my dress shirt as I sign the last of the documents Emma brought earlier that needed my approval. My eyes are scratchy, vision blurring slightly as I stare at the page, and have to blink several times for it to come back in focus.

“You’re running yourself ragged.”

I glance up, finding Emma standing in the doorway, her arms folded across her chest.

“I thought you went home.” I clear my throat, my voice hoarse from talking too much today. “You were supposed to leave at five.”

She gives me a half-smile. “You’re still here.”

Touché.

“I watched your interview from my computer,” she says, coming over to sit at the chair in front of my desk. “They had it out for you, didn’t they?”

I rub at the back of my neck, then pull the tie looser when it feels like I can’t breathe. “It comes with the territory.” And not only the interview, but the board meeting too.

They'd wanted financials from five, ten years ago that I obviously don't know off the top of my head.

She seems to study me, and I look away, not wanting to hear whatever she's bound to say. "I know it's not my place, but have you been sleeping?"

I blink at her. Sleeping? Who has time to sleep? I'm in a constant game of catch-up, learning everything on the fly. I spent last night forcing myself to stay awake as I poured over market trends, eventually passing out before I meant to, and still ended up waking too early.

"You have these dark circles under your eyes," she explains gently. "And I'm just worried—"

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm fine."

Her head tilts. "Are you?"

I cap the pen in my hand, tossing it on the desk. "It's been a rough week," I admit.

"Anything I can help with?"

Her? Now that's complicated. Despite being drawn to her, she's a distraction I don't need. "Can you put more hours in the day?" I joke, unable to answer her seriously.

"Connor," she says in that low voice, a rush of longing running through me. I close my eyes, not that it blocks out the sound. If anything, it only intensifies it. "I'm your assistant. Let me... assist you."

I grip my hands together tightly underneath my desk, logically knowing she wasn't making insinuations with that statement. But that doesn't change how my dick heard

it.

“I can listen if you just want to talk.” She shrugs, her curls falling forward over her right shoulder. “Sometimes it helps to vent.”

That sounds like something I would’ve said to Archer previously. It’s always been like pulling teeth trying to get him to open up, and I never understood why.

But I’ve never had this kind of pressure on me before. And this time, I have no one to share the load. I’m solely responsible for this company.

“This pace... it’s too hectic,” I admit. “I’ve got too much to do and not enough room to breathe.” I pull again at my tie as it seems to constrict around my neck.

She nods understandingly. “It’s hard to learn how to do a job when there’s no one to teach you. You didn’t get to shadow your dad at all.”

That describes it perfectly. “Yeah, and I’m expected to know everything he did—”

I stop, realizing maybe I shouldn’t be saying this to her. Yes, she signed an NDA, but she’s still an outsider. The only people I can truly talk to are my brothers, but I won’t make them deal with company issues if they’re not reaping any of the benefits.

That reminds me, I need to hire that maid for Gabriel.

“I’m your boss, Emma. I’m not going to bother you with my problems.”

She nibbles at her bottom lip. “It’s not a bother. Really. I know what it’s like not to have anyone to talk to when things are rough.”

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I lean forward, interested now that it's not me we're talking about. "What's going on with you that's rough?"

"Oh, I don't want to bother—" A faint blush stains her cheeks as she pauses. "You just said the same thing, didn't you?"

My lips twist, but I hold back my smile, surprised she got that much out of me after the day I've had.

"How about if I tell you something, you do the same?" she suggests.

I nod, curious as to what she'll say.

She fidgets in her chair for a moment, looking down at her lap. "We're, um, having some issues at home right now." The pink on her cheeks darkens, and she dips her head down lower to hide it.

"You and your... boyfriend?"

She glances up but doesn't call me out on my obvious attempt at fishing for information. "No, me and my mom. I don't have a boyfriend."

Okay, mentally stowing that nugget of info away. Even though it doesn't matter. Can't matter.

"She's had these medical issues for a while," she continues, "and some of it was resolved, but then another thing popped up. She finally got a diagnosis, and along the

way I've become her caregiver. She relies on me, but I don't know what I'm doing half the time. Or I have to be the bad guy and control her meds so she won't take too many. It's exhausting."

"So your roles are switched now? You have to be the parent?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Though, honestly..." She bites her lip. "You know, never mind."

"No, no. You can tell me." It's refreshing to step out of my own mess for a minute and remember there are other things going on in the world.

She shrugs half-heartedly. "She's always kind of stuck her head in the sand when it comes to actual problems. I'm realizing as I get older that I've been the parent in some ways for a long time."

Ouch. And she said something the other day about never going to her dad's house, so I guess he wasn't in the picture much either. "It was the same for me. Not my mom, but my dad. It's like he wanted me and my brothers to be miniatures of him, and then didn't understand when we weren't."

"It's hard when parents have expectations of you that are near impossible to meet. Sometimes there's only so much you can do."

"Your mom expects a lot?"

"Actually, I was talking about..." She swallows and glances over her shoulder as if she half anticipates someone to be there. "My dad. He wants me to be this person I don't have the first clue how to be. And assumes I'll figure it out magically."

I study her, wondering how she could have hit the nail on the head twice now. "Are you in my brain or something?"

A small smile spreads over her lips. “Is that how you feel too?”

I nod. “Except all I can do now is try to live up to his legacy.”

She shifts closer, leaning her elbows on the desk. “Did your dad prepare you for this?”

“Are you ever really prepared for something like this?” I gesture around me, but there’s no way to encompass everything that’s mine now. The renown. The responsibility. The resentment. It all weaves together into an obligation I’m still not quite sure I’m ready for, but it’s my job to do regardless. “Archer was meant to take over one day, but that obviously didn’t happen. I always thought I’d be some kind of upper-level management.”

“I think you’re doing an amazing job, for what it’s worth.”

I nod my thanks, ignoring the glow in my chest at her praise. I’ve barely done anything. I’m only treading water.

She stands, her slim fingers lingering on the edge of my desk. “I should get going. I have to head home and get dinner started.”

I stand too, though I’m not sure why. “Sorry for keeping you.”

A shy smile crosses her face. “I liked talking with you. Maybe we can do it again tomorrow?”

“Sure.” And truth be told, I do feel a little lighter. Emma’s more of a kindred spirit than I thought.

“And we’ll figure something out with your schedule. It won’t be like this forever.”

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I watch her leave, that red dress gently swishing as she closes my office door, her words echoing in my ears. I have to have faith she's right. That something will give soon. That the pressure will let off.

Otherwise, I fear I may break.

Chapter Seven

Emma

I rearrange the muffins on their platter, making sure each one is equidistant from its neighbor, then double-check the bagels are in place, the danishes are in an aesthetically pleasing array, and the coffee and orange juice urns are ready to go. This is Connor's first meeting with the other chiefs of the company, and everything has to be perfect.

Admittedly, I had selfish motives speaking to him on Friday after work. I need him to see me as a confidant. Someone he can rely on and eventually trust enough to take my advice about buying Montague Media. But somewhere along the way, he tugged at my heartstrings. I really do want to make things better for him while I'm here. It's the least I can do after being so... duplicitous.

A chill runs over my skin at the reminder that the whole reason I'm here is to manipulate him. But what else can I do? My home, Dad's money we rely on, Mom's healthcare coverage is all at stake.

"I'm the first one here?"

I whirl around, my heart beating overtime at the sensation of being caught, but don't let on that Connor surprised me as he strolls into the conference room. "Yes."

He nods at the buffet I've laid out. "You've got quite a spread going here. You used the company card, right?"

I keep my snort of laughter to myself. There's no way I could afford all this. I mean, this fruit salad is freaking organic. "Yep. Try a muffin. The blueberry ones are amazing."

His lips quirk. "So you already sampled some?"

I grin sheepishly. "Quality control. Just doing my duty." I also bought way more than we need. And if they don't eat it all, I guess I'll have to take some home with me.

"I appreciate your sacrifice."

I give him a mock salute, enjoying how his smile grows a little.

He loads up a plate and takes a seat at the head of the boardroom table as I finish straightening the meeting agendas, surreptitiously watching him. The dark circles present under his eyes last week aren't as pronounced, his shoulders not as hunched. "You sleep okay over the weekend?"

He pauses before taking a bite of his muffin. "Better," he mumbles.

"You know, I was thinking that as your assistant, it's my job to make your life easier."

"Okay..."

“And you’re still living in that hotel, right?”

He nods, wiping the crumbs off his hands with a napkin.

“So maybe I could hire an interior decorator and redo your apartment upstairs. I’ll take care of everything so you won’t have to deal with it.”

His expression doesn’t change, and I worry for a moment I’ve overstepped my bounds.

“Why?” he finally asks.

I shrug. “I just thought it would help. To have a bigger space. Living in a hotel room has to be cramped.”

“It’s the presidential suite,” he says wryly.

At the Four Seasons? How much must that cost? I keep forgetting who I’m dealing with. “Oh, well. You still might want to have something that’s yours. So you feel more like you... belong here.”

He stares at me, heat creeping over my cheeks as I play back the words in my head. I sound like a total bitch.

“No, I didn’t mean it that way.” I find myself reaching out before I realize what I’m doing, and snatch my hand back. “You said you don’t have enough room to breathe. That it’s been a rough transition for you.” My fingers tangle with the hem of my shirt, knowing I’m bungling this explanation. “I just thought... I’m sorry, forget it.”

I look down, fearing he’ll realize how unfit I am for the job. I should learn to mind my own business, to keep my ideas to myself. Dad sent me here to seduce him, not

try to be an actual assistant.

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“You should do it.”

I glance up, finding his blue gaze trained on me. “Really?”

He nods, standing and passing by me to throw his plate away, close enough for me to catch a whiff of that expensive cologne of his. Sigh. “It’s a good idea. Everything’s just happening so fast, you know? Two weeks ago, I was in the Philippines in charge of international projects. Now I’m... here.” I can’t see his face from this angle, but there’s no mistaking his pensive tone.

“Now you’re here.” I’m not sure what else to say, how to console him. I know he didn’t ask for this.

“What would you do?” he whispers.

My brows raise. “If I were you?”

He nods, still turned away.

What wouldn’t I do? It’s like the dream of winning the lottery. Estate on a private island. Indulgent luxury vacations. Never having to lift a finger again as my personal attendants satisfy all my whims.

And yet, here he is at work, struggling to fill his father’s shoes. And from what I can tell, he didn’t even seem to like him all that much.

“You don’t have to do any of this, you know. You could take it all and nope out of

here if you wanted.” That’s what I’d do, at least.

He glances over his shoulder, lips twisted to the side. “I could,” he agrees.

“But you won’t.” I study him quietly, appreciating the opportunity to freely look my fill. “You said something about fulfilling your father’s legacy. But maybe you should focus on creating your own.”

“My own legacy,” he murmurs. “What do you have in mind?”

Oh God, I have to come up with something now? “Um, you could start a nonprofit? Or a new branch of the company?” Or even buy Montague Media...

He nods. “I’ll think about it.” He crosses his arms, leaning against the wall. “What about you?”

“Me?” What’s he talking about?

“You said your dad has expectations of you. Are you still trying to live up to them or making your own path?”

What am I doing? Dad wants me to seduce Connor, but am I actually capable of that? Especially after he made it clear he wasn’t interested? And let’s say I somehow got past that hurdle. Would I even want to? He’s not at all what I expected when I reluctantly agreed to Dad’s demands. Some guy in his mid-twenties who grew up rich and just inherited more money? I imagined some lazy, entitled playboy. Not a man who seems to genuinely care about his leadership of the company, who works harder than anyone else here, who had to immediately lecture me on professionalism.

“I’m not sure,” I admit, unable to voice to him what the expectation laid out for me is. “I’m taking things one day at a time.” That much is true, at least. And trying to be a

good assistant isn't hurting anything.

He nods, staring at me for a moment before he looks away and clears his throat. "Hire someone and do whatever you want upstairs. I'll leave the decisions to you. And don't worry about a budget." No budget? I can only imagine living that way.

He leaves me to greet our Chief of Communications as she enters, and the room soon fills up after that, several of them looking pleasantly surprised at the breakfast offerings available as they head over to load up a plate. Like these people need it, though. All of their salaries have to be ridiculous.

I check off the attendees on my list as more chiefs trickle in until we're only waiting for the Chief Financial Officer. From what I understand, that was Connor's brother's job previously, so this guy is fairly new to the company as well.

He finally enters a few minutes after the meeting's scheduled beginning, and as the blond-haired man spots me at the door, he gives me a slow perusal. "Haven't seen you around here before. You new?"

I keep my sigh to myself. Why do some guys have to be so blatantly obvious? "Yes. I'm Mr. Bishop's assistant while Vivian's out on leave."

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

Ew. I hate it when guys call me that. "Emma," I tell him through tight lips.

"Get me a coffee, will you, Emma? Cream and sugar." He winks and flashes me a smile as he rounds the table to take a seat, but the effect isn't as charming as he must think it is.

I suppress my eye roll as I turn toward the coffee urn, and pause as I catch sight of

Connor, his brows narrowed at me. Did I not hold back the eye roll as much as I thought I did?

He comes over, bending in close to whisper, “Schedule a meeting for me this afternoon with Mr. Brigham. I don’t like the way he spoke to you. In the future, tell him it’s not your job to get him coffee.”

I nod, holding my breath until he turns around, striding toward the head of the boardroom table, an aura of power settling over him as he addresses the room at large, welcoming them. I hurriedly pull out my notepad to take notes, listening to him as he talks about Bishop Industries staying the course and continuing the traditions his father set forth, similar to his remarks last week as he met with the board of directors.

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He'd admitted to being overwhelmed, but you wouldn't guess it now from the way he commands the room. I'd wondered if there would be issues with others not respecting his authority considering half the people in here are twice his age, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Everyone's attention is on him, with no obvious dissent or resentment in their demeanors.

I find myself getting caught up in watching him too. The way he uses his hands to gesture, the way he listens intently as he asks others for their input on issues, the way his deep voice rumbles as he remarks about shareholders, projected earnings, and other business terms I don't quite understand.

More than once he gets caught up suggesting something that's met with a brick wall of that's not how your father did it, but other than that, things are good.

Half an hour in, I look down at my notepad, realizing it's nearly empty. Crap. How am I supposed to prove to him I'm a great assistant and gain his trust if I keep getting sidetracked? I've been doing so good when I'm by myself at my desk. Not gazing into those beautiful blue eyes, the dark slash of his brows, the hint of stubble dotting his jaw... Damn it. I'm not paying attention again.

What am I doing, developing some idiotic crush? He said in no uncertain terms he wasn't interested.

I keep my head down for the rest of the meeting, diligently documenting anything remotely important, and avoid this Brigham guy's eye as everyone files out at the end. I never did get him that coffee.

I stand and start putting away the food, silently grateful there's still so much left. Breakfast is covered for the next week.

"I can help you with that," Connor says, joining me as I use tongs to place the bagels back in their box.

"You don't have to. I know you're busy."

"Ah, but according to the almighty schedule, my next meeting isn't for another half hour." He says it teasingly, and I'm thankful he has more of a sense of humor about it today.

"Wish you could just tear the schedule up sometimes?"

"If it was paper, I would." He grins at me, my heart fluttering the tiniest bit, and I look back down, focusing on packing the muffins up next.

"You know, I was searching through Mr. Bishop's calendar, and Vivian would put these big chunks of what she called focus time in there." I affix the lid back on the fruit salad, setting it on top of the muffins. "I think it was just free time to handle any sudden projects or crises that came up. I could do that for you once all these initial meetings die down. So you won't feel as rushed."

He nods. "Yes. Do that. Oh, and thanks for making those note cards with my talking points. It helped a lot."

I allow myself a small smile, glad the additional effort paid off. "Of course. I'll do it for all your meetings from now on."

"If it's a lot of extra work, you don't have to—"

“Did it make things easier for you?”

He rubs at his jaw, eyeing me speculatively. “Yes.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

His lips quirk. “If I had you with me over in the Philippines, we could have wrapped up the project months sooner.”

I snort, sliding the packaged food into the tote bag I used to bring it in, and heft it over my shoulder. “I’ve never left New York.”

“Really?” He follows me out of the conference room to the elevators, pressing the call button to return us to the sixtieth floor.

“Yeah, even Manhattan feels foreign sometimes compared to Brooklyn.”

“You come from Brooklyn every day? Isn’t that a hike?”

I shrug. “I use the time on the subway to memorize your schedule.”

He grins, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Oh, so that’s how you get it all done.”

The elevator doors open, the car about two-thirds full, and we step on, the others going unnaturally silent in the presence of Connor.

“Sixty?” the man closest to the buttons asks, and Connor nods, his joking manner gone now that we’re not alone. He’s back in boss mode.

The elevator stops again on the next floor up, four more people joining us, and I scoot back, bumping into Connor. “Oh, sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he murmurs, putting more space between us.

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I stand as still as I can, barely breathing as I try not to touch him, but as the car pauses once more two floors up to let on another two people, I have no choice but to squeeze against him, his body hard underneath that tailored suit, breath gently stirring the nape of my neck.

Wait. This is the perfect opportunity to go further than I normally could. I shift my weight, pressing back, the slight noise he makes sending a shiver through me. I glance over my shoulder, but he looks straight ahead, his jaw clenched, body rigid. Am I seriously that repulsive to him?

I lean away and let out a deep sigh. He doesn't have a problem talking to me. He encourages conversation, in fact. So why is it that as soon as I come in contact with him, he tenses up like he can't wait for it to be over?

Some seductress I am.

Chapter Eight

Connor

The top of Emma's head just reaches my nose, all those riotous curls right in front of me, and I take shallow breaths, resisting the urge to lean in the tiniest bit and breathe in her delicious scent. It had taken everything not to reach out and steady her as she bumped into me, to not react as her weight had briefly shifted against me.

I can't fault her today. There are too many damn people in this elevator.

Thankfully, it empties of everyone by the fifty-sixth floor, and we ride up the remaining four flights with plenty of space between us. Not that I miss the feel of her lithe body against mine. Obviously.

We step off on our floor, and she sets the tote bag she's carrying beside her desk before following me into my office. "Did you want me to take notes during your meeting with Angelina?"

"Yes." I sigh, dropping into my chair heavily. "Can I look at what you took down for the chiefs meeting?"

She hands me her notebook, and I skim the page, looking for something that Dave said about some kind of algorithm our principal holding, ThousandWords, uses. Oh, good. She caught it.

"You know, I declined an assistant in my previous role. Now I'm wondering what the hell I ever did that for."

"I'm glad you did." She smiles as I glance over at her. "Then you would have brought them here with you. And I wouldn't have a job."

I flip through to the next page, only half paying attention to her notes, wanting to hear more of her voice. "Do you like working here?"

"I actually... love it."

"Why?" The question slips out unbidden, but she doesn't seem to take offense, that soft smile still on her face.

"I've never done anything that challenged me so much. Putting your schedule together can be kind of like... a puzzle, I guess. Making sure no meetings conflict

with each other, that there's time for everything you need to do. Knowing what's important and what's not." She shrugs, biting her lip as she looks down. "It's stupid, I know. I'm just an assistant."

"No, it's not. That's one thing I liked about my old job, actually."

She takes a seat, resting her elbows on the edge of my desk. "You were working on international projects?"

"Yeah, and like you said, it was essentially a big puzzle. You figured out how all the pieces best fit and worked together to complete it. And when you're done, you move on to the next project. But this..." I gesture around me. "It's the same day in and out. I don't even leave this building."

"So what do you want to do?"

I frown, not sure what she's asking.

"Like, if you could have any job," she clarifies. "It doesn't have to be related to Bishop Industries. What would you do?"

"I... I don't know. It's never been an option."

"Didn't you ever dream of doing something else?"

I nearly snort. "Dad had his plans for us. Archer liked numbers, so he worked his way up to CFO. But he was always supposed to take over for Dad one day. I didn't want to be stuck behind a desk so I got to do international work, with the idea that it would prepare me for becoming the Chief of Operations eventually. Dad always had beef with Gabriel, so he didn't get to work for the company, but handled our promotional events. That was just the way it was."

“But you can rewrite the script now if you want. You can do anything. You’re the boss.”

Theoretically, I understand that. But things can’t be as easily changed as she makes it seem. I’m still beholden to the company. The shareholders. The public. She’d said something yesterday about noping out of here and leaving the responsibility to someone else, but doing that seems too much like the easy way out. Besides, people here are counting on me. Have expectations of me.

And I’ve never been afraid of hard work.

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“It’s not as simple as that,” I tell her, leaving it at that.

She studies me for a moment, then nods. “So what can we do? To make your new job more like your old one? More variety? Travel? Committing to fewer meetings?”

Yes to all of the above. But that still doesn’t help me understand the vast amount of inside tips and tricks Dad had about the business that I don’t.

There’s a knock at the open door, and Angelina, our public relations guru, pokes her head in. “You ready for me?”

I motion to the seat next to Emma, bracing myself for her assessment. Angelina’s been working on a comprehensive plan for me as CEO, while also handling all press inquiries about the death of my father and Bishop Industries’ future. I gave her free rein to do whatever she thinks best regarding the press.

“Well, your interview Friday didn’t go the way we want,” she states bluntly as she sits down. That’s putting it mildly. The host had been on the attack from the first minute. “But public response has been in our favor. You just lost your father, you’ve only been CEO for a week, blah blah blah, you get the gist.” Wow, Archer wasn’t kidding when he warned me she was straightforward. “They shouldn’t have been so aggressive, but that’s how they were with your dad. They were used to that dynamic.”

“Well, I’m not... aggressive. Not like he was.”

“No, but that’s what people are expecting.”

What is she saying? I have to become an asshole just because my father was? “Can’t I be a reasonable person who has a conversation with the media rather than assaulting each other on-air?”

Angelina blinks at me. “Um, sure. But I’ll need to rework our strategy, then.”

“Okay, do that.”

She looks down at the packet in her lap. “We’ll start with this, at least.”

I internally groan as she hands it to me, sensing it won’t be good news. Maybe I can get Emma to give me the highlights.

“We’ll focus for now on media where we can control the narrative,” she continues. “I have a contact at MediaTech Magazine and they’ve agreed to do a feature on you. If you’re wanting to change your image compared to your dad, this is the perfect opportunity. Especially because it’s still early enough that you’re an unknown.”

“Unknown? I didn’t pop out of nowhere. I’ve been with the company for years.”

“Yeah, but you’ve been out of the country, out of the papers too long. Everyone’s expecting you to be a hardass like your father, but maybe you’re straitlaced like Archer or a partier like Gabriel. The question is, what are you?”

Is she hoping I’ll give her an answer now? I glance at Emma, who pauses in her note-taking as she catches my eye.

“We should show Connor as capable and hardworking,” Emma pipes up when I remain silent. “That the company is in good hands.”

My stomach makes an odd twisting motion. She really thinks the company is doing

well with me in charge? She said something to that effect the other day, but I feel like I'm winging it half the time.

Angelina nods in agreement. "Absolutely. We want to portray confidence. Stability. Not changing the status quo. I've already sent out press releases over the weekend in response to the interview and confirmed your attendance at a few key events over the next couple of weeks. It's all in the packet there."

The lightness in my belly sinks. This is all filled with events I'm supposed to attend? I'm barely holding my head above water trying to learn how to be the CEO. "What's first?"

She takes it from me, flipping a few pages in. "A benefit for the American Heart Association. The cause is obviously near and dear to you."

"How many events do I have to go to?"

She sets the packet down, giving me a level look. "Listen, I know you're busy. I get it. But it's my job to improve Bishop Industries' image. We're mainly a social media site, for God's sake. And right now, you're the only one who hasn't abandoned ship. So I'm working with what I have."

"I'm not knocking your plan. I'll do whatever you think is necessary." I scrub my hands over my jaw. "But I'm so tired already." The momentum I had going from the chiefs meeting has faded, a heavy weight settling on my shoulders at the mere thought of having to do more.

"This is temporary, right?" Emma asks, turning to Angelina. "Only a few weeks until he makes an impression, and then he can cut back?"

The PR expert studies me, and I can only imagine what she's thinking. I've had a

dream job handed to me on a silver platter that others would kill for, and I have the nerve to complain about it? Yeah, I'd be tired of me too.

“Yes, it's only temporary,” she replies in a soft voice. “Everything's laid out for you in the packet. Pick what you want to do and me or Emma will set it up.”

She stands and heads toward the door. “How about we meet again in another week to determine how everything is going? We'll make adjustments later if we need to.”

Emma nods. “I'll add it to the schedule.”

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The urge to pick up the heavy tome and chuck it across the room flashes through me, but I ignore it, cursing the damn schedule under my breath.

Emma shows her out and shuts the door behind her before returning to me. She holds out her hand and I give her the packet to flip through.

“I’ll do some research on this benefit, find out who’ll be there, who you need to impress, all that stuff, okay?”

I nod, resting my forehead in my hands for a moment. It can’t be too long, though. I’m meeting with our production team in fifteen minutes. Something about their planned rollout of ThousandWords’ new features coming out soon. Can’t we sum these meetings up in an email?

The lightest brushing on my arm has me lifting my head, finding Emma directly next to me. She returns her hand to her side, and I bite my lip so I won’t ask her to do it again.

“You’ll get through this,” she says, so much confidence in her voice, I nearly believe her. I look away, not wanting her to see my doubt. “And I’m here to help in any way I can.”

“When’s the benefit?”

She looks down at the paper. “Tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow?” I tug at my tie. “No, that’s not enough time.”

She doesn't censure me, asking instead, "How much time do you need?"

A week? A month? Forever? I loosen the top button of my shirt, needing more air.

She kneels next to me, resting a palm on the arm of my chair as she gazes up. "How about I come with you?" she offers. "For support."

I shut my eyes, reveling in her nearness, wishing she'd move her hand the slightest bit closer. "You'd do that?"

"Of course. I'll set everything up, help you keep it all straight, write up your talking points. You just have to smile and look pretty."

I appreciate her levity, my mouth curving into a grin despite myself. "You think I'm pretty?"

A smirk flirts along her lips. "Prettier than all the other billionaires there." She stands, making her way toward the door. "Do you already have a tux or should I get you one?"

A tuxedo? Is it that fancy? "I have one. What will you wear?"

She glances back over her shoulder coquettishly. "It's a surprise."

Her hips sashay as she exits the room, and I can't help but watch her, imagining what kind of dress she'll have on. Curve hugging? Dipped low in the front?

I shake my head, putting the image out of my mind. I need to prepare for my meeting with Richard, not imagine what my very helpful assistant will wear tomorrow. She's coming to assist me, not for me to ogle her. This is a professional relationship.

And that's how it's going to stay.

* * *

“Meeting with the big boss twice in one day? I must be a lucky guy.”

I motion for Richard to take a seat across from me, catching Emma's eye as she closes my office door. She gives me a subtle thumbs up, but I keep my smile to myself. I need to be all business in front of Brigham.

“Well, I haven't formally met you yet the way I have the other chiefs. Since you recently replaced my brother and all.”

The man stiffens slightly. “Hope there are no hard feelings about that. Your father was the one—”

“No. No issues there. And Archer doesn't plan on coming back if you're worried about that. But I did have a slight issue with you at the meeting today.”

“Oh?” He straightens in his seat, adjusting his tie.

I can understand why he'd be confused. He'd been on top of every question I'd asked about financials, even quoting reports from previous quarters when he wasn't with the company. “I overheard you when you came into the conference room asking my assistant for coffee. Well, you didn't ask, did you? You expected she'd do it.”

His brows knit together. “Isn't it her job to, I don't know, assist?”

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“To assist me,” I clarify.

He stares at me, face relaxing a moment later. “Oh, assist you. Got it.”

I frown, not liking the emphasis he put on his words. “What are you implying?”

He clears his throat hastily. “Nothing.”

“Miss Shepherd and I have a professional relationship.”

“Yes, of course,” he backpedals, finally seeming to catch on to my seriousness. Performance management has never been my favorite thing, but unfortunately, it’s part of the job. “I apologize if I did or said anything wrong. Won’t happen again.”

I nod, moving on to what’s going on in his department, and a half-hour later, we’re squared away.

As he’s about to leave my office, though, he asks, “So, Emma—” He clears his throat hastily. “Miss Shepherd, I mean. Did she complain about me? Go to HR or something?”

“No, she didn’t. But I’m proactive with all employees about job roles and expectations within the workplace.”

What a load of shit. But he doesn’t need to know that. And would I honestly have cared as much if he’d said it to someone who wasn’t Emma?

I push that thought away, not wanting to examine it too closely.

“Right.” He nods, showing himself out, and I lean forward in my chair, rolling the tightness out of my shoulders. There’s been no time to hit the gym lately and I’m starting to feel the difference.

I tug at my tie, loosening it slightly, and pick up my cell when I notice it blinking.

Gabriel:Dinner tonight?

I open my calendar, finding everything booked solid through the rest of the day. Plus, Emma canceled the block of time I was scheduled to spend going over notes for a project meeting tomorrow so that I could meet with Richard instead. I’ll still need to do that later. And if I’m attending that benefit, I’ll already lose working time...

Me:Sorry, it’s a late work night.

A minute later he replies, a stab of guilt piercing me.

Gabriel:Seems like I talk to you even less now that you’re in town.

He puts an emoji in after to soften the blow, but it doesn’t change his meaning. I should make time to see my brother.

But there’s a small part of me that’s...

I shy away from the train of thought, not ready to go down that path just yet.

Me:We’ll get together soon.

Vague promises are all I can make for now.

A knock on my open door has me looking up, Emma there in the doorway with a blueberry muffin on a napkin. “Need an afternoon pick me up?”

“I thought you’d keep those all for yourself.”

A soft smile graces her lips. “I’ll share with you.” She hands me the muffin, our fingers brushing, sparks running through me at the slight contact. “I know you’re busy, so I’ll leave you to it.”

I shut my eyes as she walks away, determined not to watch how her ass moves in that tight skirt. My imagination already does plenty filling in the blanks. I can’t be a complete hypocrite after lecturing Richard.

Even if my body wants to be.

Chapter Nine

Emma

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:18 am

“What the hell am I going to wear?” I mutter as I search through my closet for the third time. Not that I expect to find anything. I don’t own nice clothes.

It’s like the case of the cobbler not having shoes for himself. I’ve made plenty of dresses for others through my Etsy shop, even a couple of wedding gowns, but those were people paying me to make those. There’s no money for something special for me.

I slump down in my desk chair, pushing my sewing machine out of the way to rest my head on my arms. It seemed like a stroke of brilliance earlier to offer to accompany Connor tomorrow night. A chance to get closer to him, to prove myself indispensable, to gain his trust. But what do I know about attending some fancy event?

Okay, first things first. I need to find a dress. And there technically are dresses in this house, they’re just not mine.

I quietly open my bedroom door, tiptoeing down the hall toward Mom’s room, and knock softly, the sound barely audible. I turn the knob and peek in, spying her sleeping form on the bed, the ever-present tightness in her face relaxed.

I should wake her up. She’s supposed to limit daytime napping so she gets more restful sleep at night, but maybe this one time I can let it slide. If she catches me rifling through her stuff, I’ll have to explain why I’m doing it to begin with.

I watch her out of the corner of my eye as I open the bifold closet, praying the hinges don’t squeak. Pushed in the back behind her winter coats are three floor-length gowns

Dad bought her ages ago. She's never allowed me to touch them, barely even let me look at them, but I need one now. The green sequins are too sparkly for my taste and the blue sateen's style is ridiculously outdated considering it's over two decades old. But the red silk... yeah, I can work with this.

I slip it off the hanger, freezing as Mom stirs in her sleep, and hightail it out of there before she wakes, carrying it back to my room. I try it on, standing in front of my mirror, and twist around to view it from all angles. It fits pretty well considering it's not mine, though it's a tad longer than I'd like. I could shorten the hem, but I don't feel like going through all the extra effort.

If anything, I should be concerned about the gaping neckline. Unfortunately for me, Mom was always one to show off her assets, and this dress is no exception. It's constructed in such a way that I can't easily alter it, but maybe that's not a bad thing. If Connor sees me in this, he might... What am I thinking? He couldn't wait to get away from me in that elevator. Seduction is off the table. I'll have to dazzle him with my wit and brains.

Oh God, I'm doomed.

* * *

My eyes widen as we walk underneath the elaborate chandelier in the center of the ballroom, the crystal sparkling beautifully in the dim light of the room, and I'm unable to help gawking at the extravagance surrounding us. Grandiose floral displays on every table, servers in black-tie milling around with trays full of champagne and hors d'oeuvres, attendees dressed luxuriously in their finest as they give air kisses and empty platitudes. We pass by a woman wearing so much jewelry, it's a wonder she doesn't keel over from the weight of the heavy stones.

"If they spent all this money to make the event this nice, how much do they expect to

raise?" I whisper to Connor as we navigate the room to find our table.

"Probably a few million," he answers, unfazed by the number.

I clench my jaw so it doesn't drop, and stop a passing server to grab a flute of champagne. If they're making that much in donations, they can afford to give me one glass of alcohol.

I may need it to get through the night. Everything about this event is so much more than I expected. More crowded. More elegant. More everything I'm not.

Connor looks right at home, though, among the glitz and glamour in a tux that highlights the breadth of his shoulders and easygoing smile. I pause as a woman stops to greet him, the fabric of her gown expensive, the tailored cut of it practically shouting I'm rich. I open my clutch, again borrowed from my mom, and check the time on my phone. Damn. This thing lasts two more hours. Why did I think this was a good idea?

"Did I miss anything?" Connor's deep voice rumbles in my ear.

My eyes shut briefly, ignoring the way my stomach flutters at his nearness. "No." I paste on a smile and turn toward him, racking my brain trying to place who he was speaking with. I tried to memorize as many attendees as I could get names of earlier, but with the sheer number of people, I ended up focusing just on those Bishop Industries has ties to or are in the same industry. "The woman you were talking to, that was..."

"Talía," he supplies. "My brother knows her better than me, but we're friendly enough."

I nod. Talía... Talía... "Oh, she's Phillip Doukas' daughter." From what I remember,

that family is loaded. Then again, nearly everyone here is.

He sticks his hands in his pockets, glancing around. “She’s one of the few I recognize. Angelina was right. I’ve been away too long.”

“Well, that’s what I’m here for.” I point to a man in his mid-fifties with an obvious toupee. “That’s Aaron Sloane. Owner of Fartech Technologies. ThousandWords outsources our content moderating to him. And that guy over there. Preston Kennard.” I gesture to another man about ten feet away who has a beautiful blonde on his arm. “We bought his software company five years ago and now he’s a millionaire.”

He listens as I continue to point others out to him, asking questions occasionally, and my reconnaissance pays off as people finally realize Connor is here and approach him, striking up conversations.

I hover on the edge of the group, unsure if I should stay or fade into the background, watching him in his element as he easily charms them. Friendly. Warm. Reassuring. This is exactly what Angelina wanted, for him to subtly assure everyone that Bishop Industries is in good hands. And even knowing that was his goal in coming here, I find myself falling under his spell as well. Funny stories about his time in the Philippines. Guarantees that he’s fitting into his new role as CEO. Gracious acknowledgment of condolences for his father.

It’s a game as they fish for information, some crafty in how they go about it and others obvious, but Connor knows what he’s doing, dancing around the subject. He gives them just enough to whet their appetite without revealing too much. Is this natural to him or did he learn how to do it?

He excuses himself eventually, indicating with a head signal for me to follow him to a vacant corner, and grabs two more flutes of champagne on the way. He hands me

one as he downs the other, and I raise my brows at him as I take a sip.

“I deserve it after that,” he says wryly, gesturing behind him toward the main floor.

“You seemed comfortable enough.”

He shrugs, looking down at his now empty glass. “It’s part of the job.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

His gaze flicks up to meet mine briefly before he looks away again. “You did your homework knowing who’s who,” he answers, ignoring my actual question. “You have a handy file lying around somewhere?”

I take another sip, enjoying the bubbles. “I spent today researching everyone I could. I said I’d help you out.”

“Thank you,” he murmurs, rolling the glass between his palms. “You see anyone else I need to know about?”

I scan the room, spotting a few new faces I didn’t notice before, and point them out to him, his attention rapt on me when I glance back over at him.

It startles me for a moment, unsure if he’s ever looked at me so intently. “Is everything okay?”

“You’ve got this, um, eyelash on your face,” he explains, gesturing to my cheek.

I brush it away and he shakes his head, indicating I missed. I try again, but to no avail. “Can you get it?”

His brow knits. “You want me to... touch you?”

Jesus, what’s with him and touching? “Just really quick.”

He swallows, reaching out carefully, and my eyes drift shut as his finger rests featherlight on me for a moment, a wave of goosebumps running down my bare arms. “Got it.” He shows me his index finger with the eyelash, then presses his thumb tightly to it. “Oh, hey. Did you ever do this as a kid?” he asks, a soft smile on his face.

“Do what?”

He holds up his fingers. “You make a wish then guess which finger the eyelash is on. If you’re right, your wish comes true.”

“Is it a game?”

He tilts his head. “You’ve never heard of it? Maybe it was just something my mom did.” He lowers his hand. “Never mind.”

I grab his hand unthinkingly, his skin hot against mine before I realize what I’m doing, and let go. “No. I want to play. It sounds fun.”

He stares at where I grabbed him, letting out a breath. “Okay.” He brings his hand back up, the edge of his thumb and pointer white from being pressed together too long. “Pick a finger.”

I touch his thumb gently, and he reveals the eyelash stuck to the other finger. “Tough luck.”

“I’m used to it.” I bite my lip, realizing how grim that sounded. “So does that mean you get the wish?”

“No, it doesn’t really mean anything.” He wipes his hand on his pant leg, twirling his champagne flute in his other hand.

“Well, if you could make a wish, what would it be?”

He looks out at the crowd, lips twisting. “That you could have attended something like this with me before. It feels a lot better heading into a conversation knowing who a person is and something about them. Makes it seem like I know what the hell I’m doing.”

“I think you’ve got some major imposter syndrome going on. You handled them all like a pro.”

His mouth quirks up on one side, but he doesn’t respond.

“So you’ve always gone to events like this alone? No... dates?”

I searched online again but still couldn’t find any mention of a significant other. Sure, he’s been out of the country the last few years, but it’s not like they don’t have paparazzi overseas.

“Dad drilled it into our heads since before I can remember about being careful who you go out with. A picture lasts forever, and the people you’re photographed with reflect on you.”

“So you just, what? Never took pictures with anyone?”

He shrugs. “Archer and I decided we’d never date someone we weren’t serious about. It wasn’t worth the hassle having Dad lecture us about it.” His lips curve in a smile, seeming lost in memories. “Gabriel didn’t care, though. He was always getting reamed out.”

So that’s why I couldn’t find any info. “But how can you get serious with someone if you never go out?”

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His grin stretches wider. “Ah, that’s the catch.”

“Well, you don’t have to be careful anymore. You could date if you wanted.” The words leave a sour taste in my mouth. I need to get over this infatuation.

He raises his brows. “You think I have time to date?”

Okay, fair point.

“Besides,” he continues, “I’ve never met someone I could see myself with. Not until—” He jerks his head up, the tips of his ears turning the faintest shade of pink. Admittedly, if I wasn’t studying him so closely, I’d miss it. “Would you like more champagne? I’m going to go get some more.”

He takes my nearly empty glass out of my hand before I can answer, and hunts down a passing server for two more flutes.

Okay, that was weird.

He returns and hands me a full glass, our fingers brushing slightly, and almost drops it, steadying himself before it spills. “Sorry, I—” He rubs at his temple distractedly. “Ignore me for a minute.”

I step closer, laying a hand on his forearm. “Is everything okay?” His rules for professionalism don’t quite count at the moment, right? We’re not at the office. And besides, something’s up with him.

His Adam's apple bobs as his gaze flicks between my face and where my hand rests on him. "Emma..." He wavers, suddenly nearer, though I don't remember either of us moving.

I look up into his vivid blue eyes, something there I haven't seen before. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was... interest.

A staccato burst of laughter from a woman about ten feet away interrupts the moment, and Connor blinks, whatever I thought I saw in his face gone now. He steps back, a ripping sound from below making us both look down, where his shoe has caught on the edge of my dress, tearing the fabric.

"Oh, shit." He bends down to examine it, and in his haste spills his champagne. But not just anywhere.

All over me.

Chapter Ten

Connor

"Fuck."

There's no other word for it as I stare at Emma's ruined dress, my gaze getting stuck on her chest as a bead of liquid slowly rolls down into the valley of her breasts. No, no. Don't look at that.

I avert my eyes, but the image of her cleavage soaked in champagne is already imprinted in my memory. "Here." I fumble for the flimsy pocket square in my tux and hand it to her, the thin linen essentially useless as she uses it to dab at herself, the liquid continuing to spread over the red silk.

“Shit,” she mutters, holding out the now dripping scrap of fabric. “I ruined it.”

“No, I did.” I take it from her, tossing it into a nearby wastebasket. “I’m so sorry. I’ll buy you a new dress. Ten new dresses. A new wardrobe.”

The worried look leaves her face temporarily as she rolls her eyes, easing something within me. She must not be too mad, then. “That’s overkill.”

It’s really not. The way she’s been helping me, encouraging me, boosting me up since the very beginning. I owe her so much more.

I shrug off my tuxedo jacket to drape over her shoulders, careful not to touch her bare skin. If it happens again, I’m not sure I’ll be able to hold in my reaction. Not that I’ve hidden anything so far tonight. Her looking up at me with those innocent green eyes just a minute ago, her hand warm on my arm, body close enough to feel her heat... it was almost more than I could take.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

“But the benefit,” she says, glancing behind her. “You still—”

“I’ve accomplished what I need to.”

I send a quick text to Allen, asking him to pick us up early and steer her toward the exit, ignoring the fact my hand is on her lower back. What I’m touching is the jacket, not her.

Thankfully, we don’t have to traverse the length of the ballroom to find a way out. There are already enough curious stares directed toward us in just the short distance we travel.

“Is this what it’s like for you all the time?” she whispers.

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I open the double doors to the lobby, dropping my hand from her, my fingers flexing unconsciously. “What?”

“Everyone looking at you. It’s... unnerving.”

“You get used to it.” That’s a lie. But I don’t want her more self-conscious than she probably already is.

“Thank you,” she murmurs to the doorman of the hotel as he lets us out, and I guide her over to the side of the valet area, waiting for our ride.

She shivers, hugging my jacket tighter around her, and I have an awful surge of possessiveness pass through me seeing my clothes on her. What the hell is wrong with me? She needs my help, not for me to leer at her.

“Are you okay? I can go inside and see if they have a towel or something.”

“I’m fine. Just worried about the dress more than anything.” She shakes her head, giving me a rueful smile. “I shouldn’t have worn it to begin with. It’s not mine.”

“Whose is it?”

“My mom’s. I didn’t have a dress of my own for tonight.”

“Why didn’t you say something? You could have used my card.”

Her lips twist. “I already basically invited myself. I wasn’t going to demand you buy

me an outfit too.”

No, she’s not the type to make demands, is she? “I wouldn’t have cared.”

“Well, I do.” She fiddles with the edge of the jacket’s sleeves where it falls past her fingertips. “I don’t know what you have going on with your personal life, but I don’t want to be one of those people who starts expecting things from you just because you came into money recently.”

“Think about it like this. When you’re with me, how you appear at an event reflects on me, so it’s for the job.”

She holds her arms out, her stained and ripped dress on display. “Some impression I made, then.”

“That was my fault and you know it. I’m just saying, don’t be afraid to ask if you need something.”

She bites her lip, glancing down. “You don’t know what you’re asking for,” she murmurs, so softly I’m not sure I heard it right.

I open my mouth to ask her to repeat that when my car pulls up to the curb, and she crosses her arms, stepping away. “Goodnight, Connor. Oh, here.” She takes off the jacket and holds it out to me.

“What are you doing? I’ll take you home.”

She blinks slowly. “But it’s so far out of your way.”

“It’s the least I can do. I have nowhere important to be.”

She hugs the jacket to her chest, eyeing me carefully. “Didn’t we just talk earlier about how pressed you are for time?”

“Come on.” I open the rear door for her, waiting her out. “We can go over the schedule for tomorrow. Now it’s work related.”

A small smile crosses her face as she relents. “Okay.” She gathers the bottom of her dress as she goes to step into the backseat, and I automatically hold out my hand for her to keep her balance, regretting the decision as her slim fingers wrap around mine.

She gives her address to Allen and pulls her phone out of her clutch, pulling up my meeting calendar. We spend the next twenty minutes going over everything for tomorrow, which is helpful since the end of the day is blocked off for the magazine interview and photoshoot Angelina signed me up for. I have no idea what to expect with that. Dad was always the one being interviewed, not me.

She puts her phone away when we’re finished, but doesn’t relax back into the leather seats, instead bending forward to examine the tear in her dress. She lifts the hem to inspect it closer, revealing her lower legs, and though there’s nothing sexual about the action, I can’t take my gaze off the modest amount of skin she’s exposed. Christ, I’ve seen more of her legs when she wears skirts to work, but something about this is different, like she’s uncovering herself.

Or maybe I’m only seeing what I want to see. Imagining more of a connection between us after she slipped under my defenses earlier.

“I think I can fix it,” she says, my gaze jerking up before she catches me staring at her. “Or at the very least, make it knee-length. As long as the stain comes out of the bodice.”

“I said I’ll buy—” I stop mid-sentence. “Wait, you can do that?”

“Sure.” She shrugs nonchalantly. “It’s easy. Just takes time.”

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“So you can sew? People still do that?”

She laughs, her low, throaty chuckle so at odds with her personality. “Yes, people still sew. It’s what I was doing before I started at Bishop Industries.”

“You were a seamstress?”

“I guess you could call it that. I made custom clothes for people on Etsy.”

I shift in my seat, getting more comfortable as we start over the Brooklyn Bridge.

“Why’d you stop?”

“Oh, it was just something I liked to do. For me.” She smooths the red silk of her dress over her lap, fanning it around her. “Parts of it are actually like this job. Keeping track of orders, materials organized, prioritizing what needs to be done first, attention to detail. But it never really paid the bills and I needed an actual job. We’re, um, kind of tight on money right now.” She glances over at me and away. “My mom’s been to a lot of specialists over the last few years.”

“Insurance doesn’t cover it?”

She makes an irritated sound in the back of her throat. “Don’t get me started on insurance. Our plan is a joke, but it’s all my dad would pay for.”

“The dad that has all these expectations of you?”

Her fingers clench her dress briefly, wrinkling the fabric before she lets go. “I don’t

want to talk about him,” she whispers, looking out her window.

What kind of nerve did that hit? “Okay, no problem.” I grasp for something else to ask her, hating the forlornness that suddenly came over her. “Do you have plans to make clothes again someday? Like professionally?”

She looks back over, and I swear there’s gratitude in her eyes for changing the subject. “I had this thought early on in college that I could open my own store one day. Of my own designs, you know? Things I had made myself.” There’s an excited note in her voice I haven’t heard from her before. “I even settled on a business major so I’d understand what I’m doing.”

“What’s stopping you?”

She hitches one shoulder up, her lips twisting. “Life. Time. Money. I never finished my degree. I dropped to part-time for a semester when Mom needed me at home, then dropped out completely when that got to be too much. Besides, I’d still have to get a loan or funding or something. I thought maybe my d—” She cuts herself off, clearing her throat, and looks down at her lap. “Um, someone I know might give me some startup capital, but I’m not sure that’ll happen anymore.”

She folds her hands together, giving me a rueful smile, and I make a split-second decision. “Write me up a business plan and I’ll look it over.”

She blinks, then chuckles. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m being serious. If it’s something you’re passionate about, that you believe in, you should try. I’ll be your first investor.”

She swallows heavily, staring at me. “You’re crazy. You barely know me.”

“I know enough.” She’s smart, driven, organized. “If you had the right resources, you could make anything successful.”

She continues to stare at me like I’ve got two heads, and as the car slows to stop, she looks beyond me through the window. “We’re here.”

I turn, looking at a nondescript brick house, the steps leading up to the front door weathered with age. “I’ll walk you up.”

She carefully gets out, taking quick glances at me as we make our way to the porch. “Are you serious about the business proposal? I wasn’t fishing for money or anything.”

The first step creaks as I put my weight on it, but she doesn’t seem bothered by the sound. Must happen all the time, then. “I know you weren’t. But you had this energy about you when you spoke about it. It obviously means something to you.” I tuck my hands in my pockets, resisting the urge to reach out to her, connect with her the way I want to. “You won’t be with me forever. Vivian’s coming back in a few weeks. You deserve the chance to make it a reality. If your plan is solid.”

An enthusiastic light enters her eyes as her hand comes up to cover her mouth, then just as quickly uncovers it. “Is it crazy that I’m already dreaming about it?”

God, when was the last time I got that excited about something?

The smile on her face steadily grows, her hands fidgeting as she clasps them together. “Connor, I don’t know what to say. I—” She barrels into me, arms wrapping themselves around my shoulders as she squeezes tight. “I know it’s not professional to hug,” she murmurs into my chest. “But thank you. Tonight was amazing. You’re amazing.”

I loosen my hands from out of my pockets, steadying her so she doesn't unbalance us right off this porch. My fingers flex as they settle on her waist, itching for more, to fully embrace her, but I can't. I fear I won't let go if I do.

"It's nothing. Really."

She leans back, her face so close my breath stirs the fine hairs at her temple. "It is. Everything's been going wrong lately and this is the first good thing in a long while. Even if you pass on the plan, at least it's something."

I nod, doing all I can not to focus on her smile, those full lips right there, so near it would be nothing to lean forward the barest couple inches and take her mouth in a claiming kiss, settling this waging war inside me once and for all.

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Would she let me? Would it be worth it?

Or would I ruin everything?

Chapter Eleven

Connor

I step back, mumbling a curse under my breath as I let go of her and grip the porch railing behind me, needing my hands off her before I do something I'll regret.

A loud thud against the front door has us turning, Emma's eyes taking on a worried cast as she exchanges glances with me.

"Mom?" she calls out, pulling a key ring from her clutch. She unlocks the door and turns the knob, but it barely budes an inch. "Mom?" She's panicked now as she pushes harder, and I put a staying hand on her arm before she hurts herself.

I'm careful as I push the door open, discovering a woman I presume to be her mother on the floor inside, stirring as I make enough space for Emma to get through. She immediately bends down, running hesitant hands over her. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Her mother's eyes flutter as she raises a hand to her forehead. "I got dizzy for a second."

"Can you stand?" She goes to put her arms under her, struggling to lift, and I step in

to help, leading her over to the couch. God, it's crazy how much they look alike. Emma's nearly a carbon copy of her mother, with just a few minor differences, most notably the shape and color of her eyes.

I place a pillow behind her mom as Emma picks up a pill bottle on the coffee table, her brow furrowing. "Where'd you get these?"

"Hmm?" Her mom lifts her head, the little color in her face draining when she sees what she's holding. "I think I'll go to bed," she replies faintly, standing on her own now. "Feeling a bit weak."

Emma's mouth tightens even as she reaches forward to offer an arm, her gaze meeting mine briefly before flicking away. "I'll be right back."

She helps her mom shuffle down the hallway, and I take the opportunity to glance around, noting the worn furniture and long crack in the seam of two adjoining walls. Everything is clean and tidy, but the place is in obvious need of updating.

"I'm sorry about that," she says when she returns, rubbing at her temple. "Thank you for helping."

"Of course." My gaze traces the new lines bracketing her mouth, the fatigue in her eyes. "You should sit down. It's been a long night."

She slumps down on the couch, picking up the pill bottle in front of her. "There's no label," she murmurs. "And she's not due for a refill for another week." She opens it up, shaking out a handful of yellow pills. "Looks like Percocet."

"You think she got them illegally?"

She rolls the bottle between her palms, letting out a long sigh. "Yes. And if that's the

case, who knows if they're even real? There could be anything in these."

I lean against the wall and cross my arms over my chest, studying her. "I know it's not my place, but what does she have? Like why does she need pain pills?"

"Fibromyalgia. Her body kind of over-processes pain, and she's still struggling with managing it. But I don't want her to get dependent on drugs. The doctor suggested all these other techniques to help, but she doesn't do them. She just sleeps all day." She sets the pills down, pushing them away from her.

"How'd she get it?"

"Her doctors can't say for sure. But sometimes other illnesses can trigger it. She had ovarian cancer before this, but she's in remission now."

Wow, that's a lot to go through. "That's good she beat it. My, um, mom had cancer too."

She blinks up at me. "Oh. I didn't know."

How would she? It's not something I usually lead with when talking to people.

"She—" She clears her throat hesitantly. "She, um..."

It's clear what she's trying to say. "She passed away when I was a kid," I tell her, getting it out of the way.

"I'm so sorry, Connor. I shouldn't be complaining to you."

"No, no. It's the same as you said the other day. You can vent whenever you need to. It's nice to hear about someone else's problems." Her brows narrow, and I

immediately retract my statement. “That came out wrong. I only meant I feel like I’m constantly griping about my issues. So I don’t mind at all if you want to talk about anything.”

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She nods, not looking at me. “It’s just hard. She’s an adult. I shouldn’t be policing her. But how can I watch her become an addict or something if I could prevent it?” She looks up at me, tears swimming in her eyes, and I go to her without a thought, crossing the room before I know what I’m doing to wrap an arm around her, hugging her into my side.

She snuffles, turning her face into my chest, and my eyes automatically shut, reveling in the feel of her so close. Does she have anyone she can lean on? Rely on? Or is the burden on her shoulders alone?

“Does your dad help out with any of this?”

“No,” she murmurs into my shirt. “They aren’t together.”

“Divorced?”

She lifts her head, rubbing underneath her eyes. “Affair. He was married.”

Wow. No wonder she has issues with him. “Oh. Um, I’m sorry—”

“It’s fine. But he still pays a lot of our bills. Or used to, at least.”

Is that why she’s tight on money? Not just her mom’s doctor visits?

“Thanks for listening to me. And sorry for crying on your shirt.” She wipes at the spot on my chest, her hand warm through the fabric. “I hope you didn’t take it as too...” Her gaze drops to my mouth, lingering there. “Unprofessional.”

Oh, God. She really can't look at me like that, whether it's unconscious or not. I realize then my arm is still around her, her side pressed into mine, and I drop my arm, the action obvious in the wake of her statement.

"No, you're fine." How can I say anything when I'm the one who asked her to confide in me? When I was the one who comforted her? "But I should get going. It's getting late." Yeah, right. It's probably not even past nine-thirty.

"Yeah, of course." She hugs her arms tight to herself, a faint blush staining her cheeks. So she picked up on my lame excuse. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Emma."

I let myself out before I start rationalizing why it would be okay to stay a bit longer, to talk a little more, to get even closer. With the way my body reacts to her, I'm playing with fire, and the better I get to know her, the will to stay away crumbles more.

An hour later, I walk into my hotel room, setting the key card down on the foyer table, and flick on the lights, idly playing a few notes on the Steinway as I pass by it. There's something about tonight that makes me look at the place with fresh eyes after seeing Emma's home. The Italian marble mantle over the fireplace. The unparalleled views of Central Park and the Upper East Side from the private terrace. I wander into the bathroom, taking note of the deep soaking tub I've never used, the ridiculous amount of luxury and opulence I'm hardly even aware of because it's become so commonplace. I should use that tub tonight. Actually enjoy the amenities I pay for here, but I don't want to wash the day away just yet.

The soothing tones of cream and beige are echoed throughout the small apartment as I head into the bedroom, but I must be immune to the colors because all I feel is a pervading sense of detachment from it all. Will it be different when I move into

Bishop Tower? Will it feel like mine after it's redecorated?

I've always stayed in hotels whenever working on a project. It's easy, it's fast, and it's not like money's a concern. But those places were temporary, and New York isn't. I could grow roots here. This is where I grew up, where my brothers are, my new company, and... Emma.

She was stunning in that red dress tonight. An unwitting vixen beckoning me to take another look. Get a little closer. And in reality, she wasn't in anything more revealing than half the other women there, but the fact that it was her wearing it...

I groan, desire rushing through me, an unwelcome visitor I keep pushing away more and more lately. But tonight I'd had her in my arms, however briefly, my body singing even as I tried to ignore it. That jump in my belly as she'd hugged me, inhaling her seductive scent. The innocent way she'd looked up at me, all the more alluring because of how genuine she is. Her waist right under my fingertips, the silky feel of her dress adding to the sensory overload of the moment.

My dick lengthens behind my fly, and I waver, so tired of pushing this feeling away, wanting for once to indulge in what I want. Not the company I didn't ask for, the legacy Dad hefted on my shoulders, the expectations, the demands. Something private. For me.

And what I want, what I've wanted from the beginning, is her.

I unzip my pants, palming myself, moaning aloud at the relief coursing through me as I take that first stroke from base to tip. How does she do this to me? How is it that one person can have such an impact? What is it about her I find so intoxicating?

The husky timbre of her voice that weaves itself around my senses?

Those lush curves I'm dying to grip more fully?

Those wild curls begging for my fingers to run through them?

But more than those superficial things are the ways she's snuck under the barricade I set up initially. I thought I'd be safe if there was no physical contact, that she'd no longer have an effect on me. But I didn't account for the way she would look out for me, ask me questions like she cares, try to help as much as she does.

And then at her house, the way she'd confided in me, leaned on me for support. I can't deny the pleasure that rushed through me, being there for her like that. Being someone she can count on, can turn to, can trust. I want to be that. I want to be more.

My strokes speed up remembering the sensation of her body next to mine, how close she'd been, how much I wish things were different. That we were two normal people. That I was normal. That I could be with someone without the public commenting on it. Without feeling guilty as hell for thinking this way at all.

But I'm too far gone to care.

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I stumble over to the bed, bracing myself on the mattress as I get into it, telling myself she doesn't have to know I think about her like this. That the thought of me peeling off that silk dress of hers sets me on fire. That wishing I knew the taste of her lips has my blood pumping harder than before. That if she were here with me now, I'd be unable to help making a move on her, praying she'd let me lay her out on this bed and show her how good we could be together.

Because there's no doubt in my mind we'd be explosive if given half a chance. I've never had a reaction like this to any woman. It has to mean something. And I swear there was interest in her gaze as she'd focused on my lips at the end of the night.

What would she have done if I'd leaned in and kissed her? Pull away? Remind me I'm her boss?

Or kiss me back, pushing me into the couch cushions as she straddles my waist? Her lithe body mine to do with what I want, her mixture of innocence and seductiveness spurring me on, the two of us getting worked up, just like I'm worked up now, my fist flying full throttle over my dick. Almost there. So close.

Slowly undressing her, uncovering every part of that luscious body, discovering the taste of her sweet skin. Her wild underneath me, asking for more in that throaty voice, looking up at me with lust-filled eyes as she takes my cock.

I groan as my release slams into me, nearly knocking the wind out of me with its force, keeled over the bed as I lose control of myself, spending onto the comforter. If it's that powerful just imagining it, how will it be when—

No. That's not happening. This is all fantasy. Like picturing yourself with a celebrity crush.

Except Emma is very much real.

And getting dangerously close.

I head into the adjoining bathroom and clean up, gazing in the mirror at my flushed face, the relaxed curve to my lips. Maybe what I needed all along was to let off some steam privately. That way she won't affect me so much in person.

I can stay professional with her. She never has to know what I do alone. How I think about her. Fantasize about her. Wish beyond hope...

Nope. Not going there. Because if there's one thing I've learned, it's that you don't always get what you want.

No matter how hard it is.

Chapter Twelve

Emma

"Alittle to the left," the photographer calls out, and Connor adjusts his arm accordingly, wincing as the camera flashes in his face. He rolls his eyes at me as the man fiddles with his camera settings, and I hide my smirk behind my hand, enjoying watching him pose. He could make a killing as a model. I'd pay to see him, at least.

I shift in my seat, chastising myself for the train of thought. I'm here as his assistant, not to gawk at him. But how can I help it when he looks so good in that suit?

He wears suits every day.

Yeah, but he's not giving smoldering poses at work.

"Seems like he was made for magazine covers, right?"

I glance up, the journalist who interviewed Connor earlier standing next to me.

"Tiffany," she reminds me, reaching her hand out to shake. "You're his assistant, right?"

I nod, surprised at her strong grip, and watch as she takes a seat close by, out of the way of the photo shoot they have set up. "Did you need to talk to him again?"

"No, I wanted to speak to you."

"Me?" I clear my throat, smoothing out my skirt. "I'm not anyone."

"I'm just trying to get the whole picture," she says. "And you're the one that works most closely with him, right?"

"I guess." I glance over at him, but the photographer has him angled away from me now.

The woman takes out a notepad and paper, looking at it rather than me as she asks me, "Would you say there's any tension between him and his brothers because he inherited the company and they didn't?"

What? She didn't ask him anything about that. "I don't know," I tell her truthfully. "He doesn't talk about them much."

“So he’s estranged from them?”

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“I wouldn’t say that. They just haven’t come up in conversation.”

She nods, writing something down in her notebook. “Has he mentioned his relationship with his father?”

“I, um... shouldn’t you speak with him about this?”

She waves her hand, dismissing my concern. “You know how men are. Never good at articulating what they’re feeling. But women like you and me?” She motions between us as if we’re in on a secret together. “We can interpret it, can’t we?”

Is she trying to get me to tattle on him? As if I’m so desperate to be quoted in her magazine. “What makes you think he confides anything in me?”

She gives me a knowing smile I don’t quite like. “I’ve seen the looks you’ve been exchanging. You’re obviously close.”

Looks? “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on. No need to play shy. He looked to you for approval when we described the vision we had for the shoot. When I asked him about his upcoming plans. Even a minute ago when Paul said he wanted more poses from him.”

I hitch one shoulder up, suddenly self-conscious of my actions. I hadn’t realized Connor and I had even looked at each other all that often. “I’m his assistant. He depends on me.” It’s the only explanation I can give her.

“For how much?”

There’s an edge to her voice I don’t quite understand. “What do you mean?”

“Are you actually the brains behind this little duo? He has to run everything by you first?”

My brow furrows. “No. I don’t have anything to do with his decisions.”

“So what kinds of things has he decided for Bishop Industries, then?”

Another question trying to trick me? “You know, you’re going to have to excuse me. Is there a bathroom around here?”

She gives me a fake smile, and I see in her eyes she knows the jig is up. “Down the hallway to the left.”

Does Angelina have any idea her contact doesn’t seem to have Connor’s best interests at heart?

I take my time in the restroom, surprised to see Connor pacing a few feet away as I exit.

“Is everything okay?” he asks upon seeing me, face stern.

What happened between a few minutes ago and now? “Um, yeah. Why?”

He steps closer, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t know, you looked uncomfortable talking to Tiffany, and then you left. I wanted to make sure you’re all right.”

He was concerned? About me?

“She was asking some strange questions,” I admit. “Ones she didn’t ask you.”

“Like what?”

“Like if you talked about your brothers or your dad. She was fishing for gossip it seemed like.”

He rubs his bottom lip with his thumb, looking down at the floor. “What’d you tell her?”

“Nothing. Whatever you say to me is always in confidence.”

He looks up, the blue of his eyes seeming to flash for a moment before he glances away. “Thanks. I...” He clears his throat softly. “It’s hard to find people in this business you trust.”

Does that mean he trusts me?

The rush of pleasure at his implication turns icy as I remember he can’t truly trust me. I’m a spy. A seductress. And if I don’t deliver, Dad made the consequences clear. On top of that, this job won’t last forever. Connor won’t be there to protect me from the fallout.

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Now could be the perfect time to put Dad's plan into motion.

My stomach rolls as I say, "Actually, I wanted to talk to you—"

I cut myself off as the photographer approaches from the end of the hallway, asking, "Can we get some more shots?"

Connor lets out a sigh and turns to him. "I think we're done here. You had to have taken at least one good one already."

The man visibly wilts, but Connor seems to be past the point of caring. "I have another meeting soon."

"Of course," Tiffany says, seeming to materialize from behind me at the other end of the corridor. How long has she been there? "Thanks so much for agreeing to this. And Emma, I loved chatting with you. Here's my card if you'd like to talk more."

She hands me her business card, the creamy white cardstock heavy in my hand as I politely accept it. Was there subtext to her statement? Like she wants something juicy on Connor? What makes her think I'd be so disloyal?

But didn't I just remind myself this job is temporary? I should be looking out for myself. What's in my best interest?

Ugh, this is too much to think about right now. I'm starting to get a headache.

"Do you really have another meeting?" I ask Connor as we exit. "Or was that an

excuse to leave?”

“Both.” He holds the door open for me but doesn’t move toward the curb. “I got a text from Gabriel. He and Archer are at a wedding venue a couple of blocks up and I said I’d stop by. Want to go with? It should be quick.”

“Um, yeah, sure.” We head down the sidewalk and it’s not until a minute later that his words register. “Wait, a wedding venue? Is your brother engaged?” Not that I’ve been looking in the tabloids for anything about Connor or his family. Not at all.

“It’s for Archer.”

“Isn’t he married?” You know, to my secret half-sister?

He glances around, not that there’s anyone near enough to overhear, but lowers his voice anyway. “Okay, don’t repeat this because it’s not public knowledge, but he and Serena aren’t technically married. So they’re having an official wedding, but just telling people it’s a smaller celebration for close friends and family.”

They’re not really married? Dad never said anything about that. Not that he talks to me about her. “Wait, so she’ll be there? Serena, I mean?”

He scratches at his jaw, sidestepping a woman pushing a stroller to the left of us. “Yeah, I guess. I can’t imagine he’d choose something without her. The guy’s seriously gone for her.”

Well, why wouldn’t he be? She’s beautiful and kind and amazing. At least, the fantasy version I have of her in my head is.

Am I actually going to meet my sister? Dad would flip.

Then again, he doesn't have to know...

"Have you met her?"

"What?" I blink, getting out of my own thoughts. "Oh, no. I just..." Oh, God. How do I explain my interest without admitting the reason why? "I, um, remember all the media surrounding her, is all. When she and Archer married. Or fake married, I guess."

A smirk curves over his mouth. "You're starstruck?"

Yes. Just not the way he thinks. I always pictured us meeting one day and instantly becoming best friends ever since Mom spilled the beans about Dad's real daughter. But that was when I was seven, not twenty-four. "She just seems cool," I tell him lamely. With her being four years older than me, she always seemed the epitome of cool. "The kind of person I'd want to be friends with."

"You want me to introduce you?"

I wipe my palms on my skirt, hoping he doesn't notice. "You'd do that?"

He shrugs, his smile growing wider. "Sure. She's not a celebrity. She's my sister-in-law."

Oh my God, does that mean he and I are related?

By marriage, I remind myself. Not blood.

Right. Maybe this isn't a good idea after all. I don't know what to say to her, how to act. I need time to prepare.

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But then Connor's turning into a building on our right, holding the door open for me expectantly. It's too late to back out now.

"You made it," a deep voice booms from across the wide room, so similar to Connor's, it's eerie.

I've never actually seen his brothers in person, only photos, but there's no denying the resemblance between the three of them as my eyes adjust to the dimmer lighting, spotting Gabriel and Archer on the other side of the room. Dark hair, identical blue eyes, chiseled jaws, broad shoulders. It's like they won the genetics jackpot.

I search for a willowy blonde, but only find a woman with light brown hair, an air of assertive energy surrounding her as she walks around the space inspecting things, checking items off on her clipboard.

"Is that their wedding planner?" I whisper to Connor while we're still out of earshot of the others.

"That's Gabriel's girlfriend, Mackenzie. She owns an event planning business, so they're handling everything."

"They?"

"Gabriel works with her," he explains. "He says he really likes it."

I nod, not realizing he works in a field so different from his brothers.

“What’s Archer doing now?” All I know is he left Bishop Industries about a month ago, but Connor never said why.

“Not anything at the moment, but he’s considering consulting work. He thinks it’ll be more fulfilling and he can pick and choose what he wants to do.”

I can’t quite say for sure, but is there the slightest hint of jealousy in his voice? Or am I reading too far into things? “Did you think any more about what I said? Making your job different so you like it more?”

“It’s not that simple,” he says stubbornly, the same as he did last time.

“Why?”

He glances over at me, whispering, “Let’s talk about it later.”

Tingles wash over me at the way he says it, the low timbre of his voice, the implied connection between us. My mind is obviously attributing more significance to the statement than it warrants, but I can’t help it.

Gabriel approaches us, smiling broadly, and claps Connor on the back. “Who’d you bring?” His gaze flicks between us, studying me in particular as he tries to figure out what our relationship is. Even if Connor doesn’t date girls in public, does he ever bring them to meet his family?

“This is my assistant, Emma.”

His brother frowns. “What happened to Vivian?”

“She took an extended leave to be with her daughter and new grandson,” I reply. “She’ll be back in a couple of weeks.”

Gabriel nods, crossing his arms over his chest as he studies me. “I’m sorry, have we met? You look so familiar.”

“I do?” I tuck my hair behind my ears, not liking everyone’s gaze suddenly on me. Even Archer and Mackenzie have stopped to stare from across the room. “I’ve definitely never met you before.”

“Maybe it’s your eyes?” He shakes his head, lips twisting. “I swear it’s not a pickup line. But there’s something about them...”

“They’re the same shade as Serena’s,” Archer says, coming up to stand on Connor’s other side, expression solemn.

The blood drains from my face, and I do everything I can to not let my panic show. There’s no way they could put two and two together like that. Lots of people have green eyes. It’s not that uncommon.

“What’s going on?” a soft voice murmurs from behind me, and though I’ve never heard her speak, I know exactly who it is.

“Come here and stand next to her.” Gabriel motions to Serena, who looks at me wide-eyed as she approaches. “Tell me I’m not crazy. They have the same eyes.”

I firm my mouth before it starts trembling as everyone stares at us, resisting the urge to shut my eyes and flee. That will only raise suspicions.

“Oh, yeah,” Mackenzie says, stopping her inspection to join in. “I see it. Even the shape.”

“That’s so weird,” I mumble, not sure how else to deflect.

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“All right, you all are freaking her out,” Connor growls, coming to stand in front of me. “Give her a break, she just met you.”

“Sorry,” Gabriel and Mackenzie say in unison, but Archer is silent, gaze still switching between me and Serena, his mouth a grim slash.

When Serena moves forward to kiss him hello, though, his face softens, eyes only for her.

“I got caught up at the shelter,” I hear her say as he leads her to the other side of the room. “Someone surrendered a box of puppies.”

Their conversation fades as they get further away, and Connor turns around to face me, laying a hand briefly on my upper arm before he drops it. “Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault.” I shrug half-heartedly. “Just a weird coincidence, I guess.”

He nods, his eyes seeming to search mine. Is he looking for the similarity too?

I force myself to chuckle, trying to put him at ease. “You know, people always tell me I look like my mom. It’s the first time I’ve been compared to anyone else.”

“Yeah, no doubt you’re her daughter.” His shoulders drop, his searching over, and the tightness in my body eases as we join the others, Mackenzie explaining the vision she has for the space.

“This is where the reception will be,” she says, gesturing to the whole of the room.

“I’ve done a few weddings here and it works great as a blank canvas so you can make it your own.”

“And since money isn’t an object...” Gabriel chimes in, smiling slyly. “We can go big.”

“Don’t get too crazy,” Archer warns, eyeing his brother.

Mackenzie slips her arm through Gabriel’s, reining him in. “We won’t. And this isn’t the ultra-classy affair from before. This will be relaxed and intimate, with a romantic vibe. I’m thinking white, green, and gold as the colors with a lot of natural elements.”

“I like that,” Serena says, her eyes shining as she gazes around the venue. “I don’t want anything stuffy.”

“Let me show you the ceremony space. I have a plan for a white runner down the length of the aisle with evergreens framing the sides.”

“Oh, that sounds beautiful.”

The two of them move to the next room over, but the guys linger, and I stare longingly after them, not sure if I should stay with Connor. I should stay, right? I’m his assistant. I should be here to assist.

But the chance to spend time with my sister? When am I going to get that again? And she already seems so nice. Just like I imagined.

I slide a little to the right, but no one appears to notice, and then a bit more, but Connor’s listening to something Gabriel is saying about the capacity of the room.

I slip through unnoticed, the lure too strong to resist.

Chapter Thirteen

Emma

The door snicks shut behind me, echoing in the empty room, and a blush steals over my cheeks as Serena and Mackenzie both turn toward me. “Sorry. I couldn’t resist seeing the space.” Or you. Not saying that aloud, though.

Serena smiles, looking angelic with all that fair hair loose around her shoulders, and studying her closer, it really is true about our eyes. They’re the same. “That’s fine. I didn’t catch your name when I came in. I’m Serena.”

“Oh, I know who you are.” Oh, God. That sounded like a total stalker. “I mean, I’ve heard about you from Connor. I’m his assistant, Emma.” I study her closely, seeing if my name sparks any recognition, that maybe Dad had slipped up and mentioned it to her, but there’s nothing other than polite interest on her face.

“We were at a photo shoot,” I continue, as if I need to justify myself for being here, “down the street when his brother texted him about coming here. I’m sorry to crash your wedding planning.”

She waves her hand to dismiss my concern. “Mackenzie’s the one with actual work to do. I just have to say if I like her ideas or not.”

“Well, let’s hope it goes better than last time,” Mackenzie quips, earning a chuckle from Serena. Is she referencing how they switched grooms in the middle of the ceremony previously? And speaking of, if Mackenzie is dating Serena’s ex-fiancé, how are they all so cool with each other? I must be missing something.

I stay quiet as Mackenzie paints a picture of her vision for the space, white tulle and fresh greenery framing the arch behind the couple, gold chairs lined up in neat rows

for the guests, and that long runner where Serena will make her way down the aisle to marry her already sort-of husband.

“Could we have lit candles along the aisle too?” Serena asks. “It would look so romantic.”

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Mackenzie taps her pen against her lips, mulling it over. “Let me check with the event coordinator for the building. They might not allow it if they consider it to be a fire hazard. Give me a sec.”

She exits the room, leaving me and Serena alone, my brain scrambling for something to say in the sudden quiet. “I heard you run an animal shelter?”

Her face lights up, and I sigh in relief at the good choice of topic. “Yes, New Beginnings. It’s my pride and joy.”

“I think I’ve passed by it before.” That’s not true. But I have looked at it obsessively on her website. “I always wanted a pet as a kid,” I confess. “But my dad was allergic, so we couldn’t have one.” And Mom wasn’t getting one on the off chance Dad then used it as an excuse not to visit.

“Mine was too,” she exclaims. “Sometimes I think he just said that so he wouldn’t have to deal with one, though.”

Yeah, that sounds like him. Not that I can tell her that. “Do you have any pets now?”

“Archer and I just adopted Petey. He’s the goofiest dog, but I love him.”

I find myself mimicking her smile, happy to be with her like this.

We chat about her shelter some more, and turn to Mackenzie as she comes back, shaking her head. “It’s a no-go on the lit candles. It violates the terms of their liability insurance.”

Serena frowns. “Well, that stinks. Can you think of any kind of alternative?”

“Would you want LED candles instead?”

“I don’t want it to look too fake.”

They both study the space, and I glance between the two of them, not sure if I should offer my opinion. “What if you put them along the far wall?” I ask, deciding to just go for it. “Line them up past the arch so people can’t see they’re fake, but they’ll still flicker like they’re real.”

Mackenzie nods as Serena says, “Oh, I like that. Can we put flowers back there too?”

They debate different options for a minute, settling on lilies as the main flower of the wedding, then Mackenzie changes the topic, reminding Serena she still needs to pick a dress. “Don’t think I’m letting you choose the first thing you try on this time again.”

“I know, I know. I’m one hundred percent invested, I promise. But there are so many choices. And since we’ve decided on a theme, that makes it even harder.”

“Shouldn’t it narrow it down?”

“No. What if my choice doesn’t match the rest of the wedding? I just—” She pauses for a moment, hugging her arms around her middle. “I want everything to be perfect. It means so much more now that it’s Archer I’m marrying.”

Mackenzie bites her lip, appearing at a loss for words, and though I’ve been minding my own business since suggesting the candle placement, dresses are the one thing I’m actually knowledgeable about.

“You’re going for this soft, romantic vibe, right?” I ask. “Then how about something

long and flowing? Imagine an extended train and draping sleeves. Really boho and earthy.”

“That’s a fantastic idea,” Mackenzie says, a gleam in her eyes. “What if we added a floral crown too?”

Serena glances between the two of us, a wrinkle between her fair brows. “I’m sorry, I can’t picture it. I don’t know what it all means put together.”

Hmm, maybe I could draw it for her? “Can I borrow that?” I motion to Mackenzie’s clipboard, taking it from her as she offers it. I flip her checklist over to the blank backside and unclip the pen from the top, sketching out a quick vision of the dress I have in my head. “This is what I mean about the train. See how it would cascade behind you? And the sleeves wouldn’t be ruffly, but there’s a curve to them that adds dimension and interest, especially if you’re holding your bouquet at chest level.” I keep sketching, getting into it. “Oh, and you could embroider tiny lilies in gold thread on the skirt of the gown—”

I look up, finding them both staring at me. Crap, I did it again. “Sorry, sometimes I get too into dress design.”

“No, no,” Serena exclaims. “It’s amazing. I love it. And you just whipped that out of thin air. How’d you do that?”

I shrug, my cheeks pinkening as they both continue to stare. “I’ve made things like it before. Not all in one dress, but the different elements.”

“You made things?”

“Yeah, I sew custom clothes for people on Etsy. Mostly dresses, but sometimes other things.”

“I thought you were Connor’s assistant,” Mackenzie says.

“I am. I did the Etsy thing before this job.”

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“Do you have any photos?” Serena asks, interest on her face.

“Of my dresses? Sure.” I pull my phone out of my purse, navigating to my gallery. “Here’s one with the train I was talking about. They wanted something for a medieval cosplay they were doing, but the idea’s the same. And then this one for the sleeves—kind of a seventies feel to it. I bet there’s a designer who makes something like what I sketched.”

“What about you?”

I stare back at her for a moment, not sure what she’s saying. “What about me?”

“Could you make my wedding dress?” She gently takes the clipboard from me, tracing my drawing with careful fingertips. “I know this sounds crazy, but the more I look at this, the more in love I am. And you could do so many things to customize it too, like stitching Archer’s name along the hem, or—oh! Pockets. I’ve always wanted a nice dress with pockets.”

My mind is in too much shock to process anything beyond her first sentence. “You want me to make your wedding dress?” I blink, hardly able to believe that’s what she actually said.

“Yeah.” She laughs, the sound light and airy. “If you’re taking commissions, that is. Do you have time now that you’re working for Connor?”

Is this a good idea? It’s not that I’m not capable of it. But it was one thing when I thought I’d meet her once and be on my way. This is different. I’ll have to work with

her on the design, take her measurements, do at least one fitting. Multiple meetings. Multiple chances for someone to figure out the truth about who I really am. Connor's brothers were already too perceptive for my liking.

But it's also a chance to get to know her. My sister. And she already seems so wonderful. Better even than the fantasy version of her I'd built up in my head.

"I'll do it," I blurt out, not giving myself time to reason my way out of it. My gut wants to do this. And now that I've said yes, my brain is kicking into gear debating the best material to use, the best cut. What I have at home and what I'll need to buy.

"Oh my God, that's fantastic." She beams at me, those eerily similar eyes sparkling. "I have to go tell Archer."

Mackenzie sidles up to me as Serena leaves, smiling to herself. "You just made her day."

I hold back the hysterical burble of laughter that wants to escape. It's definitely the other way around. If I could say I made a custom wedding dress for someone like her, it would be a huge step toward making an actual business a reality. "I'm just grateful for the opportunity. This could change, well, everything."

"I know exactly what you mean. That's how I felt when I landed the deal to plan the other wedding."

"The one to your boyfriend?"

Her grin grows wider. "Yeah, that one." There's obviously a story there, but she's not telling. "Did Connor tell you I'm dating his brother?"

"Yeah."

“He must trust you, then.” She looks at me, seeming to size me up. “Do you have a business card? If I have brides looking for a custom dress, I can refer them to you. And then vice versa? If you have someone that commissions a dress, offer me as a wedding planner.”

“Yes, of course.” She’d really recommend me like that? “Um, not to shoot myself in the foot, but are you sure? You don’t even know me.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Show me that medieval dress again.”

I bring it up on my phone again, angling the screen toward her.

“Gorgeous,” she sighs. “I’ve never once remotely thought about attending a Renaissance fair, but this dress makes me consider it. Your work speaks for itself, Emma. You obviously have skill.”

The blush from earlier spreads over my face, cheeks turning hot. “Thank you. And I’ll get you my business cards. As soon as I make them.”

She laughs, pulling a stack of her own cards out of her purse. “My office address is on here. Bring them by whenever you have a chance.”

“I will. Thanks.”

I follow her out to the reception space, the three brothers in a loose semi-circle with Serena comfortably fitted against Archer’s side. They really are a beautiful couple. And as Mackenzie joins Gabriel, his arm going around her waist in what seems like an unconscious movement as he continues to speak, there’s no denying how good the two of them look together too.

I’m hesitant to intrude, feeling the odd man out in this familial unit, but when Connor

notices me hovering off to the side, he breaks from them to walk over to me.

“I heard you’ve been busy.”

Yeah, I guess I have. Wait, he’s not mad, is he? Is it a conflict of interest to book a job while technically on the clock for another?

“You mean Serena’s dress?” I ask, making sure we’re talking about the same thing.

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He nods and sticks his hands in his pockets, ignoring Gabriel's laughter from the other side of the room, no hint on his face what he's thinking.

I wipe my palms on my skirt, which is probably soaked with sweat with how often I've done it today. "I wasn't trying to use you for your connections or anything. It just kind of happened."

"No." His brow furrows as he steps closer. "That's not what I was implying."

I look up, his gaze sincere, and the tension in my shoulders melts.

"I should have said congratulations. You got your first big client. Things are looking up."

In some ways they are. The far-off dream of being an actual designer seems more within reach than ever. But how can I get there when I have so much else hanging over my head? Mom's medical bills, possibly being evicted. I have no savings, no one to support me if I fail to do what Dad asks. A commission for one dress won't solve everything.

I smile at him, trying my best to make it look real. I don't need him questioning my sudden downturn in mood. "Thanks."

His head tilts watching me, mouth opening to ask me God knows what, but his brother beats him to the punch.

"Connor, we're going to dinner," Gabriel calls out. "Want to come with?"

“I should probably go,” I whisper, stepping back. “You’ll want to be with your family.”

He stares at me a beat longer, his gaze flicking between my eyes, searching for something. But what?

“Emma?” Serena walks over, a happy smile on her face. “Would you like to come too? I’d love to talk more about the dress.”

My gaze returns to Connor, expression unreadable once more. “As long as it’s okay with Connor.” I don’t want him thinking I’m overstepping my bounds.

He blinks, the seriousness surrounding him seeming to disappear. “Yeah, of course,” he says with an easy grin. “That’d be great.”

She leaves, going to tell Archer we’ll come, and I whisper to Connor, “If she put you on the spot, I don’t have to—”

“I want you there,” he interrupts me. “If it’s okay with you.”

“It is.”

“Great. It’s a date.” His smile immediately falls. “Not a date, I mean. It’s dinner. With my family. Nothing date-like about it.”

The tips of his ears burn red and he tips his head down to stare at the floor, not meeting my eye. What’s going on with him? I’ve never seen him so flustered.

“I know what you meant,” I assure him. “And that you definitely wouldn’t want to date me.”

He looks up, startled. “I wouldn’t want to date you?” There’s disbelief in his tone, catching me off guard. Why is he acting like this is news to him?

“Um, yeah. The whole touching thing? You practically recoiled the first few times I did it. It’s totally fine, though. I understand.”

“Emma.” His voice lowers and he quickly checks behind him, but everyone’s out of earshot. “It’s not that I wouldn’t. It’s that I can’t. You’re my employee.”

I stare at him, not sure I’m reading between the lines correctly. Is he suggesting that if I wasn’t working for him... he would want to date me? That he’s attracted to me? But he was so disinterested all those times I tried.

“Shit.” He rubs at the back of his neck, almost aggressively. “I shouldn’t have said that. Forget I said anything, okay?”

“Okay,” I agree faintly, still caught up in the slight possibility he’s interested in me. If I interpreted him right, that is. Did I? Or was he just being nice? Making an explanation as to why there could never be anything between us that shifts the blame off him.

“Connor? Are you coming?” Gabriel asks again.

“Yeah, give me a sec,” he replies, eyes never leaving mine. “Are we good?” he asks in a lower tone.

I mentally shake my head, snapping out of it. “Yes. All good. Let’s go eat.”

He nods, motioning for me to walk ahead of him as everyone files out of the building.

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“Would you like to ride with me and Archer?” Serena asks me as a black town car pulls up to the curb. “We can talk about details on the way.”

“Sure, I’d love that.”

I glance back as I follow Serena into the backseat, catching Connor’s eye, his face solemn as he watches us. I can’t tell what he’s thinking, what any of that was even about. But it feels like something’s changed between us, that the dynamic has shifted.

And though I’m not sure exactly what that means, a part of me is excited to find out.

Chapter Fourteen

Connor

Archer’s town car pulls away from the curb, Emma’s gaze holding mine until she’s too far to see. I texted Allen to pick me up here, but he’s stuck in traffic up the road.

“Is something going on with you two?”

I turn, Gabriel’s face serious for a change. “What?”

He motions toward the street where Archer, Serena, and Emma just departed from. “You and your assistant.” He says the last word with air quotes, my brows narrowing.

“What are you implying?”

He ignores my hard tone, rolling his eyes. “That you’re obviously into her.”

My gaze flicks to Mackenzie, who’s studiously looking elsewhere. Are they both thinking it? “What makes you say that?”

He laughs, crossing his arms over his chest. “I haven’t heard you deny it.”

I mirror his posture, irritated at his insistence. “Seriously, why would you think there’s anything between us?”

“Your body language. You were standing awfully close together.”

I purse my lips, trying to remember our exact positions.

“And you two came in whispering to each other, all secretive.”

I huff out a breath, returning his eye roll. “I was preparing her for dealing with you lot. Look what you did first thing haranguing her about her eyes.”

“I still say that was weird. And the whole time you were talking to me and Archer when the girls were in the other room, you kept checking the doorway, then went to her immediately when she came back.”

I shrug, annoyed at how perceptive he is. “What, I can’t watch out for her? You’re all strangers to her. I wasn’t going to abandon her.”

“Why’d you even bring her?”

I motion down the street. “We were only a couple blocks away working. It would have been rude to up and leave her.”

“You mean rude to let her go home early so you could meet your family?”

Okay, so maybe I hadn’t wanted the day with her to end just yet. She’d seemed upset about whatever it was that happened with that interviewer. But if I’d known Gabriel would interrogate me like this, I wouldn’t have come at all.

“Can we drop it? She’s my assistant. End of story.”

He holds his hands up, signaling he’s done, but a smirk still lingers around his lips. “Thou doth protest too much.”

Mackenzie elbows him in the ribs. “He said leave it alone. You push him too far and he’s going to take away that maid he got for us. Thank you for that by the way.”

I nod, relief coursing through me as Allen finally pulls up to the curb, and I automatically go for the front passenger seat, leaving the backseat to them. I don’t need Gabriel questioning me anymore.

Is he only that perceptive because he’s my brother? Because he knows me? Or are my feelings for Emma obvious to everyone?

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At the very least, she hasn't picked up on it. Not after she declared I had no interest in her. I must have done a better job at hiding things than I thought.

Just not to Gabriel.

* * *

I rub my stomach, pleasantly full from dinner, and listen to Emma chatter on as Allen drives us back to her house to drop her off.

"I was thinking of trying something with a lace overlay," she muses, "but I'm not sure. I haven't worked too much with it before and now's not the time to experiment, you know? This dress has to be perfect."

She's so excited about this project for Serena, so passionate, it brings a smile to my lips just watching her.

She notices, head tilting slightly, then her eyes widen as she claps a hand over her mouth. "Connor, why didn't you tell me to stop? How long have I been rambling?"

I laugh, unable to help myself, the last bit of tension melting from me after these past few unrelenting weeks. This whole night has been good, even after my slip up earlier. I forgot how much I love Gabriel's outlandish stories, Archer's dry wit that creeps up out of nowhere. And now with Serena and Mackenzie added to the mix, there are more people to get to know, to love.

And then there's... Emma. Maybe it was my imagination, but she'd fit right into the

group, getting along instantly with the girls, the six of us clicking in a way that felt natural. Right. Just like it does with me and her alone.

No. I can't be thinking that way. She's not anything to me but my assistant.

"We should be going over your schedule, shouldn't we?" She reaches to pull her phone out of her purse, and I stop her, her wrist warm where my fingers encircle it.

I let go, not wanting to tempt myself too much, and tell her, "Let's have one night where I don't have to think about work. I like hearing about the dress you'll make."

Her lips tip up at the corners. "You're interested in fashion design?"

Another laugh escapes me. "No, but I enjoy seeing your enthusiasm. It's inspiring."

She points to her chest. "Me? Inspiring?"

I nod, relaxing back into the seat. "Yeah. You still considering that business plan?" I've already decided to give her any money she asks for. She deserves it.

"I started working on it last night. And Mackenzie offered today to help me too. All of them were so nice. I—" She smooths her palms down her skirt, a nervous gesture of hers I've come to recognize. "I really liked your family."

"They liked you too." I like you too, I want to say, but that's definitely not a good idea.

She smiles, looking up at me from lowered lashes, obviously pleased even in the dim lighting from the streetlamps outside. "I've always wanted a big family," she confesses. "People that care about you. That help you out. That love you."

It's not hard to read between the lines that she doesn't feel she has those things. "You don't think your family loves you?"

"I..." She twists her hands together in her lap. "My dad, no, probably not. I'm not sure he's capable of it." Sounds a lot like mine. I don't know what Mom ever saw in him. "And my mom, well, yes, of course she does. But she always needs more than she gives. Especially lately."

There's a faint ache in my chest at the matter-of-fact way she says it. Yeah, I had a crappy parent of my own, but two of them? I can't imagine how me and my brothers would have turned out if we hadn't had Mom. How did Emma still turn out so amazing?

She must see something on my face, because she rushes to add, "It's fine, though. She's... Well, she's all I have." She looks down at her lap, seeming to realize her hands are fidgeting, and stops herself. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make any of this about me. I just wanted to say I liked everyone tonight. That story Gabriel told about you guys at Cape Cod was really funny."

I know what she's trying to do, her clumsy attempt at changing the subject obvious, but I give it to her. I don't want to bring her down about her family right before she goes home. "I still say it was a shark in the water. I can't believe he even got Archer to go along with it."

She gives me a grateful smile for not pushing for more about her parents. "Isn't that what big brothers are supposed to do? Tease you?"

A chuckle escapes me. "I guess." Things had only been like that when we were little, though. And only when Dad wasn't around.

"It's nice you're all still close. So many siblings drift apart as they get older."

“I’ve always kept in touch with them, even when I was away. They’re important to me.” The only people to know how it was to grow up as Harold Bishop’s son. To truly understand me.

Though I’m coming to see that maybe there are others who understand me too.

“Then why did Gabriel say it’s the first time he’s seen you since the reading of the will?”

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There's no censure in her voice, but the guilt hits me all the same. "I've been busy." While that's true, it's not the real reason, if I'm being honest with myself.

But there's been a lot of not being honest with myself lately, hasn't there?

I take a deep breath, shutting my eyes as my head thumps against the back of the seat. "And I've been kind of dreading it," I admit, voicing the feeling aloud for the first time.

"But they were so happy to see you."

"I know, it's not because of them. It's because of... me."

"Why?" Her voice is soft, lulling, encouraging me to open up. And because it's her, this woman who promised earlier to keep my secrets, I do.

"I got all the money and they got nothing."

"And you feel guilty about that?"

I nod, still keeping my eyes shut. "Part of why I liked working overseas was because I didn't have to deal with Dad as much. He was... a hard man to get along with. Impossible if you disagreed with him. So I avoided him if I could." It was a better relationship that way. If I'd had to work in the office with him every day, I'd probably have been kicked out of the company long ago. But I never let on to him about that. Better to keep the peace.

“Me and my brothers were supposed to be part of his legacy. He actually told us that. But I’m not sure he ever saw us as real people, only extensions of him.”

“I understand.” And from what she’s said about her own parents, I think she really does.

“And then all this stuff went down first with him and Gabriel, then Archer, and they were both cut off. They asked me not to make waves, to promise not to involve myself. That way, he wouldn’t do the same to me. But it killed me that I couldn’t stick up for them.” That I had to bite my tongue whenever he ranted about them. And without them there to take the brunt of it, I was the only one to listen.

“They were looking out for you. Big brothers do that too.”

My lips twist. “There’s still a part of me that feels like I took the easy way out. I didn’t like him either, but I was the one who got rewarded. And all because I didn’t stand up to him the way they did.”

“Connor.” A delicate hand slips over mine, and I squeeze my eyes tighter, telling myself that if I don’t see it, it’s like it’s not really happening. I won’t have to tell her she shouldn’t do that. There’s only so much a man can take. “You can’t blame yourself for any of that. Don’t make yourself miserable over something out of your control.”

That’s easy for her to say. She doesn’t have to live with the aftermath.

“Is this why you’re being so stubborn about not changing your job?” she asks softly. “What is it? Penance?”

I swallow, my throat hot with... what? Regret? Shame? Is she right? Am I forcing myself to fill Dad’s shoes because I don’t deserve everything he left me otherwise?

“I don’t know,” I admit, shaking my hand out from under hers and leaning forward, resting my elbows on my knees. I still don’t have a firm grasp on what the hell I’m doing. With this company. With her. With my life.

Tonight was a glimpse of the way things used to be. The way I want them to be. But they’re not anymore. I’m separate from my brothers now, separate from anyone that means anything to me. Everything Dad left me is a curse, not a blessing.

There’s a click as Emma undoes her seatbelt, scooting over to rest a warm hand on my back. She draws soothing circles along the tense muscles, calming me despite myself.

“Don’t torture yourself. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“No, I—” I sit up, not realizing how close she is, our faces just inches apart. This near, that exotic fragrance of hers is even headier, and I inhale, drawing her in further, taking in the beauty of her porcelain skin, pert nose, lush mouth.

It wouldn’t matter what she looked like, though, if I didn’t know the kind of person she is inside. If she hadn’t shown me over and over she’s there for me, looking out for me, trying so hard to help me.

My gaze dips down to her parted lips, her breaths sweet, and she sways toward me. Whether it’s from the motion of the car, I don’t know, but I can’t resist anymore, taking advantage of the movement to fit my mouth to hers, savoring her taste for a brief moment.

She makes a small gasp, leaning back the slightest bit, her gaze darting over me, like I’ve caught her off guard. Did I really surprise her? Didn’t I basically admit to her before we left for dinner that I was interested in her?

Her confusion doesn't last long, though, as she moves in, kissing me this time, her lips soft and sure. I let her take the lead, rationalizing to myself that if she's the one calling the shots, that makes it okay. That I'm not taking advantage of her as her boss. That what we're doing isn't completely wrong. Because how can anything that feels this good be wrong?

The car turns a corner, and she slides further against me, my hands finding her waist to steady her, but once they're there, I can't let go. Not when her mouth is moving insistently now over mine. Not when she makes that low sound of satisfaction as I grip her tighter. And definitely not when she moves a hand to the back of my head, gripping the short strands there. The tug has something in my belly go warm and loose, and I return her kiss with equal enthusiasm, unable to help myself, dipping a hand into her curls, pressing her closer.

She willingly complies, her breasts brushing my chest, and I nearly groan at the sensation, wanting her fully against me. To feel the shape of her, the weight of her. Needing her close.

The car stops, the action bringing me back to my senses, and I reel, watching as she blinks at me, a hazy fog still in her eyes. "Emma, I—" I falter, unsure what to say. That it was a mistake. That this can't change anything between us.

No matter how much I want it to.

Her gaze clears, searching my face, and whatever she sees makes her slide across the seat over to her side of the car, grabbing her purse. She opens the door and exits without a word, her pace hurried as she treks up the path to her house, disappearing behind her front door.

I reach for the handle to follow her, to explain, but what would I even say?

The car moves again, heading into traffic before I can decide what to do, and I don't bother putting down the darkened privacy glass to tell Allen otherwise. It's better to put some distance between me and Emma. Give us some time to reflect and rationally talk about it tomorrow.

I just hope to God I didn't fuck everything up.

Chapter Fifteen

Emma

I shut the front door behind me, touching a hand to my lips as soon as Connor's not sure to see, reliving the way his mouth had moved under mine. Was it a mistake to kiss him like that? What was that look in his eye exactly as he'd pulled away from me? I'd been too afraid to ask, taking my leave instead of talking to him.

But I still can't completely regret it. The feel of him against me, the tips of my breasts brushing lightly against his chest, had been exhilarating. The zing that had raced

through me, every bit of me alive.

“Was that Bishop’s car that dropped you off?”

I startle, my stomach dropping as I whip around, not recognizing Dad’s voice at first until I spy him in the armchair. What’s he doing here? Has it been a week already? And why does he keep showing up unannounced? “Um, yes,” I reply when I realize he’s waiting for an answer.

“So you’re making some kind of progress with him?” He drums his fingers on the arm of the chair, his tone neutral, but there’s no way it’s just a casual question.

I’m silent, hating how mercenary he makes it sound.

“Have you asked him about buying my company?”

“Yes,” I admit, knowing it’s the lesser of two evils to tell him that. If I say I haven’t brought it up at all, he might fly off the handle like last time.

“And?” He goes still, awaiting my answer.

“He, um...” I swallow, deciding not to mention Connor calling him shady. “He said it wasn’t my job to worry about things like that.”

His eyes narrow slightly. “You need to make it your job.”

“I know, I—” My fingers clench the sides of my skirt, mind racing to come up with an excuse to placate him. “I’m working on trying it from a different angle.”

“How?”

I glance around, searching for Mom, but she's nowhere to be seen. Probably hiding in her room. "Gaining his trust."

"How far have you got?" he asks in that same dispassionate tone. This should not be a normal conversation between a father and daughter. But then again, we've never had a normal relationship.

I shrug. "Far?" How do you judge these things?

His gaze narrows.

"We kissed tonight," I add. "Just now." An icky sensation washes over me, confessing that. That kiss wasn't because I was trying to manipulate him. It's because I wanted to do it. Because I... like him. The way he comforted me last night right there on that couch, letting me cry on his shirt. The way he's encouraged me to make my dream business a reality. The way he's opened himself to me, trusting me with his secrets. How can I break that trust?

And then tonight, finding out this attraction on my part isn't one sided. Has he felt like that the whole time? Or was it a recent development?

Dad studies me, and I self-consciously run a hand over my hair. Is it tousled from when Connor briefly cupped my head, sifting his fingers through the strands? Are my lips swollen? Cheeks flushed? Can he see what Connor did to me?

"You better pick up the pace. I'm running out of time."

"Time for what?" To whoever he owes money to?

"I'm cutting off the utilities here at the end of the week," he says, not answering my question. "You'll need to set something up to pay for it. Insurance is after that."

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Is this supposed to be an incentive for me to work faster? Because taking away these necessities is only terrorizing me, not motivating. “Dad—”

“I’m running out of time,” he repeats, the lack of emotion almost as scary as his previous tantrum. What happened to him while he was gone the last week?

He gets up from the chair, and I step aside as he lets himself out, staring blankly at the living room. What the hell am I going to do? I can afford utilities now that I’m working full time, but this job is only temporary. I’m not eligible for insurance. And forget about Mom. We’re still waiting on Medicaid and I can only imagine what it would cost to privately insure someone with a pre-existing condition like hers—if they’ll even cover her to begin with.

I head down the hall, pausing at Mom’s door, but the light is off. Is she actually sleeping in there? Or just avoiding talking to me? We still need to discuss those pills she has.

Well, if she’s sleeping, I shouldn’t disturb her. She’ll only be grouchy if I wake her.

I go to my room and pull out the additional sketches I made during dinner while talking to Serena, laying them out on my desk. I don’t know what I’m doing about Connor or my dad, but I can at least get started on Serena’s dress.

It may be the only thing I have left after all this is over.

* * *

My fingers grip the straps of my purse as I step off the elevator in the morning, still unsure how to approach Connor. I pray he has something to say already, a plan for what to do.

Though I have a feeling I won't like it.

The double doors to his office are closed, and I quickly stow my purse at my desk, shaking out my hands as I mentally prepare myself. I can do this. Seduce him. It's time to get serious about this mission.

I raise my hand to knock and slowly lower it as I register a woman's voice coming from inside. My stomach lurches briefly before I tell myself to get a grip. Just because he's behind closed doors with a woman doesn't mean anything. He's at work.

And look what he did with you last night, another woman he works with.

That's different.

Right?

I tune back in as my name is mentioned, realizing then it's Angelina's voice on the other side of the door. That sickening pull in the pit of my stomach fades.

"Are you two in a relationship?" she asks, and I'm silently thankful she's so naturally loud. Wait, is she talking about me and Connor?

I press my ear closer to the door to catch his reply. "I told you, it was nothing." There's irritation in his voice, the kind I only hear when he's speaking about his job or his dad.

“Then how do you explain these pictures?”

What pictures?

There’s silence for a few moments, and then Connor says, “Someone must have taken them at exactly the wrong moment. It’s completely out of context.”

Seriously, what pictures are they talking about? Were ones taken of him and me or something? And where? At the benefit? At dinner with his family? Or worse, in his car last night?

“Well, I have people reaching out asking who she is.”

“She’s no one,” he insists, my belly sinking once more. Do I mean that little to him?

“These say otherwise.”

There’s the squeak of his chair as it rolls back, then a treading sound like he’s pacing. “I don’t want her involved in any of this tabloid shit. Don’t people have better ways to spend their time than making up stuff about me?”

“No, actually. They don’t. You’re the most important Bishop now. The public is hungry for info about you. And when you show up somewhere with a bombshell on your arm, they’re going to sit up and take notice.”

My cheeks heat, but I guess it’s a compliment.

“She’s my assistant. She can’t help how she looks. What am I supposed to do? Fire her because she’s attractive?”

He wouldn’t really fire me, would he? I get that he’s aggravated, but let’s not be

hasty. I'm definitely losing the house, then.

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“I didn’t say that,” she says in a controlled voice. “And I’m just trying to figure out how to spin this. It’s my job to manage the company image, and right now, you’re it. So what do you want me to do?”

“Tell them the truth. It was nothing. Make the whole idea sound ridiculous.” Heavy footfalls sound and I scoot back, heading toward my desk, barely making it in my seat before the door rips open, Connor’s gaze meeting mine.

Oh God, he looks like he’s been through the wringer. Hair disheveled, dark circles under his eyes. Did he sleep at all?

“Morning,” he mutters before taking off down the hall and around the corner.

Angelina exits next, glancing left and right. “Did he leave?”

“Um, yes.”

Her jaw tightens, but she appears otherwise composed. “How soundproof is that office?”

“Not completely,” I admit. Especially when you have your ear pressed against the door. “I heard something about a picture?”

She lets out a sigh. “Here. You should know.” She pulls out her phone and brings up whatever it was on the screen that she and Connor were discussing. It’s me and him at the benefit two nights ago when we were leaving, his tuxedo jacket around my shoulders, palm on my lower back leading me out of the ballroom. She swipes again,

to a picture from a few minutes before that with us standing close to one another, my hand on his forearm. The way it's framed makes it seem as if we're gazing into each other's eyes.

No wonder she's questioning him.

And no wonder he's mad.

"Nothing happened," I assure her, but she holds up a hand to stop me.

"At this point, the less I know, the better."

"No, really—"

"And that's what I'll tell the press," she says, slipping her phone back in her purse.

"You seem like a good assistant. I'm sorry you've been dragged into this."

She strides over to the elevator and hits the call button, my tongue too tied to try and make my case anymore. What can I say anyway? While those pictures may have been innocent, I can't claim my thoughts to be.

As the doors close behind her, I slump in my seat, staring blankly at my computer. Without Connor here, it's not like I can have the short meeting we usually do to go over his schedule.

I push back from my desk and walk down the hallway, finding him gazing out a window as I turn the corner, his face somber, hands shoved in his pockets. He doesn't look at me as I approach him, but there's no way he can miss the click of my heels against the tile, how purposely close I stand to him, breathing in his cologne and crossing my arms over my chest as I join him in looking down at the city below.

“I overheard some of your conversation in there. I couldn’t help it.” Better to say it that way than admit how I’d unashamedly eavesdropped.

“I wasn’t exactly keeping my voice down, was I?” He continues watching the traffic below, almost like toy vehicles from this high up.

“Do you want to talk about it? Or... last night?”

He glances over at me briefly, lines bracketing his mouth. “I’m sure you heard Angelina. We’ll have to be more professional. Especially if they’re making assumptions about us.”

Normally, I’d leave it at that, but Dad’s calm threats weigh heavy on my mind. “I don’t think we can deny there’s something between us.” If I close my eyes, I can still feel the pressure of his lips on mine, their surprising softness, the way he’d responded to me. I’d spent too long in bed reliving every detail of the short encounter.

“Last night was a mistake. We can’t do that again.”

Which part? “Going out or kissing?”

He swallows heavily, avoiding my eye. “Both.”

“Are you saying you didn’t like it?”

His mouth tightens, the brackets surrounding them more prominent. He can’t deny it. I felt the way he kissed me back. “I wasn’t thinking straight. You were so close and I—” He runs a hand through his hair, messing it up further. My fingers twitch, resisting the urge to straighten it. “I shouldn’t have done it. You’re my employee.”

Is that his only reason for staying away? “I won’t be your employee forever.” Vivian

comes back in just a couple of weeks. I step closer, laying a hand on his forearm, the same as that picture. “I really liked that kiss,” I whisper, hoping it sounds as seductive as I need it to.

And honestly, it’s not like I’m faking it. I can’t remember a kiss that ever made my belly dip quite like that. This man has checked all my boxes from the beginning. I’d only given up hope because I thought he wasn’t attracted to me. But now that I know he is...

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“Emma.” He steps away, my hand curling in frustration as I return it to my side. There’s regret on his face, but it doesn’t change the rejection that stabs at me. “I’m not that guy. The boss who takes advantage of those under him. Our situation—” He sighs heavily. “My situation... You deserve someone who can be with you freely.”

I swallow, my mouth incredibly dry. Is he suggesting... “So you’re saying you’d want to be with me? If you could?”

“No, I—” He pulls at his hair again, turning away from me. “What I want doesn’t matter.”

The despair in his voice tugs at my heart. A part of me wants to leave him in peace and respect his wishes. There’s a chance I could blow it all if I push too hard. But I fear we’ll never get anywhere if I give up now.

I walk around him until he has no choice but to look at me, and step close, sliding my hands up his chest, over those broad shoulders, intertwining them around the back of his neck. I take note of the way he quickly inhales, the involuntary flash of desire in his eyes, his focus on my mouth. “What you want matters. And if you want me, well, I want you too.”

He bites his lip, gaze flicking over my face, indecision waging a war within him. He wants this. I know he does.

He just needs a push to get there.

Connor

I'm helpless against this dominant side of Emma, her words sending a rush of arousal through me, closing my eyes as she reaches up on tiptoes, drawing my head down for a hot kiss. As our lips meet, everything in my world goes right again, the same way it did last night. The same way it does every time I'm around her. I can't fight this attraction when she's this close, her arms looped over my shoulders, invading my senses.

She makes a sound of pleasure, the noise kick-starting something within me, and I move too, my body acting before my brain does, guiding her to the closest wall. I settle my hands on her waist, squeezing her as I fully return her kiss, learning the shape of her mouth. Breathing in her delicious scent. Reveling in the softness of her.

I'm weak against this woman, letting her overtake me, not worrying about what's right and wrong for the moment. I let her consume me, her nails digging into my skin the slightest bit, a pleasure I wasn't aware I needed till now. My thumbs draw circles over her hipbones, my fingers restless, wanting more of her.

I press her further against the wall, shifting my hips to make contact with hers, letting out a groan as I nestle in where I want. Her breath hitches, hold on me tightening, and I grind softly against her, the low whimpers she makes in the back of her throat spurring me on, a desire stronger than I've ever known filling me.

She breaks her mouth from mine just long enough to whisper, "Touch me, Connor," her voice breathless, begging.

I can't deny her what she wants, sliding my hands up those seductive curves, shaping my palms over the heavy weight of her breasts, my body revved and ready to go at the feel of her.

I trail kisses down her neck, nipping at the soft skin, and she arches to give me better access, her breaths coming faster. I eye her Oxford shirt, overwhelmingly tempted to undo the buttons, wanting to see for myself what's underneath.

I toy with a button, gauging her reaction, and she lifts her head from where it's thrown back against the wall, noticing where my attention has gone. She untwines her hands from around my neck, bringing them down to unbutton the first button, a sliver of creamy skin revealing itself. She moves down to the next one, drawing it out, the button slowly slipping out of place, a hint of cleavage exposed. The third is undone even slower, my gaze glued to the area soon to be uncovered, my breaths harsh as she parts the neckline of her shirt and runs a finger between the valley of her breasts. God, I can't wait to get my hands on her.

There's a distant ringing, my mind too focused on what's to come to recognize it at first until she looks up at me, some of the sensual daze leaving her eyes. Oh, shit. That's my phone.

I release her, shaking my head, unable to believe I let myself get that far into it. While at work of all places. And after I just committed to being more professional, determined to never get caught in a compromising situation with her again.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, seeing it's Gabriel, but don't answer it yet. She's still staring at me, her shirt half open, lips swollen from my kisses, everything about her screaming that she wants to be fucked. By me. The one person who can't do anything with her.

This wasn't simply a mistake. This was a fuckup beyond belief. Now that I know the taste of her, the feel of her, how can I go back to working with her platonically, knowing what I'm missing? Knowing she wants it as much as I do?

"I—" I struggle, nothing to say that'll make this situation right. I hold up my phone,

using it as a weak excuse as I say, “I have to take this.”

I spin around, leaving her there, a brick settling in my stomach as I answer the phone and stride down the hall, praying there’s no one outside my office to witness my hard-on, clearly visible in these pants. I’m perfectly aware it’s a shitty move to abandon her, but if I stayed, it was only a matter of time before I pushed up her skirt and fucked her for real. That’s where things were headed. And it can’t be like that between us.

I listen to Gabriel tell me how good it was for everyone to get together last night, how he’d like to meet up more often, asking if I’m free for lunch today.

“Uh, sure.” I shut my office door behind me, locking it, a part of me afraid that if Emma comes in here, I won’t be able to resist her again. My willpower is shot.

“Great. What time?”

“I have a meeting.” When is it? Emma and I never went over the schedule. And I’m sure as hell not going back out there to discuss it with her now. “It ends at one or one-thirty, I’m not sure.”

“No problem. How about I meet you at your office at one? And if you’re not done yet, I’ll just chill here. I’ve got the afternoon clear until four.”

“Yeah, sounds good. See you then.”

I hang up, staring down at the erection still straining at the fly of my pants. There’s no way I’m relieving it. If I do, I’ll have to think of Emma. And inviting her into my thoughts is only a recipe for disaster.

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I ignore the ache, booting up my computer to review the document our general counsel sent me for our meeting later, forcing myself to focus on the words rather than the remembered feel of Emma's body, the sounds she'd made, the taste of her.

No. Stop thinking about that. It's cowardly enough to hide out in here without talking to her about what happened. I owe her an explanation, a reason, something other than this incredibly wishy-washy behavior where I tell her no with my words and yes with my body. She doesn't deserve that.

I just need to figure out what to say.

I lose myself in work as the morning wears on, exiting my office at noon to head down to the fortieth floor for my meeting. Emma doesn't look up from her desk as I pass by, but the back of my neck still prickles as I wait for the elevator, her gaze a living, breathing thing. I shake off the sensation, telling myself I'm crazy, but as I step in and turn around, our gazes meet, hers radiating sorrow. I open my mouth, no plan as to what'll come out. Comfort? An apology? To reaffirm this is the way things have to be?

The doors shut, my reflection staring back at me as the car descends, my hair disheveled, dark circles under my eyes. I ignore the reminder of my sleepless night and finger comb my hair the best I can, straightening my tie and shirt cuffs before I exit, donning the CEO persona I have to show everyone here.

Everyone except Emma.

An hour and fifteen minutes later, I return to my office, a part of me relieved to find

Emma's spot empty. She must be at lunch. I swing my door open, finding Gabriel seated in my chair, legs crossed on the desk, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"How do I look? Think Dad would like it?"

I can't help the laugh that escapes me imagining the aneurysm Dad would've had upon Gabriel making himself at home like this. That ball of tension in my gut eases some with something else to focus on. "I'd pay to see his reaction."

"Well, you can afford it." His tone is easy, no jealousy or resentment there, and I silently thank God this hasn't caused a rift between us. I'm not sure what his financial situation is like, but he and Mackenzie seemed happy enough yesterday, at least.

"What do you want for lunch?" I ask. "My treat."

His brows raise as he takes his feet off the desk. "Well, then. Bring on the prime rib. But first." He gets up, heading toward the door that hides the elevator, and rubs his palms with glee. "Can I go up? I've always wanted to know what it looks like."

I shrug, pushing down the flare of panic that rises. Dad's not there. Seeing his stuff won't affect me. Not again. "Sure."

He pushes the call button, bouncing on his heels. "What's it like? Does it feel like he's..." He swallows, the light in his eyes dimming a bit as he stops moving. "Up there?"

So I'm not the only one with that ridiculous thought. "The whole place is... impersonal. Like something in a magazine that no one actually lives in."

He nods, understanding what I mean. "Will you move in?"

“Yeah, I guess.” I shrug again, still not sure how I feel about it. “Emma mentioned redecorating it. She said she’d handle it.”

We ride up, and as the silver doors open, my heart doesn’t thud painfully like last time.

“Well, you were right that it looks like no one lives here.”

The apartment is empty, our footsteps echoing loudly on the marble floor. “I guess she started renovating already.” Wouldn’t I have seen furniture being moved, then? Isn’t the elevator into my office the only access?

We poke our heads into rooms I didn’t bother exploring last time, each one bare, and a door hidden in the laundry room reveals a staircase leading down. Maybe everything came out through here. Upon closer inspection, there are scuff marks all along the frame, giving credence to my theory.

“Where’s that lead?” Gabriel asks from behind me, peering down the stairs.

“Sixtieth floor, I’m guessing.”

I shut the door, leaving the investigation for another time.

“It’s not as bad as I thought,” he comments as we head back into the main area. “Not that I really knew what to expect.”

“White furniture, minimalist.” I walk over to the dining alcove, finding even the chandelier that was previously here gone. “Except for this ridiculously big table here, as if he ever had anyone over.”

“Not us, at least.”

No, not us. His sons.

I take a breath, my lungs expanding freely in a way they couldn't the last time I was up here. Without his furniture, the place seems bigger. Open. Lighter. Maybe I could actually live here.

Gabriel walks over to the floor-to-ceiling window in the living room. "Mackenzie showed me those pics of you and Emma at some benefit. How are you dealing with that? Since, you know, you're definitely not interested in her?"

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He turns to face me, smirking, and I blow out a breath, impressed despite myself at his cheek. “Do you take perverse pleasure in calling me out on my bullshit?”

His smirk transforms into a grin. “Of course. I rarely get the chance.”

I cross my arms over my chest, wavering on how much to divulge. It’s not that I can’t trust him. But this thing between me and Emma... I have no idea what it is. “Angelina already reamed me out earlier,” I tell him, not really answering his question.

“Oh, I’ve dealt with her plenty over the years. Surprisingly, Dad didn’t sic her on me during the wedding planning process. Guess he wanted to chew me out personally.”

I nod, hating how Dad always had it out for him. “Do you think if that paper hadn’t published that article about you at that party, we’d even be here right now?”

“Huh?”

“Like maybe he wouldn’t have been mad enough then to make you marry Serena. And if you hadn’t been engaged to her, Archer never would’ve married her and been disowned. It’d be him with the apartment. With everything.”

He shrugs. “It’s possible. But you’ll kill yourself with the what-ifs.”

He’s right, but I can’t quite let it go. “If you could go back, would you have gone to that party?”

His brow furrows. “What’s this about?”

“I’m just curious.” Emma said I shouldn’t blame myself for inheriting everything, but I wonder if he regrets the way it went down.

He’s quiet a moment, turning to the window again. “If that’s what set this all in motion, then yes. That’s how I ended up meeting Mackenzie. And I can’t imagine my life without her now.”

“She means that much to you?”

“She means everything,” he says seriously, his normal joking manner gone. He eyes me carefully. “Really, what’s this introspection about? Did Angelina say something?”

“No. Not about all that, at least. She’ll tell the press nothing’s going on.”

“Is there something going on?”

I scuff my foot against the floor, leaving a dark smudge. “Not when the photo was taken.”

“Why are you being so evasive?”

I throw my hands up, an unsettling weight in my stomach dropping at being called out by him. “Because I don’t know what I’m doing. I kissed her last night. And then again this morning. Right after I told her we had to stay extra professional so another picture like that doesn’t happen.”

He waves a hand, as if dismissing my concerns. “The press will think whatever they want, no matter what you say. Don’t let it affect your private life.”

“It’s not just that. I’m her boss. It’d be wrong.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re not some middle-aged horndog taking advantage of the girl in his department who’s half his age.”

“It could affect the company.”

He grins good-naturedly. “You’re the owner and CEO. You can do what you want.”

I shake my head, sensing any argument I give him will be quickly met with a counterargument. “You don’t have any reservations?”

“Hell, no. If you have a connection, don’t worry about whatever titles you think are getting in the way. Boss, employee. Billionaire, regular girl.” He lays a hand on my shoulder, the weight of it reassuring. “At the end of the day, I know how hard it is to find something real for people like us. And I watched you two at dinner last night. There was a spark there. I liked her. Mackenzie liked her. Serena did. And Archer’s a grump, so you can’t count him.”

My lips twist, unable to help myself. The way he describes it seems so easy. But he’s not the one living my life. He wouldn’t have to deal with the repercussions, the fallout if I pursued something with her and it all went belly up.

An affair with my assistant would undermine my credibility and respect at Bishop Industries if it was discovered. I already checked HR’s policy, and it’s definitely not allowed. How will it look if the top person at the company flouts the rules? And if it’s confirmed by the press, would it affect our image? Our reputation? Our stock prices? There are so many factors to consider.

“Don’t deny yourself happiness,” he says, watching me closely. “You don’t seem like your usual self.”

There's no denying he's right. But it's impossible to be my normal self with everything in my life that's changed. "Thanks for the advice," I tell him, wanting to drop the subject. There's only so much a guy can take in one day. "Ready for lunch?"

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We go out, and while I enjoy the time, half of my mind is marinating over his words. Not to worry about titles. Connection is important. The rarity of finding something real.

Have I found something already with Emma? My dick unequivocally screams yes, recalling the passion she'd shown earlier. Her tight grip as I'd kissed the hell out of her. Those low sounds of need she'd made in the back of her throat. The seductive look in her eyes as she'd slowly unbuttoned her shirt for me.

My heart is on board too, appreciating the genuine caring she's demonstrated. Offering to come with me to the benefit. Talking with me about my dad. Supporting me every day at work. Her kind nature and generous warmth. Her easy smiles that do more than she knows to soothe something inside me.

It's only my brain that isn't convinced, knowing there's more to it than connection. Than passion.

There's situation. And right now, I'm in a tough one.

Chapter Seventeen

Emma

"Good evening."

I nod at the doorman of Serena's apartment building, not sure what to say. Do I have to explain to him why I'm here? Will they let me up if I don't?

Another uniformed man walks over, asking, “Miss Shepherd?”

“Yes?” He knows who I am?

“Mrs. Bishop is expecting you on the fourth floor. I’ll call the elevator for you.”

“Oh, thanks.” Talk about service.

“She’s in four-oh-two. Second door on the left.”

“Thanks,” I repeat, not sure what else to say. Am I supposed to tip him or something?

He touches his index and thumb finger to his hat as I step onto the elevator, and I hitch my tote bag higher on my shoulder, being careful not to crush the fabric samples inside. I’d taken an extended lunch, running home to grab some of my dress-making supplies, fairly sure Connor wasn’t going to call me out on abandoning my desk. He’d avoided me for the rest of the day.

Not that I blame him. He’d told me we couldn’t kiss again, which I then proceeded to ignore and kissed him anyway. I didn’t expect it to turn into a full-on makeout session with him grinding against me and feeling me up, but I swear there’d been fireworks between us. I’ve only casually dated a few guys, years ago, but just that brief time in the hallway had been more exciting than anything I can recall.

The only bad thing had been when he pulled away, regret in his eyes as he realized what we’d done. How am I supposed to get closer to him if he thinks it’s wrong?

I knock on Serena’s door, stepping back slightly when there’s a loud bark from the other side.

“Down, Petey,” Serena exclaims as she opens the door, pushing a white dog back

with her foot from the open doorway. “Go lay down.” She points to a dog bed over in the corner of the living room and praises him as he trots over. He circles a few times before he plops down, folding his paws in front of him. “Sorry about that,” she says to me. “It’s good that he warns us about visitors, but I don’t want him getting too crazy.”

“Is it okay if I pet him?” I ask, watching as his tail wags happily from the corner, alert even in his seated position.

“Yeah, of course.”

I set my bag and purse down on the coffee table and bend down near Petey’s bed, holding the back of my hand out for him to sniff. He licks my fingers enthusiastically, tail going at top speed, but stays in place like Serena told him. “He’s really well behaved.”

“He’s a good boy,” she says, scratching behind his ears. “And he’s fit in well to our life here. I’m glad we could adopt him.”

“Archer likes him too?” When we were out at dinner last night, he was the most reserved out of everyone. Not cold, but it was hard to get a read on him, seemingly content to sit on the sidelines observing the others.

She laughs lightly, standing and brushing the dog hair off her pants. “You wouldn’t think it, but the two of them are the biggest cuddle bugs at night on the couch.”

Nope. Definitely wouldn’t have thought it.

The man in question exits out of a side room, no sign of hiscuddle bugpersonality present. “You doing your dress stuff now?” His gaze flicks between us, the same as it did at the wedding venue, his dark brows narrowed over those intense blue eyes.

Does he suspect what the real reason for our similar eyes is?

I turn away, pretending to search for something in my bag, just so he'll stop looking.

“Yeah, Emma’s going to take my measurements, and then we’ll look at some sample designs she made.”

“You don’t need me, right?”

“No.” She wags a finger at him good-naturedly. “And don’t try to peek in on us. It’s bad luck for you to see the dress.”

His mouth quirks as he crosses the room to lay a light kiss on her lips. “We’ve already weathered our share of bad luck,” he murmurs, barely audible. “It’s only good times from here.”

Wow. Guess he has a bit of a soft side, after all.

“Connor asked if he could stop by,” Archer continues. “He’ll probably be here in a few minutes.”

My head swivels toward the door. Connor’s coming?

“Oh, shoot. You could have ridden with him,” she says to me. Yeah, don’t think he’d have invited me to carpool. If I’d known kissing him would make him completely avoid me, I’d never have done it.

No, that’s not true. Making out with him had been insanely hot. “Oh, it’s fine. I like taking the subway.” Said no sane person ever.

“Well, you guys can have the living room. We’ll make ourselves scarce in the bedroom.”

She leads me to a larger than expected room done up in soft grays and creams, the

gauzy curtains and throw pillows on the bed homey and inviting. There's a small sitting area in the corner with two accent chairs and an end table between them, and she sits down, motioning me to the other seat. "We can set up shop here."

I pull out the designs I already sketched out and a few different fabric materials I had on hand, pausing as the front door opens, listening to Connor's deep voice. The words are muffled, my head automatically tilting to hear better, but it's not like I can eavesdrop again the way I did this morning.

Why is he here? I mean, he's allowed to visit his brother obviously, but he admitted he hasn't lately. Is it because of me? And does he even know I'm here?

"Emma?"

I glance up, finding Serena smiling at me. "Oh, sorry. Their voices distracted me for a second."

"It's worse when it's the three of them together."

I breathe out a laugh, the tension in my shoulders dropping. "I was thinking the same thing at dinner."

We get down to business then, going over her different options until we've decided on exactly what she'd like me to make, and I pull my measuring tape out, asking her to stand. "Do you have the shoes you'll be wearing to the wedding?"

"Yep. Right here."

She slips on a pair of gorgeous silver stilettos, bumping her height up a few inches. She's probably half a foot taller than me to begin with, and with these on, I have to crane my neck up to see her. We definitely don't share the height gene.

“What about shapewear?” I ask. “If you plan on wearing something under the dress, it’s better to measure you with it on, and so I can get an idea of how the material should drape.”

“Um, I guess I’ll just wear what I did last time.”

I’m dying for the full story on what exactly happened at the wedding, but I’m too afraid to ask. We don’t know each other well enough yet.

She heads into the walk-in closet to change, and I sidle over to the bedroom door, pressing my ear against it, but there’s only silence from the other side. I turn the knob as quietly as I can, peeking my head out, but a wall blocks my view of the living room.

I glance back toward the closet, Serena still inside changing, and creep out of the room slowly, praying there are no creaky floorboards to give me away. Craning my neck, I make out the couch, but it’s empty. Where did they go?

“What are you doing?”

I clap my hand over my mouth to contain my screech, my heart pounding. I whirl around, finding Connor in the doorway of what looks like a home office, Archer behind him seated at a desk.

Crap. Did I really think I could be sneaky? “I, um...” I’m not admitting that I wanted to hear if they were talking about me.

Wow, narcissistic much?

“I was looking for Archer,” I blurt out, not sure what else to say.

Connor's gaze is questioning, but he otherwise stays silent as he steps back to give me better access to his brother. Oh, now I actually have to think of something to ask?

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Archer stands, his brows knitting. “Is everything okay? Does Serena need help?”

“She’s fine,” I assure him, sensing he’s about ready to vault over that desk and search for her. I guess it’s weird that I would look for him. “I just wanted to get your opinion on, um... sleeves.”

His head tilts slightly. “Sleeves?”

Really? That’s the only thing I could come up with? “Yeah. What kind of sleeves should Serena’s wedding dress have?”

“I’ve never thought twice about sleeves,” he says slowly. “I have no opinion.”

I clasp my hands together in front of me. “Great. Good to know. I’ll leave you guys to it.”

I avoid Connor’s eye as I return to the bedroom, hoping he didn’t notice the heat licking my cheeks. This is what I get for being nosy.

I resist all urges to find out what Connor and Archer are up to for the remainder of my time there, focusing instead on taking Serena’s measurements and coming up with a schedule for working on the dress. It’s not like I have anything else to do with my free time, so at least I should be able to finish it in a few weeks if I spend a few hours on it every night.

I make my goodbyes to Serena with promises to keep her updated on how the dress is coming along and head toward the door, speed walking past the office. God, how am

I supposed to seduce him if I don't even know what to say to him? How do I recover from him walking away from me like that this morning?

I'm out and halfway to the elevator, when a soft, "Emma," sounds from behind me.

My eyes shut, feet stopping. "Yes?" I glance back over my shoulder as Connor steps out of the apartment, face serious as he approaches me.

"Archer didn't tell me you'd be here tonight," he says. "Just so you don't think I'm, I don't know, stalking you or something."

"No, I thought you were avoiding me." The words slip out accidentally, but I don't regret them. I didn't fully realize how irritated I was till just this moment.

He sticks his hands in his pockets, biting his bottom lip as he looks down at his shoes. "Yeah, you're right. I was. And I'm sorry. That wasn't fair to you."

Wow. A man who owns up to his mistakes? My annoyance melts away. "No, I was the one who kissed you. It was my fault."

He peeks up at me, a ghost of a smile on his face. "Let's agree we were both at fault. We both... wanted it."

My heart thuds at the sensual look in his eye, gone almost as quick as it was there when he blinks and straightens his head, going back into professional mode. "I just wanted to apologize for how I acted earlier."

"You don't have to apologize. I liked what we did."

He blows out a breath, rubbing the back of his neck. "You're not making this easy, you know?"

Oh, I'm perfectly aware of that. And while I admire how noble he's being, how principled, it doesn't exactly agree with my plans. "Connor." I step closer, secretly loving the way his eyes widen slightly, the sharp inhale he takes as I get nearer. "You said you didn't want to take advantage of me. But you're not. You've never asked for anything I wasn't willing to give already."

"I'm your boss," he whispers. "And I've never wanted to be that awful cliché of the guy who sleeps with his hot assistant."

A grin flirts over my lips. "You think I'm hot?"

He points a finger at me. "That was the wrong part of that sentence to focus on."

I take his outstretched hand, intertwining my fingers with his. "We haven't slept together. We haven't done anything wrong. We're two consenting adults."

He doesn't drop my hand like I thought he might. If anything, he seems to hold it tighter. I use that as a sign to continue, to convince him. If I can only get him to kiss me again...

"I don't expect anything of you," I tell him. "Not at work. Not money. Not favors. I just like being with you." And that last part is the truth. I really do like him, separate from anything my Dad tasked of me. Even if Connor never ends up buying Montague Media, if Dad cuts me off, I wouldn't regret getting closer to Connor. He's more than I ever expected to find when taking this job.

Something dark flickers in his gaze. "Are you trying to torture me?"

I swallow, belly curling at the low need in his voice. "I'm being honest." As honest as I can be.

He blinks, shaking his head slightly. “I thought we agreed to keep things professional.”

No,hesaid that. I never agreed. “Are you saying you only think of me professionally?”

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His lips twist. “You know the answer to that.”

“How do you think of me?” I press.

“I’m your boss.”

“Pretend you’re not for a minute,” I whisper, rubbing my thumb over his knuckles.

“I’m just a girl who wants to know what the guy she likes thinks of her.”

His body sways toward mine, gripping my hand. “I...” I squeeze his hand back, encouraging him, but he lets go, my stomach dropping at the loss of his touch.

He reaches his palm up to cup my face, gaze full of warmth. “I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on. From the very first moment. You’re sweet and genuine and smart.” Butterflies erupt in my belly at his tender words. “You’re an amazing assistant and person and I don’t want to ruin everything because I couldn’t keep it in my pants.”

“You won’t ruin anything.” There’s no thought any more about a calculated seduction, about gaining his trust, about getting him to agree to buy Dad’s company. There’s only me and him. This man that I want. “I don’t care about the boss thing. You won’t even be my boss after a couple of weeks.”

His palm slides off my jaw, my cheek cold without his touch. “It’s not just that. There’s still a power imbalance.”

My mind races, trying to think of something to counter with. “So give me the power.”

Chapter Eighteen

Connor

Give her the power? I have to admit, the idea is wildly arousing. This woman telling me what to do in that husky voice of hers? Commanding me to pleasure her? To finger her? Eat her out? Fuck her?

Oh God, I'm so hard up. I swear, I didn't mean for any of this to happen when I came out here to apologize to her, but I've had her on my mind so often lately, imagining the ways I can have her... Maybe her suggestion is a good one.

And maybe I'm trying to convince myself.

"What did you have in mind?" I ask hoarsely, not ready to dismiss it just yet. How little persuading will it take for me to agree to whatever she says?

She bites her lip, looking up at me from under lowered lashes. "Well, if you think you hold too much power over me, we could reverse roles. So I'm in charge."

I swallow thickly. Does she have any idea what she's doing to me? "You'd tell me what to do?"

She nods, sultry passion filling her gaze. "And what I want you to do to me."

I lace my hands together behind my neck, turning around as I pace the length of the hallway, needing to get away from her for just a moment. Needing to think clearly. Is it even possible to think clearly anymore when she's always on my mind? Would doing this take the edge off, at least? Sate that curiosity so I have the willpower to not take it further and do something I'll regret?

I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the strands, craving clarity. Is this a good idea?

“Something small,” I say, working it out aloud. “Something that I don’t get anything out of.” How is that possible? I’d find pleasure in whatever we do together. “Something for you, not me.”

I turn to face her, those beautiful green eyes of hers alight with interest. “When? Tonight?”

As soon as she suggests it, there’s no way I can delay it any further. “Yes. Where?”

“Your hotel?”

I do some quick mental location scouting, and she’s right. It really is the best option.

And the closest.

I find my key card in my wallet and hand it to her. “Fifty-first floor. Room number is on here. We’ll take separate cars. I’ll leave here ten minutes after you.” I pull out my phone. “I’ll get you an Uber.” I’m not taking any chances of people spotting us together. I don’t need to make tabloid headlines again.

I focus on getting her a car, because otherwise I’ll be tempted to crowd her up against this hallway wall and take her here, in full view of whoever may exit their apartment at any moment.

Oh, crap. Archer’s still expecting me back. I just said I’d be gone a second.

“They’ll be here in five,” I tell her, tucking my phone in my pocket. “I’ll see you there?”

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“See you there.” She reaches forward to lay a quick kiss on my lips, the action natural. What would it be like to be free to do that whenever we want?

She spins and heads toward the elevator, those glorious red curls of hers bouncing with each step. But as she moves further away, the doubts creep in. Logically, I know this isn’t a good idea. And yet, how far can I push myself before I reach the breaking point? Like she said, I want her and she wants me. That’s ultimately what it comes down to, right?

Or, again, am I just trying to convince myself?

No, no doubts. Gabriel told me I’d kill myself with the what-ifs, and he was right. Emma’s waiting for me. And after I make my excuses to Archer, we’ll be together. Alone in my hotel room, ready for her to tell me what to do.

I silently thank whatever higher power there is that we’re finally on the same page, that she’s agreed to this at all. In my wildest dreams, I hadn’t imagined she’d be this eager to be with me too.

I return to the apartment, finding Archer still in his office, his reading glasses on as he types. He’s itching to get back to work, and I hope this consulting business idea he has pans out.

I rap twice on the door, getting his attention. “I’m gonna get going, okay?”

He glances up at me over the rim of his glasses. “Right after Emma left?”

Damn. I knew it was a mistake asking for his advice. But after Gabriel practically shouted at me to go for it, I needed a voice of reason to balance him. And while Archer's never been remotely interested in anyone at work, he understands where I'm coming from. There are definite expectations in the office.

Except, I'm off the clock tonight.

And I really want this.

"Yeah, Emma left too." I shrug my shoulders, probably not as nonchalantly as I intend. "What about it?"

His brows lift the slightest bit. "You don't have to get defensive with me. You came over here like you wanted me to talk you out of it. Now you meet with her for five minutes and your whole mindset changes?"

I suck in my bottom lip, knowing he's right, but unable to admit it. "It's not what you think."

What a crock of shit. It's absolutely what he thinks.

His mouth quirks on one side, but he doesn't call me out on it. "Just be careful, okay? It's not only yourself you have to worry about."

"You mean the company?" I'm well aware of what the company believes I should do.

"That too. But also her. Whatever you do affects her not just privately, but publicly. If photographers catch you two again in even the slightest compromising position, they'll have a field day. Especially after you said it was nothing the first time."

My jaw firms. "I know what's at risk here."

He nods. "As long as it's worth it."

"It is." If our brief tryst this morning is any kind of indication, at least. And now that I've finally allowed myself to believe there could be something between us, even the smallest bit, I can't go back.

That pathway is wide open.

* * *

I only have to knock once on the hotel door I'm beginning to think of as home before Emma opens it, looking up shyly at me. "Hi."

I glance down, realizing she's noticeably shorter without the heels she normally wears. What else will I discover about her tonight? "Hi." I shut the door quickly behind me, not wanting anyone to catch us in the open doorway together.

She rubs at her arms, biting her lip as she takes brief glances toward the bedroom in the corner. "This place is amazing."

I step closer, covering her hands on her upper arms with my own. God, it feels good to touch her freely. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, of course." She smiles, but I'm not sure if I believe it. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"We don't have to do anything you don't want to, you know." I can't say for certain, but it seems like she needs to hear that.

Her mouth trembles the slightest bit. "It just seems so real all of a sudden. It was one thing to think about it, but now we're actually here..." She ducks her head down, slipping her hands out from under mine to cover her face. "Ignore me, sorry."

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“No, that’s valid.” I lead her over to the sitting area, propping a throw pillow behind her on the couch. “A lot’s happened in the past twenty-four hours.”

She angles herself toward me, scooting closer, our knees brushing. “I want this. I do. It’s just, before last night, I didn’t even know you were attracted to me. And now we’re talking about me directing you in bed? It’s a lot to process.”

I swallow, unable to comment on the thought of her directing me. But she’s right. We’ve gone from zero to sixty. “I wasn’t sure you were interested in me either,” I admit. “You could have just been really friendly.”

She chuckles lightly, her shoulders dropping some as she eases. “It’s never been just friendly with you.”

A surge of satisfaction rushes through me. So it wasn’t only me feeling this connection. “What do you want to do tonight? To have me do to you?” There’s blatant lust in my voice, but I can’t help it. I want anything she’s willing to do.

“Touch me,” she whispers.

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

My gaze drops to her breasts, hidden away behind that Oxford shirt. “How about we continue what we started this morning?”

She nods excitedly, and I'm right there with her as I undo the first three buttons in quick succession, revealing the edges of her bra. I groan, leaning in to finally kiss her, something settling within me. Though my lips were last on hers only hours ago, it feels like longer.

Like I've been waiting a lifetime for her.

"Tell me what you want."

"Keep unbuttoning," she breathes.

I do as she says, parting her shirt, revealing an eyeful of cleavage. I've done my best not to stare previously, back in those first few days I worked with her, and again at the benefit, but tonight, it's an invitation.

I run light fingers over her collarbone, teasing her, slowly bringing them down to dip briefly into the cups of her bra. The shaky sigh she lets out has my breath hitching, wanting her to do it again. Wanting to hear how much I affect her. "You like that?"

"Yes." Her eyes drift close as I rub my thumbs over her nipples, drawing soft circles until they harden.

She shrugs off her shirt, kissing me hungrily, hands tangling in my hair. "How do you get me so hot so quick?" she murmurs against my lips, her bra straps sliding down off her shoulders in her haste. "Take it off." She indicates behind her toward the clasp.

With pleasure.

I undo the closure, taking my time removing her bra, reveling in the sight of her topless for me. Fuck, she's big. And those pale pink nipples. God, I can't wait to get my mouth on those.

“Cup me. Squeeze.” She takes my hands and places them over her, directing me just like she’s supposed to. “Like that. Play with me.”

A moan escapes me, that husky voice of hers overtaking me, and I do as she asks, palming her and massaging, loving how greedily she responds in her kiss. I lick my way into her mouth, sucking gently on her tongue as I pluck at her nipples, my dick hardening against my fly, a pressure I have to ignore. Tonight is about her only.

She breaks away, lips bee-stung as she looks at me, desire in her half-lidded gaze. “I want your mouth on me.”

I’m momentarily startled as she pushes me back against the couch cushions and raises her skirt around her waist so she can straddle me, but I quickly get on board with this new position, my hips automatically thrusting upward to grind against her. I trail soft kisses down her neck, flirting with her collarbone the same as I did with my fingers earlier, and cup her breast, bringing it to my mouth for a light lick, nuzzling her.

Her hands find my shoulders, balancing herself, nails digging in with a sweet sting I delight in. “More,” she mumbles. “I want more.”

“Let me build you up.” I lick again, kissing the area after, loving the way she squirms atop me. “Trust me.”

She moans her assent, gripping me tighter as I give her a barely there suck, just enough to placate without fully satisfying her. I switch breasts, repeating the action, building her up like I promised over long minutes, her harsh breaths and restless movements telling me it’s time to go further.

“What should I do next?” I ask her, biting gently at the hardened bud of her nipple.

“Touch me,” she pants. “Finger me. I need you.”

I snake a hand down her body, tracing her curves, committing them to memory. I have no idea if tonight is a one-off, but in case it is, I can't forget any second of it.

I ignore her bunched-up skirt, traveling past it to rub two fingers over her panties, and she angles her hips to give me better access.

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She moans low, throwing her head back as I caress her with delicate strokes. “More.”

My belly jumps in excitement at her command, pulling the thin fabric aside to discover her wet heat, my fingers slick with her arousal. “Are you turned on?”

“Yes. God, yes.” She rides my fingers, cupping the back of my head to return me to her breast.

I gladly comply, sucking her once more, pumping my fingers in and out, loving the desire on her face, her faint whimpers, the way her body writhes atop mine. I’d hoped she’d be responsive, but this is more than I could have asked for.

“Faster,” she whispers, and I speed up my strokes, bringing my other hand to her lower back to steady her. And though she didn’t ask for it, I can’t help rubbing her clit softly with my thumb.

She bucks, nails digging into me again. “Like that. Just like that.”

“You close?” I murmur against her breast, giving her a strong suck.

“So close. It’s so good. I—” She makes an unintelligible sound, gripping me tightly as her orgasm overtakes her, inner muscles clenching around my fingers. I continue to stroke her until she comes down from her high, wringing every drop of pleasure out of her I can, already wanting to do it again.

“Oh my God,” she mumbles, leaning down to kiss me, her lips sweet. “That was... it’s never been like that.”

Pride suffuses me as I run light fingers down her back, needing contact with her still. “So you liked it, then?” I grin, knowing perfectly well she did, but craving the ego boost all the same.

“I loved it,” she whispers. She cups my jaw, warmth flooding me at the intensity in her gaze. “I’ve never done anything like this before. Never been so... explicit with a guy.” Her lips curve up at the corners. “I really liked it.”

“Have I created a monster?”

“Yes.” She grins, bringing her hands down to run over my chest and torso.

I preen under her touch, but pause as she travels further south, brushing the backs of her finger over my dick. “Emma.” I clasp her wrist. “This was supposed to be for you.”

“I can get you off too,” she murmurs, so seductively it’s hard not to lean back and immediately unzip my fly for her.

“No, if you touch me...” I run a hand through my hair, not knowing how to put it into words. If it’ll even make sense aloud.

“You don’t want me to touch you?” She retreats, climbing off me, brows pinched together. I instinctively reach out to soothe her, taking her hands in my own.

“It’s not that.” I kiss her knuckles, testing the words in my head first, still unsure how it’ll come out. “I don’t want this to be anything for me. To take advantage of you. And if you touch me, it’ll seem more... real. Like this is something it can’t be.” I shake my head, knowing it sounds shitty even as I’m saying it. “I’m sorry, it’s difficult to explain. My logic’s already hanging on by a thread.”

She bites her lip, glancing down at my still hard cock, begging to be let out. “So I can’t touch you, but can you?”

I blink, not understanding what she’s asking. “What?”

She brings her chin up, meeting my gaze steadily. “Can I direct you, then? Will you touch yourself for me?”

Chapter Nineteen

Emma

His gaze sharpens, the blue of his eyes darkening.

I swear to God I’m having an out-of-body experience tonight or something because I’ve never in my life been this forward, this wild, this... turned on. Once the dam was breached, it’s like I can’t get enough, like I’ve transformed into this sexual creature.

And I still want more.

“You’ll tell me how I should...” He trails off, but we both know what he left unsaid. Stroke himself. Jerk off. Masturbate.

I want it all.

I nod, eyeing the way his erection strains at the fly of his pants. It’s not as if he can deny he wants some relief.

“That’s—” He shakes his head in denial, but he can’t hide the glint of excitement in his eye. “That’s not what we agreed on.”

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“You said you wanted to do something for me. And this is something I want.” To see him tip over the edge, head thrown back as he loses control. For him to join me in this madness. To surrender to a connection neither of us expected. “I want you to feel good,” I tell him. “If you won’t let me touch you, I at least want to watch.”

He wavers, gaze dipping down to my still topless breasts, nipples puckering under his stare. I lean in close, whispering, “Unzip your pants.”

His chest expands, pulling in a choppy breath as his hand moves slowly over his body, doing as I say, the sound of his zipper loud in the quiet of the room. I reward him with a trail of kisses down the column of his throat, inhaling that delicious woody scent of his.

“Take out your cock.” Seriously, where is this seductress coming from?

He reaches in his boxers, pulling out his gorgeously erect cock, the thing jutting out proudly. My fingers itch to reach out and stroke it, but I curl them instead, resisting temptation. I won’t push my luck too far with him. Despite my illusion of control, he’s still the one with the power.

“Light touches,” I instruct him. “Teasing more than anything else.”

He groans at the first touch of his hand, eyes shutting as an expression of bliss crosses his face. “You get me so fucking hot,” he murmurs, just brushing his fingers against himself. From this close, it’s easy to spot the goosebumps that race over his skin, the way he seems to shudder, following my directions to a tee.

“A little harder.” I’m captivated as he curls a palm around his dick, stroking himself once, twice, the action sending a wave of arousal through me. All that power of his leashed, under his control. Those same fingers on himself now were just inside me, caressing me, bringing me to greater heights.

“Harder,” I whisper, moving my own hand down, turned on again. I slip my fingers over my panties, rubbing softly, watching as he grips himself tighter. “Do you ever think of me when you touch yourself?”

The question slips out before I can censor myself, but I can’t regret it too much. In this moment, this far gone, I’m dying to know.

His eyes open, and as he turns to face me, they widen, realizing what I’m doing too. “Yes,” he breathes, gaze laser-focused on the movements of my hand. “All the time.”

“Really?” I’m not sure why his answer surprises me. I guess just knowing I have any kind of effect on this man still seems incredible.

He leans in, bringing his free hand around to cup the back of my head, fingers tangling in my curls as he draws me in for a long kiss, his lips gentle and sweet. He pulls away after a minute, murmuring, “You’ve been on my mind since day one.”

Again, really? I glance down, his pace lazier now as he moves his fist up and down, pleasuring himself. Because I asked him to. My own private show.

“You walked into my office,” he continues, “and I was a goner. You were so goddamned gorgeous.” His hand in my hair tugs slightly, encouraging me to bare my throat to him. He leans in, laving hot kisses along my neck. “I can’t get you out of my head. Especially now that I really know you.”

Reality crashes over me. Now that he knows me? He doesn’t know the whole truth.

Can't know it.

I swallow, my fingers stalling, and he seems to pick up on my mood, his strokes slowing. "What is it?"

"Nothing." I paste on a smile, praying he can't tell the difference, and straddle his thighs again, whispering, "I think of you too. At night when I'm alone in bed. Imagining what it would be like with you. If you'd take me rough or gentle. Need to have you now fast or achingly slow."

My words have their intended effect, distracting him from my slip-up. "You do?"

"Mmm-hmm." It's not like it's a lie, though. I really have imagined it. "So which would it be? Rough and fast? Or gentle and slow?"

His Adam's apple bobs. "That's a dangerous question."

"Why?" I can't help my smirk, knowing exactly what I'm doing.

His hand trails down my back, featherlight, until it reaches my ass, cupping me. I arch into his touch, and as my gaze meets his, my grin fades at the serious look in his eye.

"Because I want both," he replies, fingers flexing on me. "If I was a different person, if I lived a different life, I'd do it all with you. Rough, soft, fast, slow, and everything in between."

My hands grip his shoulders, kneading the heavy muscles there. "You can do whatever—"

"Let's not get into that right now," he interrupts.

He's right. Now's not the time.

Between us, his fist still moves idly over his cock, reminding me what we're here for. I lean in, whispering in his ear, "Faster, then. I want to see you come."

I scoot back slightly on his thighs, bringing my palms up to cup my breasts, his gaze zeroing in on the action. He picks up the pace, obeying my command, and my own hands quicken, rubbing myself, loving how completely focused he is on me. How much I turn him on. How much I affect him.

My right hand dips down again, underneath the edge of my panties, inside already slick with arousal from coming earlier. "I'm so wet," I murmur. "You have no clue what you do to me."

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He pants, gaze flicking between my chest and where my fingers are pumping in and out of me. “I have a fair idea. Especially if it’s like anything you’re doing to me right now.”

That wildness steals over me once more, the filter on my tongue loosening, not that it’s been present much tonight. “I want you to touch me again. To get me off.”

“Where should I touch?”

“My clit.” I move my fingers there, bucking at the sharp pleasure that runs through me.

His hold on himself quickens, and he brings his free hand between us, big palm spanning my lower belly, thumb diving down to tangle with my fingers, pressing firmly on my clit.

“Yes.” I moan, not caring how I sound, inhibitions gone. I bring my hands back up to play with my breasts, tugging lightly at my nipples, needing that extra sensation to get myself there.

“You’re like a fantasy come to life.” He sighs, leaning forward to suck on me, switching breasts after a minute. I offer myself to him, and he takes greedily, my breaths coming harshly, chest pumping.

“Can I just—” I bring a hand down, wrapping it around his fist. “Please?”

He releases my breast, indecision flitting over his face for what seems an eternity.

Finally, he bites at his bottom lip, nodding. He groans loudly as my hand replaces his, the feel of him velvet over steel. He's so big, so hard. How would it be to have him actually inside me?

"Fuck," he mutters, hips thrusting up, free hand gripping the back of my neck, tugging me in for a hot kiss. His other hand continues to stroke my clit rhythmically, building me up, and I brace myself as a wave of pure want washes over me. I kiss him back roughly, that crest rising within, my fist going full throttle on him.

He tenses, pulling away from my mouth, brows knit as he looks down at himself, a moan escaping him. "Emma. Oh, God." His eyes squeeze shut as he comes, holding me tight, all sorts of nonsensical curses flying from his lips interspersed with my name.

I've never seen him so frantic, so out of control, but it's exactly what I wanted, the sight of it sending me over the edge, joining him in a flurry of excitement as my climax overtakes me.

When it's over, my heart back to its steady rhythm, I pull away, realizing there's cum all over my hand.

"Oh, shit," he says. "Here." He reaches over to the side table and pulls a few tissues out of a silver-plated box, carefully wiping my fingers, then cleans himself off, tucking his dick into his boxers.

I climb off him and pull my skirt down, then slip my bra and shirt on, finding his gaze on me as I do up the buttons.

"I've never been so sad to see a shirt being buttoned."

A breath of laughter escapes me, glad he's not immediately remorseful for what we

just did. I step closer, twining my arms around his shoulders, and kiss him, my body melting into his.

He settles hot palms on my waist, kissing me back, the action easy, natural. “How am I going to keep my hands off you at work?” he murmurs against my lips.

I relax further, loving this playful side of him. “You don’t have to. We can do this whenever you want.”

His shoulders stiffen, body tensing as he seems to remember himself and pulls away. “Emma—”

I tighten my grasp on him, not letting him go just yet. Not without a fight. “Don’t say it was a mistake.” The pleading in my voice isn’t part of any kind of act. I wanted this. Wanted him. “Please.”

He rolls his lips between his teeth, the moment stretching out until he finally nods. “I, um—” He clears his throat, giving me a rueful smile. “I meant for this to take the edge off, but I don’t think it did that.”

I shake my head slightly. “No, it didn’t.”

“I only want you more,” he confesses.

He does? My belly flutters north. “It’s the same for me. When can we do it again?”

I wait for him to make an excuse, to tell me it’s a bad idea. Logically, I know he’s right. Every time we’re together is a chance to be caught. For someone to capture an incriminating photo. For his professional integrity to get the better of him.

And for me to fall deeper under his spell.

But he doesn't deny my request outright. "I want to. God believe me, I want to." He cups the back of my head, gently sifting through my hair, and I arch into his touch, craving the connection for as long as it lasts. "But I need some time to think about this all. How best to... navigate it."

"You're not giving up on me?" The words slip out without conscious thought, and I immediately wish them back. That sounded pathetic. Needy. He doesn't want that. He wants a seductress. Someone confident. In charge. I might have fooled him earlier, but how long can I keep that up?

"No," he says softly, brushing my hair away from my face. "I want you too much. I can't deny that any longer."

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He kisses me again, not as a prelude to anything, but simply an exploration, soft and sweet. How many sides are there to this man? Will I have a chance to discover them all?

“I have to go soon,” I tell him after another few minutes. I’ve already been here far too long. Mom probably expected me home an hour ago. If she’s even awake.

“Take my town car. I’ll have my driver wait for you out front.”

“You’re not worried he’ll wonder why I’m at your hotel?”

“Allen’s trustworthy. Drove Dad around for years, so I’m sure he’s seen and heard his fair share of things. Besides, he signed an NDA.” Just like me.

“Okay. So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“See you then.”

He kisses me one last time, filling my stomach with butterflies, and as I shut the door behind me, I let loose the goofy smile that’s been building all night.

Connor wants me. Somehow, I have a crazy effect on him. And God knows he drives me wild too, especially with those magical fingers and that sinfully skilled mouth.

But even more than that, he seems to genuinely like me. Not just my body, but me. How many guys can I say that about? Of the few I’ve done anything with, I ended up realizing they were more interested in my boobs and butt than my brains.

But Connor...

No, it's probably not smart to get so attached. There's the whole iffy work situation, the paparazzi waiting to catch him slipping up, my mission to have him buy Montague Media. There's so much in our way, so much working against us.

But I still can't squash that kernel of hope deep inside. This could turn into something. Something real.

As long as the truth doesn't catch up with me.

Chapter Twenty

Connor

I rub at the back of my neck for the tenth time today, unable to shake this sense of restlessness coursing through me. I get up from my desk, gathering the papers I need to take with me for my meeting with Tech, and exit my office, pausing when I pass by Emma.

She looks up from her screen, a smile on her lips. "Hi."

"Hi." Neither of us has outright mentioned the events of last night, but there's definitely been an added tension to our interactions this morning. Glances that linger a beat too long. A sensual sway to her movements. A knowing tone in her voice. It can't only be my imagination.

And it's only two hours into the day.

"You heading out for your meeting with Dave?"

I nod, straightening the stapler at the edge of her desk. Does she want to talk about last night? Things got pretty heated. Way more than I was expecting, at least.

But I don't regret it, even though I should. What I should do is tell her it can't happen again. What I want to do is bend her over this desk right now.

"I have to get going," I say instead of doing either of those things. "Maybe we could talk later?" Not that I know exactly what to say yet.

"Yeah. Of course."

"Good."

I continue to stand there, reluctant to leave, even though I need to move to make it to my meeting.

"I really liked last night," she whispers.

"I did too." It's not like I can deny my obvious enjoyment. It'd been the hottest night in memory.

"Did you want to talk now?"

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I can't blame her question. I'm still standing here when I already said I had to go. "No, Dave's waiting for me."

I force myself to leave, taking the stairs down the five flights to the conference room to burn off some of this restlessness.

I've had all morning to clear the air and decide to finally talk to her right before I have to leave? Tomorrow's the weekend, though. If I don't do it today, I'll miss out on two days with her.

I pause, gripping the railing of the stairwell. When did I get to the point where just the thought of not seeing her for two days makes my chest ache?

I push the notion away, focusing my mind as I find the right room on the fifty-fifth floor.

"Connor, hey," Dave greets me as I pull open the glass door. He's been with the company as long as I can remember, back when Dad was first starting out.

He stands and holds a hand out to me, and I gladly shake it, thankful I have his support. I was half worried the chiefs like him who have been here forever would have something to say about me taking over, but so far there's been no pushback.

"I don't know if you've met Zack here," he says. "He's one of our senior software engineers."

"Good to meet you." I shake his hand too and sit down, getting right to it. "My

assistant said you wanted to discuss an issue with some kind of AI you're developing?"

"Right," Dave confirms. "We had estimated about six to eight months to get it up and running, but it's proving tougher to crack than we expected and two of our junior software developers who were working on it just quit. Looks like it'll be more like a year now."

"Okay." Not that this means anything to me. "What exactly is it that your team is doing?"

"Well, your dad had got word of a new AI Montague Media had developed. It promised more sophisticated data mining to serve better targeted ads to users. And once we had that, we could hike up our pricing for advertisers."

"That's why he wanted to buy the company? I thought it had something to do with algorithms."

"The AI uses algorithms to make the program run," Zack chimes in.

"But once your dad decided he wasn't buying Montague Media," Dave continues, "he tasked us with creating the AI ourselves. We were set to break even in about seven months from the increase in ad revenue minus the cost of the company, so that's how long he gave us to develop it ourselves."

"But it's a shot in the dark trying to figure out what Montague Media had even done without seeing the code," Zack says. "It'd be a lot easier if we could just buy it from them."

Dave's brows knit. "Now that's not what we came to talk about." He turns to me. "I just wanted to make you aware we're behind schedule."

“But the company’s not really losing anything even if it takes you longer to develop it, right?” I ask. “Since we didn’t have it to begin with.”

Dave shrugs. “Unless you count staff time that could be used on other projects.”

“But your dad already promised advertisers a more advanced system for collecting user data,” Zack insists. “And shareholders increased profits by the end of next fiscal year.”

So they’ll be coming to me asking why that hasn’t happened yet. One more thing he left for me. “Well, I’ll be the one to break the news that they’ll have to wait a little longer.”

“Or we could buy the AI we were originally supposed to,” Zack responds.

Is it really that big a deal? Or does this guy just not want to do the extra work?

I glance over at Dave, his jaw set. Is this subject a sore spot for the two of them? “What other projects do you have going on?” I ask, trying to smooth things over.

He gives me a grateful look and launches into other new technology developments that ThousandWords is looking to implement in the next few years, and while it’s all interesting, the issue about Montague Media is still working in the back of my mind. Would it be better to slog through and develop whatever it is we need to ourselves? Or put money in the pocket of Greg Montague—a man who expected to use our family name and wealth to cover his gambling debts? Serena even went no contact with him last month after everything came to light about him. How would it look to her and Archer if I did business with him?

The problem is still on my mind half an hour later as I step off the elevator, Emma’s gaze flicking up to meet mine from her desk. And that’s one more unresolved issue.

“How’d your meeting go?” she asks, and though the question is innocent, I swear there’s an underlying flirtation in her tone.

“Fine.” Just like all the other meetings. “Can you get me those files on the Montague Media buyout?” Maybe there’s something in there that will give me a better idea of what to do.

She stiffens in her seat, the color draining from her cheeks. “The, um, what?”

“You said you found files in Vivian’s desk, right? This guy kept going on during the meeting about how we should renew the deal.”

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Her hands twist together in front of her, the movement distracting. “So, are you interested in buying that company, then? You didn’t seem like it when I mentioned it before.”

I shrug, still undecided about the whole thing. “I don’t want to do business with Montague if I can help it. But he has something we could use that we’re having trouble developing ourselves.”

“So you wouldn’t buy it? Or you would?”

Why does she care? “I don’t know. I’d have to be convinced, I guess. But I need more background info first.”

“I, um... Do you really need the files?”

“It’d be helpful, yeah.”

Her face seems to pale further, body fidgety. What’s wrong with her?

“I don’t have them,” she whispers.

“What?”

“I—” Her bottom lip trembles and I automatically step closer, rounding her desk. As I touch her shoulder, I realize it’s shaking. “Here. Come on.”

I lead her to my office and into the seat in front of my desk, shutting the door behind

us. I don't want anyone seeing her like this. "What's wrong? Did something happen to the files?"

"Yes," she chokes out, leaving it at that.

"Okay, what happened?"

"I—" She looks down at her hands, pressing them together till the knuckles turn white. "I spilled water on them. That day I soaked my shirt. It got all over the papers too. And, well, I ruined them."

Is that all? I thought something was seriously wrong. "Are there digital backups?"

She's silent for a few moments, then shakes her head. "No. There's nothing on the shared drives." She looks up at me, sorrow all over her face. "I'm so sorry. That's why I asked if you were interested in buying it. And when it seemed like you weren't, I thought it wouldn't matter about telling you. I was brand new and didn't want you to fire me."

"Emma, it's fine. I'm not mad." I crouch down next to her, rubbing soothing circles on her back until she stops shaking.

"It was such a stupid mistake," she whispers. "I should have confessed."

"It's no big deal," I assure her. "Really."

She nods, finally giving me a small smile. "Thank you." She wipes at her eyes carefully. "I probably look a mess now."

I brush her hair back, tucking it behind her ears. "You look beautiful."

She bites her bottom lip, gaze flicking over my face, and I suddenly realize how close we are, faces just inches apart. And where before I would have stepped away, I can't quite bring myself to do it this time. Not after last night. Not after knowing finally what it's like to touch her.

I'm not sure who moves first, but it doesn't matter as our mouths meet, my hands tangling in her hair, cupping her closer.

"Did you think about things?" she murmurs against my lips, breath sweet.

"Yes. No. Sort of." I can't remember what I decided, if I decided anything at all when she's sliding her hands under my jacket, encouraging me to take it off, her palms hot where they touch me.

"Don't think about it right now. Let's just have this."

I nod, unable to deny her request when her lips and hands are on me.

My tongue slips in her mouth, her quiet moan revving me up, and I stand, bringing her up out of her chair, pressing her flush against me. My hand travels over her soft curves, palming her ass, squeezing, our tryst yesterday fresh in my mind. She pushes her hips into mine, rocking me back until I bump into the edge of my desk, knocking a little clarity in me.

We're at work. It was bad enough at my hotel last night, but here in my office? Not a good idea.

I pull away from her, regret thick in my throat as I tell her, "Anyone could walk in."

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She blinks, the haze leaving her eyes as she turns and crosses the room to the door.

Fuck. What was I thinking stopping her?

The click of the lock echoes loudly, a devilish smile on her lips as she pivots back around. “Problem solved.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Connor

My mouth dries watching her walk back toward me, a predator seeking her prey as she pushes me lightly, guiding me into my chair. I’m helpless to do anything but follow her command, loving this forceful side of her, my brain emptying of any earlier thought of resistance.

She lifts her skirt, the sight of her slim thighs intoxicating as she straddles me, the same as she did last night, and bears down on me. We both let out low groans at the intimate contact, our mouths joining once more. Her fingers nimbly undo my shirt buttons as she kisses me teasingly, but it’s not till she’s on the third one that I actually realize what she’s doing.

“I undid mine for you yesterday,” she whispers before I can protest. “Now it’s your turn.”

Her touch on my bare skin is too good for me to argue the point as she spreads my shirt wide, hands roaming over my torso. It’s not like I can tell her not to touch me

after I let her grip me tight and get me off last night.

“You’re so sexy,” she murmurs, leaning forward to press hot kisses to my neck.

No, that’s all her. This gorgeous, passionate dream girl I finally have within reach.

My hands span her waist, pulling her in closer as my hips thrust up, nudging against her softness. We continue that way, the minutes unending as we build each other up until we’re panting, worked up, my dick so hard behind my fly it’s a wonder it doesn’t bust right through my pants.

“I want you.” She grinds against me, brushing her thumbs across my nipples, a shudder running through me. “I can’t take it much longer.”

God, I want her too. Any reservations about being at work, about if this is even a good idea to begin with, are long gone. But I do have enough control over myself to say, “I don’t have any protection.” Didn’t think I would need it here of all places. “Are you on the pill or anything?”

She leans back, lips swollen, and blinks at me. “No. I, well, I’ve never had a steady boyfriend, so there’s never been a reason.”

How in the world has no one snatched her up? “Me either. A girlfriend, I mean. Not a boyfriend.”

A smile crosses her face as she smooths her hands over my pecs. We’re both quiet, the only thought in my mind that if things were different, I’d ask her to be my girlfriend right now.

She shifts slightly, pressing against my dick, and I kiss her again, murmuring, “I can think of something we can do.”

Her eyes widen as I stand, lifting her with me to set her on the edge of my desk, skirt haphazardly hiked up around her waist.

“What are you going to do?” she asks with breathless wonder as I kneel in front of her, skimming my palms up her thighs.

“Make you feel good.”

“You’re...” She inhales as I press a kiss to her knee. “Are you—” A gasp escapes her as I rub her over her panties, squeezing her eyes shut as her lips part.

I grin against her leg, pressing light kisses up her right inner thigh, enjoying the play of emotions over her face. Satisfaction. Wanting. Desire. I could watch her react to me all day.

I pull the edge of her panties aside, touching her directly, and she angles her hips the slightest bit, humming a soft sound of encouragement.

She’s already wet for me, my fingers sliding in and out easily, and I carefully observe her as I replace my fingers with my tongue, her eyes flying open, brows knitting as she looks down at me.

“Oh my God,” she pants, gripping the edge of the desk. “Keep going.”

I peel off her panties and dive back in, my hands coming to rest on her ass as I bury my tongue in her pussy, reveling in her sweetness, needing more of her taste.

She reclines on her elbows, giving me better access, whispering, “It’s so good. How is it this good?”

I spread her legs wider, answering, “It’s you and me.”

And that really does seem to be the reason, the attraction between us too strong to resist any longer. I've never wanted anything as badly as I want this woman.

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I alternate between long, slow licks and fast flicks with my tongue, her hips lifting from the desk, seeking relief as I build her up.

“Easy,” I murmur, tracing her hip bones with my thumbs, memorizing the softness of her skin, savoring the taste of her. “I’ll get you there.”

She reaches down, fingers sifting through my hair, clenching the ends, and I moan, loving the gentle way she tugs, her urgency spurring me on despite my request for patience. I have a feeling if she asked me to jump, I’d simply ask how high in response.

“Faster,” she says, tugging at my hair harder, the action unlocking a burst of lust within me. “Like that.”

I give her what she wants, nuzzling into her as I bring my thumb to her clit to tease her there.

Her hips buck, breaths picking up in speed as I work her, thighs trembling, fingers gripping me tight until she breaks.

I drink her down, relishing every bit of her as she comes down from her high, a sight I’ll be reliving tonight when it’s me alone in my hotel room.

Her body finally goes limp against the desk, a lazy grin on her lips as she tilts her head to look over at me. “Three for three,” she murmurs, and it takes me a moment to realize what she means. Three times I’ve made her come now—twice last night and once today. Three glorious, earth-shattering times. “And all within twenty-four

hours.”

“A record, I’m hoping?”

Her smile grows wider. “Definitely for me.” She lifts up on one elbow, brushing her hair that’s gone wild back from her face. “But you? We need to double your score.”

I swallow hard, scared to hope for what I think she means as she straightens and slides off the desk, taking my hands to bring me up. Her arms twine around my shoulders, and she kisses me languidly, pressing her body tightly to mine.

My hips unconsciously push forward, nestling into her softness, my belly dipping low in delight as her nails lightly scratch down my back. Does she have any idea what kind of effect she has on me?

One of her hands snakes between us, over my pecs, my abs, my navel, down to my belt buckle, her fingers quick and light as she undoes it. I should object, stop her, remind her that this whole situation came about because I told her last night I would only do something for her. That I don’t want to take advantage of her.

But I’m weak, too excited to see what she’ll do, my pulse a heavy beat throughout my body as she unzips me and reaches into my boxers to pull me out.

“It’s all right that I touch you now?”

“Yes.” The word slips out easily, no other answer for her as she strokes me harder. “I can’t get enough of your touch.”

She leans away slightly, looking up at me from under lowered lashes. Her hair is tousled, cheeks flushed, eyes half-lidded with desire. My bombshell seductress. “What about my mouth?”

A sly smile curves over her lips as she lowers herself to her knees, guiding my cock into her mouth, giving a light lick to the head.

“Oh, fuck.” The curse slips out as I grip the edge of the desk behind me, balancing myself as my knees momentarily weaken, the sight of my dick disappearing into her mouth almost too much to take. I stare up at the ceiling, half afraid I’ll come right now if I see anymore.

“Do you like that?” she asks, releasing me briefly, pressing soft kisses down my length.

“Yeah.” Is that my voice that sounds so hoarse?

“Is there anything special I should do?”

She wants me to think of something else? I only have two working brain cells at the moment, and they’re both screaming for her to suck me again. “What you’re doing is amazing.”

She continues to stroke me, her fingers a tight ring around my cock, and concentrates on using her tongue to swirl over the sensitive head, precum beading out of the tip. She licks it down, my eyes squeezing shut as I attempt to control myself, breathing in and out on long breaths.

I want this to last, to go on forever, to always have her mouth and hands on me, to revel in this connection. She takes me in further, and I make the mistake of looking down, my hips bucking as she bobs up and down, intent on her task, the suction incredible.

“Emma.”

She makes a questioning noise, never stopping, and I finally let myself go, giving in to the pull she has over me, an electric thrill running down my spine.

“Suck me harder.”

She hums happily, doing as I say, building me up, and I brace myself, my hand gripping the back of her neck as the climax overtakes me, washing over me in waves. I bite my lip hard, keeping contained the words that long to come out. How much I want her. How goddamned amazing she is. How I’m losing myself to her. There’s no denying it to myself any longer, at least.

She releases me with a pop as I finish, her smile so irresistible, I can’t help but bring her up to join me, giving her a long, luxurious kiss.

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She pulls away after a minute and retrieves her underwear from where I flung it behind us, pulling it on as she straightens her skirt, then returns to me, tucking me back in my boxers and zipping my pants up. She works on buttoning my now-wrinkled shirt next, whispering, “I think you should buy it. For what it’s worth.”

The dreamy fog surrounding my brain fades slightly. “What?”

“Montague Media. From what I remembered from the files, it was a good deal.”

My brows narrow. “That’s what you’re thinking about?”

Her hands pause on the last button, silence stretching between us. “I’m sorry,” she finally says. “I guess I was just getting back into work mode.”

I look beyond her, my mood somewhat soured. “Right.” I mean, we’re at work. That makes sense.

But while I’m internally rhapsodizing about how into her I am, she’s still on those files?

“Ignore me.” She waves her hands around her head. “You addled my brain with that orgasm. That was tacky and I’m sorry.”

My chest goes tight at the contriteness on her face. “No, no. You’re fine. Talking about work when we’re at work is reasonable.”

She moves nearer, reaching up to give me a kiss. “So we’re good, then?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Her smile eases me somewhat. “Is it all right if I use your bathroom? I probably really look a mess now.”

I gesture toward the private room in the corner of the office. “Of course.”

I slip back on my suit jacket, donning my CEO armor again. I guess if we continue to do whatever this is we’re doing, I’ll need to get used to returning to work mode more quickly too.

The only question is—what exactly is it we’re doing?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Emma

“What are you working on?”

I jump in my seat, glad I only had a ruler in my hand and not scissors. “Mom, you scared me.”

“Sorry, honey.”

I glance over my shoulder, finding her lingering in my doorway. I must have been too focused to hear her open it. “It’s a wedding dress for a client.”

“I thought you were putting your shop on hiatus while you’re working full time.”

I turn around, setting the paper pattern I’m making aside on my desk. “They commissioned it in person. It’s someone Connor knows, so it could lead to more

business later.” I’m not telling her it’s Serena, though. She’s always abided by my Dad’s wishes for me not to contact any of his real family.

She wanders in, hugging her robe tight around her, and takes a seat on my bed. “How much longer do you have at this office?”

“Two weeks.” That’s when Vivian comes back, at least. And after that, who knows? Maybe I really could get a business going. Connor said he’d look at any plan I make.

But that was before we started getting intimate. Would he still invest in me now? Or is it a conflict of interest?

“And then you’ll be back at home if I need you, right?”

I peek over at her on my bed, her curly red hair piled haphazardly on top of her head, deep grooves bracketing her mouth. “I don’t know,” I tell her honestly. I have no idea what’s going to happen with Dad cutting us off or not. Especially after I failed yet again at getting Connor to agree to buy the company.

Guilt splashes hot in the pit of my stomach at the reminder of yesterday. Having to make up that lie on the spot about ruining the nonexistent files on the buyout. Having to interrupt what should have been a beautiful, intimate moment between us at the end with a crude attempt at making good on my promise to Dad. If Connor had any idea what was going on in my head, he’d have run for the hills.

“Are you ready to talk about Tuesday night?” I ask Mom, not wanting to dwell on my predicament with Connor. “With your extra pills?” I’ve tried to broach the subject over the last few days, but she’s made excuses every time.

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“I was hoping you’d let that go.” She looks down at her lap, looping the tie of her robe over her index finger.

“Nope.” Seriously, we have to talk about it sometime. I’m not letting her bury her head in the sand about this.

“I just needed something to take the edge off,” she says quietly. “I have to do more around the house now that you’re not here.”

Thanks for the guilt trip. “I’m worried about you. If you got those pills illegally, there’s a chance they could have a weird filler in them. It could be dangerous.”

“I’m trying my best,” she argues.

“Well, what about the suggestions from the doctor? Meditation, exercising, limiting naps, the deep breathing—”

“Those things don’t help.”

I take my own deep breath, letting it out slowly. “He said antidepressants help some people too.”

“I’m not depressed. I’m in pain.”

“I understand. But I need you to try something else.” I get up and join her on the bed, squeezing her hand. “If you’re only focused on the pain all day, you’ll never enjoy life again.”

She tilts her head down, and it's not until a drop lands on our joined hands that I realize she's crying. I wrap an arm around her, hugging her to my side.

"I want to get better, I do. But it's so hard."

I stroke a palm down her arm, soothing her the way she's done for me countless times. At some point, though, it switched. Now I'm the one doing it. "Do you remember when I was eight or nine and I discovered your old sewing machine?"

She sniffles slightly. "Yeah."

"And I was so intent on making myself that pink dress."

A chuckle escapes her. "That's right. It was so lopsided."

"And I was upset it turned out so awful. But what did you tell me?"

She's quiet for a moment. "That you needed to practice more before you'd get good at sewing."

I nod. "I think this is the same kind of thing. You need to practice changing your mindset. Try the recommendations the doctor gave. If you stay on this path of taking too much pain medication..." I swallow hard, not wanting to finish that sentence. "It won't be a magic fix, but working on those things will help. And I'll be here to support you too."

She leans into me, resting her head on my shoulder. "Okay." She takes in a shaky breath. "You're right. I'm going to try harder."

"Good. I'm proud of you."

Her exhale turns into a weak laugh. “It should be me saying that to you.”

“Everyone needs to hear it sometimes.”

“I’m proud of you too,” she says after a few moments of comfortable silence. “I know I haven’t acted like it lately. I’ve been... selfish.”

“No, you—”

“I have. I didn’t want to face the fact you’re growing up. And have been for a while. My God, when I was your age, I already had a three-year-old.” She lifts her head off my shoulder, turning to me. “I appreciate everything you’ve done the last few years. I really do. I wouldn’t have made it without you.”

“Don’t say that,” I whisper, my throat thickening.

“It’s the truth.” She squeezes my hand tight. “I’m feeling okay today, all things considered. How about I make breakfast?”

“Mom, it’s noon.”

“Fine, brunch. It’s the weekend. We can do whatever.”

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I grin, glad to see some of her old spirit returned. “Sounds good.”

She returns my smile, leaving me feeling lighter as she gets up and makes her way to the kitchen. Thank God we finally had a real conversation and cleared the air. That’s at least one person I can say I’m on the same page with.

Still have to get there with Connor, though.

My phone dings and I pick it up, reading a text from the interior designer I hired for Connor’s apartment.

I stick my head out of my room, calling to Mom, “Can we do brunch tomorrow? I need to run to work.”

Where before she might have made a comment about me leaving yet again, this time she merely replies, “Of course, baby.”

I change out of my pajamas and into a new sundress I made over the winter that I haven’t had a chance to wear, the blue and white floral pattern lifting my mood even more, and grab my purse before heading out the door and toward the subway station a few minutes away.

I showed Hannah the apartment above Connor’s office earlier in the week while he was at a meeting, but she wants to look at the space one more time before she makes her final selections for new furniture. She was great about helping me find a company to move all of Mr. Bishop’s old stuff into storage, but with all the other things happening with Connor lately, I keep forgetting to tell him.

As I'm heading down the steps to the station, though, my phone dings again. Crap. She wants to meet half an hour later now. I debate for a second about whether to turn around, then decide to just head into the city. I can kill thirty minutes easily catching up on work.

Except, I end up getting off the subway at a stop nowhere near Bishop Tower, my mind not examining too closely where I'm going until I'm in front of New Beginnings, Serena's animal shelter. Sure, I've imagined coming here before. Fantasized about stopping in and pretending to look for a pet, striking up a conversation with Serena that somehow leads to us becoming best friends. That was all in my head, though. I didn't believe I'd actually ever meet her.

But now I have. I don't have to pretend. Well, about the pet part, at least.

A bell rings over the door as I enter, and a woman with a friendly smile greets me as I approach her desk.

I flounder for how to respond for a moment, knowing I have absolutely no reason to be here. "Hi, is Serena here today?" It's all I can think to say.

"Yeah, she's just in the back. Want me to get her for you?"

"That'd be great, thanks."

I cross my arms over my chest, hiding my shaking hands as I wait for her. It was one thing to meet with her to take her measurements for her dress. She invited me then. But this...

"Hey, Emma. Is everything okay with the dress?"

My eyes unfocus from where they were staring at the ground, and I smile at her.

“Yeah, it’s coming along great. I created a pattern for it this morning, actually. I, um, I was just in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop by. You made the place sound so amazing that first day we met, I had to check it out.”

“Oh.” She returns my smile and I breathe a sigh of relief. “Do you have time for a tour? I love to show it off when I can.”

“Yeah, of course.” Wow, I didn’t even have to ask.

She motions for me to follow her to a door along the far wall, excited barks greeting us as we enter a kennel area. “You all be quiet,” she says good-naturedly, holding the back of her hand out for the closest dog to lick through the cage.

She shows me around the facility, and after my own share of puppy kisses, the knot of nerves in my stomach dissipates as we laugh at the antics of Snowball, a fluffy white mutt who revels in being the center of attention. She lets us in his cage, and I bend down to give him a belly rub.

“Your shelter is amazing,” I tell Serena. “I always picture one of those sad ASPCA commercials when I think of places like this. You know, with the Sarah McLachlan song? But this is nothing like that.”

“Oh my God, no.” She laughs, not taking offense at my statement. “I don’t want some depressing place that guilts you into adopting. People should be happy when they come here. My mission is to provide a loving environment and rehabilitate the animals as best we can so they’ll find their forever home.”

I stroke Snowball’s soft fur, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. “It was called something different originally, right?”

“Yeah. I changed it about a month ago. My dad withdrew funding, so it didn’t really

make sense to have his name on it anymore.”

So I guess I’m not the only one he’s cutting off. “But you’re okay now? Like, you don’t have to shut the place down or anything?”

“We had a big fundraiser recently, so we’re set for the next year, and I applied for a bunch of grants too. Plus, since Archer took over keeping track of all the finances, it’s so much more organized.”

A loud gurgling sound comes from her, and Snowball sits up from his lounging position, ears going alert as he stares at Serena raptly.

She laughs, clutching at her stomach. “It’s past my lunch time, isn’t it?”

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She opens the door to the cage and I follow behind her, silently waving goodbye to the dogs.

“Would you want to go out to eat?” she asks me. “Are you free?”

I grip the sides of my dress so I don’t reach out and pull her into a hug. She’d actually want to go out with me? Are we becoming... friends?

Wait, I can’t go. I need to meet the interior decorator. “Any other time I would. I just stopped in real quick on my way to work. We could do it tomorrow, though. Or Monday. Or Tuesday...” Okay, best to quit before I sound too desperate.

“Yeah, sometime this week would be great.”

A grin creeps over my face, but I quickly stifle it. I’m going to scare her off before we can even start. “As long as it’s not where we had dinner the other night. I definitely can’t afford that.” It was the kind of restaurant with no prices on the menu. Thank God Connor had picked up the bill for everyone.

“It’ll be my treat,” she promises. “I have Archer’s credit card.”

I laugh at the sly smile on her face.

“So Connor makes you work weekends too?” she asks. “I hope he’s not a workaholic like Archer used to be.”

“No, he doesn’t know I’m coming in. I’m redoing the apartment above his office for

him.”

“Oh, I never thought about where he’s living now that he’s here permanently.”

“He’s just been in a hotel.” Admittedly, an insanely nice hotel suite. I mean, the place had a grand piano as soon as you walked in.

“But he inherited so much property.”

Wow, even more than the apartment at Bishop Tower?

I shrug. “He doesn’t seem concerned about it, but I thought he should have somewhere that’s actually his, you know?”

“I’m glad he has someone looking out for him,” she says softly. “Connor’s always been nice to me. The first night I met him, he was the only one who really welcomed me to the family.”

“He’s a great guy.” My stomach churns at the reminder of what I did yesterday. How I tried to manipulate him, how he doesn’t deserve it. He’s been so good to me and I...

No, I have to stop dwelling on that. I’ll make myself sick otherwise.

I check the time and realize I need to get moving if I’m going to meet Hannah at Bishop Tower. After thanking Serena for the tour and promising to get together for lunch sometime this week, I head back out toward the subway.

Setting up a home of his own is at least one thing I can do for Connor. Does it make up for everything I’m putting him through? Definitely not.

But I’ll take what I can get to ease my conscience.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Emma

My phone dings again as I step off the elevator onto the sixtieth floor, and I check it, cursing when I see it's another text from Hannah asking to push back the meeting. I'd be mad, but the bus she was taking got into a fender bender and she decided to just walk the rest of the way.

"Emma?"

I jerk my head up, panicking for a moment before I realize it's Connor. Walking toward his office, I peek in, finding him seated behind his desk. "You're not supposed to be here. It's Saturday."

He gives me a lopsided grin. "You're not either."

Okay, that's fair.

"I'm meeting with the interior decorator. She's reviewing the space one more time before she orders the furniture. If you want to meet with her too—"

"No, I'm good. I trust whatever you pick."

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I ignore the bolt of shame that hits me at his mention of trust. “What are you doing? You were so looking forward to the weekend.”

He sighs, scrubbing a hand down his jaw. “I tried relaxing, but all I could think about was how much there still is to do.”

“Why didn’t you call me? I could have helped.”

He gets up from his desk, joining me at the doorway. “Just for the record, I never expect you to work weekends. But I’m glad you’re here. I needed a break.” His arms move to reach for me, and then he stops himself. “Where’s the decorator?”

“Oh, she’s running late.”

“So I can do this, then?” He tugs me closer, cupping the back of my head to give me a drawn-out, delicious kiss.

I cling to him, savoring his warm taste until he releases me. “You can do that anytime.”

He smiles down at me. “I might hold you to that.”

Despite everything we’ve done together so far, his words still bring a slight blush to my cheeks. I bite my lip, stepping away to fully look him over. “You know, I’ve never seen you in casual clothes.” His outfit is nothing special, just a black t-shirt and worn jeans paired with scuffed boots, but it seems to match him in a way I didn’t expect after only seeing him in expensive, tailored suits. “I really like it.”

He chuckles. “This? I’d wear it all the time if I could. Those ties strangle me.”

I purse my lips at him. “You know what I’m going to say.”

He gives me a sardonic look. “That I’m CEO and I can do whatever I want?”

“Yep.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“You keep saying that. Why?”

He turns away, running a hand through his hair. “There are expectations of me. I have to uphold what Dad put in place.”

“Why?”

“Because I... I just do, okay?”

His voice isn’t quite exasperated, but there’s definitely a note of defeat in there.

“If you can’t give me a reason other than because, then it’s not a very valid reason, is it?”

He glances over at me over his shoulder. “Aren’t assistants supposed to be yes men?”

The corners of my lips tip up. “You wouldn’t want someone who doesn’t challenge you.”

He returns to his desk, leaning back in his chair. “So you’re saying I should just change everything I don’t like? I might as well step down from the job, then.”

I take a seat too, crossing my arms over my chest. “No, but you should reduce the unnecessary parts, and add more of the stuff you like. That’s the benefit of being the owner too. You can decide what you do.”

He’s silent as he picks up a pen and taps it on his knee, mulling over my words.

“Okay, let’s imagine,” I say. “Not making any actual decisions. Just a wishlist. What’s something you don’t like about being CEO?”

He sighs. “Emma—”

“Humor me.”

“All the meetings,” he finally answers.

“So tell them to send emails instead. Boom. Next problem.”

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He lets out a tired grunt. “I’ve tried. But they say that’s not—”

He cuts himself off, both of us aware of how he was going to finish that sentence.

“You don’t have to do everything the way he did,” I remind him softly. “You’re your own person. And you already do some things differently.”

His brows narrow. “What? I haven’t changed anything. Trust me, I’ve wanted to.”

“It’s how you respond to people. From what I can gather, your dad led the company using fear as a motivator. The employees were afraid of him berating them, of losing their job if they messed up. But you’re not like that. You listen to them. You respect that they know what they’re doing and if something goes wrong, you work with them to come to a solution.”

“Dad always said I was too trusting,” he murmurs, barely audible.

“No, I don’t think that at all. It’s a different form of leadership but just as valid. Like you told Angelina, you’d rather have a conversation with someone than yell at them.”

“And she said people weren’t expecting that.”

“So make them expect it. Change the norms. Don’t stay miserable doing something in a way that doesn’t work for you.”

He sets down the pen he was holding, wiping his palms on his jeans. “Okay, so say I do that. There are still all these issues that need to go through me.”

“So give your chiefs more autonomy. They can deal with the problems of their own department and then meet with you every, I don’t know, two weeks to update you. There’s, what? Seven chiefs? Do two meetings a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, then you’ve knocked them all out in less than a week and can focus on other stuff.”

He blinks at me. “Have you thought about this before or did you come up with that just now?”

“I’ve thought about it,” I admit. “I hate seeing you so stressed.”

He blows out a long breath, lacing his fingers behind his neck. “Maybe I need to pay you the going rate of a consultant. Or a therapist.”

I can’t hold back the laugh that escapes me. Me? A therapist? Yeah, right. “Well, it’s always easy to play armchair psychologist with other people’s problems.” It’s your own issues that are harder to solve. “So what’s something else you’d like to change here?”

He grins. “How about casual Fridays?”

“Done. A company-wide email will be sent out first thing Monday morning.”

His lips twist. “You think HR wouldn’t have an issue?”

I shrug. “It’s not like it’s hurting anything. And it’ll boost morale.”

He nods, running a hand over his jaw. “I’d be pushing my luck asking them to change their stance on supervisor-employee relationships, though.”

I glance down at my lap, unable to hide the burst of pleasure that runs through me.

“Probably,” I agree. It’s not like I can pretend it isn’t an issue.

“But, you know, after Vivian comes back, and you’re not here anymore...”

I peek up at him, his face set in a serious expression. “Yeah?”

My phone dings, his gaze shifting to my purse. “Is that the decorator?”

I pull it out, looking at the display. “She just walked in the building.”

“Cool. I’ll, uh, let you get to it.”

He shifts his attention to his computer, but I don’t leave yet. Once I’m no longer employed by him, would he want more with me? But when that time comes, I’ll either have successfully deceived him... or be homeless. The former means any kind of relationship between us would be based on a lie, and the latter means I’ll have much bigger problems on my plate than deciding to date someone.

What the hell am I going to do?

I stand, making my way to the door, pausing for a second. “I’ll let you know when I’m finished upstairs.” I don’t wait for his reply, closing the door behind me as I meet Hannah at the elevators.

We take the back stairwell to the sixty-first floor, and I lose myself for the next hour and a half going through her picks for everything from the rugs on the ground to the lighting on the ceiling with her. Thankfully, she understands exactly the vision I had in mind when I described what I thought Connor would like, and by the time we’re done, I’m confident he’ll love this place.

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Now, for all I know, he could end up deciding to stay in that hotel forever, but at least any traces of his father should be gone once Hannah and I have it all situated.

She promises to order everything when she gets back to her office, with deliveries set to arrive on Wednesday. It's easy to get things done fast when money isn't an issue.

I don't follow her out, lingering instead at the living room windows overlooking the city. I'd always thought of Manhattan as a magical place when I was younger. Mom rarely took me here, but when we did go, it was for things like watching the lighting of the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, my gaze filled with awe at the brilliant display of lights on the incomprehensibly huge tree. Or the one time we went to Times Square on New Year's Eve, the energy of the crowd manic as the ball dropped.

Plus, it was that far-off place where my dad lived. Where maybe one day he'd invite me to his home. To meet my sister. To spend time with me. A city of wonder. Of hope.

And now, Manhattan really has brought me magic. A romance I wasn't expecting. A budding relationship with my sister. A dream career in fashion design if I play my cards right.

Except it's like one of those blessings the Fae give that actually turn out to be a curse. Everything could tumble around me at any minute. If Connor finds out who I really am, why I'm really here, I'll lose it all.

What started off as a more or less questionable mission has morphed into something else altogether. Feelings are involved now. I care about Connor. How can I do this to

him? And if I succeed in deceiving him, will I be able to live with myself?

But on the other hand, I can't even say for sure he wouldn't want Montague Media. He seemed more interested in it yesterday after he met with Tech. And his dad must have wanted to buy it for some reason. Maybe this will end up benefiting him. Maybe I'm doing him a favor.

And maybe I'm deluding myself.

I hug my arms around my middle, more confused than ever. Would it be the worst thing if I didn't go through with Dad's plan? I mean, I'd lose any kind of financial security, Mom's health insurance she desperately needs until she qualifies for state aid, my home... Okay, not really an option.

And if I convince Connor? What would I lose then? Potentially the trust and respect of an amazing, thoughtful, generous guy. One who makes my toes curl, my heart swoon. Who has turned out to be so much more than I expected. Someone, I admit, I've fantasized about a future with.

Except, what kind of realistic future is there for us? He's a CEO billionaire of a huge corporation, and I'm a bastard nobody who's never done anything special. I'm nowhere in the same league as him. What would he even want with someone like me long-term?

Something drips on my arm, and I blink stupidly at it, not realizing it's a tear at first. I brush my fingers along my cheek, more wetness there. Am I seriously crying at work?

I wipe carefully under my eyes, removing all traces of tears. If Connor discovered me like this, I'd have no explanation for him, and I don't want to lie again.

Not any more than I have to.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Connor

Agrin creeps across my face as I skim through the email that just popped up from HR about casual Fridays. Emma was true to her word about turning my wishlist into reality and reducing my workload after I'd finally relented and let her have her way.

And it's only two hours into the day.

"You ready?"

I glance up from my computer, my gaze lingering over Emma in the doorway of my office, her green dress hugging her curves, hair braided over one shoulder today. God, she's so beautiful. "Yeah, give me a minute. Do you have the, um—"

"Your talking points?" She holds up a bundle of index cards. "Right here."

A soft chuckle escapes me. "I seriously think you're in my head." Crossing over to her, I make sure there's no one in the hallway before I lay a light kiss on her lips, savoring the brief contact.

She smiles, but there's something about it that seems slightly... off. "If only," she murmurs, but doesn't elaborate further as she moves to the elevator, pressing the call button.

"Everything okay?"

She glances over her shoulder, a sadness lurking in her eyes for a shadow of a

moment before it's gone, so quick I'm not quite sure I saw it. "Yeah, of course."

I reach for her, but the elevator doors open and she steps on. I'm careful to keep a respectful distance, mindful of the camera in the upper left-hand corner. Thank God Dad didn't have any installed on the sixtieth floor to observe his activities. I'd be in hot water if he had.

"You sure? You can talk to me if something's wrong." I can't shake this strange sense pervading me.

"I know," she whispers, hugging her arms around her.

"So..."

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The edge of her mouth quirks up briefly. “It’s usually me being this pushy.”

“Guess it’s my turn.” I stick my hands in my pockets, fingers twitchy wanting to comfort her.

“There’s just this thing with my dad—”

The elevator stops, doors opening on the fiftieth floor, Richard Brigham standing there waiting to be let on. Great.

His gaze flicks between the two of us carefully. “Mister Bishop. Miss Shepherd.” He cautiously steps into the car, turning around to face front. Emma and I exchange a glance behind his back, mutually agreeing to put the conversation on hold till later.

As we enter the conference room on the fortieth floor, a few of the other chiefs send nervous glances my way, and I don’t blame them. We usually hold chief meetings monthly, and here I am holding two within a week of each other. There shouldn’t be a reason to meet again so soon unless something is seriously up.

Emma makes a beeline toward the breakfast buffet she set up earlier, but I can’t follow her. All eyes are on me.

I pause at the head of the boardroom table, still feeling slightly surreal that this is my place now rather than Dad’s. Of the few meetings I attended here in the office when I was in town, this spot was always his, no questions asked. The feared leader of the company. His way or the highway.

But I don't want to be the same way.

I choose not to sit where I'm supposed to, heading instead to a seat halfway down the table between the Chief of Operations and Production. There, that's more my speed.

Eyes widen, but I ignore them, waiting as the last couple of people file into the room, everyone avoiding Dad's old spot. Maybe we should just have the chair removed.

I clear my throat, calling attention to myself. "I want to thank you all for taking time out of your schedules to meet today. I know it's hard to constantly drop what you're working on to go sit in a meeting."

I glance around, noting the familiar faces. Some of these people have been with the company since I was a kid.

"How many of you like meetings?" I ask, posing the question to the room at large.

Furtive glances and even more confused looks abound, not that I'm too surprised. No one raises their hand until Dave asks, "Meetings about what?"

I shrug. "Anything. Take your pick."

"Well, uh..." He looks around, but nobody steps in to save him. "When it's about something important and we make decisions during it. That's always good."

"Yes, exactly. Productive meetings make sense. But how many of you have been in a required meeting where you were wondering why you're even there to begin with? You know, like this one."

Some of the tension in the room relaxes after the Chief of Communications chuckles and I smile at her. Pretty sure Dad didn't poke fun at himself often.

“Some of you expressed concern about changing things from the way my father did them, but we can’t stay static forever. And I’ve decided that the meeting issue is the hill I’m willing to die on. I’m not able to lead effectively when I’m swamped with meetings daily. So unless you have real news to report or something important to discuss, we’ll no longer meet just for the sake of meeting. We’ll shift the individual weekly check-ins to quarterly and I won’t be sitting in on all departmental meetings. Invite me if I need to be involved, but otherwise I’m giving you autonomy to make decisions yourselves. You’re chiefs for a reason and I trust you all.”

The room is silent after my little speech, and my gaze automatically cuts to Emma, over in the corner by the bagels and muffins. She smiles widely, whatever sadness lurking around her earlier now gone, and gives me a subtle thumbs up. A lightness fills me imagining my free calendar and the time I’ll have to catch up on all the things I still need to learn.

Our Chief Production Officer cautiously raises his hand and asks, “So does this mean we don’t have to have the weekly required meetings with our staff either if it’s unnecessary?”

“Correct.”

Excited murmurs abound around the table and I hear a muttered, “Thank God,” from the Chief of Operations.

Wait, so was everyone else feeling the same way and too afraid to go against the status quo? “I want you all to know you can always come to me if you believe there should be a change in our workflows. I promise I won’t bite your head off.”

“It’s, uh, not quite the dynamic we’re used to,” Dave admits, several others nodding their heads in agreement.

“No,” I agree. “It’s not. But I’m not the same man my dad was.”

And I think I’ve finally come to terms with not worrying about filling his shoes exactly as he wore them. I wear my own shoes.

We go over a few more logistical questions the chiefs have and I adjourn the meeting, not wanting to waste more time. Dave waylays me afterward to ask about getting the AI from Montague Media or creating it ourselves, but my attention keeps shifting to Richard as he heads over to the buffet table and speaks to Emma.

What is he saying to her? He’s not trying to get her to make him coffee again, is he? Or worse, hitting on her? I mean, he was obviously interested in her before. And who wouldn’t be? She’s gorgeous and smart and... is she smiling at him?

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The punch to my gut nearly has my knees buckling before I shake it off. It was nothing. She's allowed to smile at people. Even if she'd seemed annoyed with him previously. What changed? Does she actually like jerky guys?

"Connor?"

Oh, crap. I refocus on Dave, who is patiently waiting for an answer while I have a mental freakout. "Uh, I'm still thinking it over, but strongly leaning toward creating it ourselves, however long it takes." This is one thing I'm in agreement with Dad on, at least. "Keep working on the project for now."

He nods and heads out, my gaze like a magnet back on Richard and Emma, but someone else gets my attention to ask about the exact expectations for performance management meetings with her subordinates, and I reposition myself so the buffet table is out of my line of sight, knowing I won't be able to focus if I see her smile again. If she touches his arm in that friendly way she does. If he dips in close and whispers something in her ear.

Okay, now I'm getting absurd. He wouldn't be so bold at work.

Haven't I done worse, though? I just went down on her in my office on Friday then let her give me a blow job.

I rub at the back of my neck, something settling in my gut I don't quite like, and wait until all the chiefs have cleared out of the room before I finally turn around and approach her. She's packing up the spread of food hardly anyone touched, so similar to a week ago.

But so much has changed since then.

“Need help?”

She glances over her shoulder, giving me a small smile. “I got it.”

I pick up a muffin, taking a half-hearted bite. I’m not even hungry. “What were you and Brigham talking about?”

She reaches with the tongs for the last of the danishes, then fits the lid over the box. “He actually apologized for the way he spoke to me before. Can you believe it?”

Oh. “That’s great.”

She starts in on the muffins next, setting the remaining ones back in the packaging. “Looks like whatever talk you had with him worked.”

Looks like it did. “And, uh, that’s all you talked about?”

She pauses, turning to face me. “Yeah. Why?”

I reach again for my neck, then realize I just rubbed it a minute ago. “You, well... You were smiling at him.”

She shrugs. “He did something nice.”

“Is the bare minimum of civility the standard for nice now?”

Her brows narrow, but she doesn’t seem mad exactly. “Shouldn’t you be glad he’s treating me with respect?”

“I—” I throw the rest of my muffin in the trash, all appetite gone. “Yes, of course I am.”

She sidles a little closer, pointing the tongs at me. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re acting jealous.”

I purse my lips, unable to refute her claim. Even though it’s ridiculous to feel that way to begin with. Even though I have every reason to trust her. Even though this thing between us can’t be real right now.

“I’m going to presume you’re projecting some kind of inner conflict onto my twenty-second conversation with Richard Brigham,” she says. “Because literally nothing happened.”

“I know it didn’t. I just—” I blow out a breath, feeling like an idiot.

She steps even closer, setting the tongs down before she lays a hand on my arm. “What is it?”

I look up at the ceiling, unable to voice the foolish thought. “Nothing.”

“Connor...”

God, how does she get me to spill all my secrets? “I wish I could make some kind of claim on you,” I murmur. “To let everyone know you’re mine. It’s primitive and barbaric and I hate that I can’t watch you interact with another man without a part of me wanting to go over there and pull you into my side to show you’re taken. Especially because he was clearly interested in you during last week’s meeting.”

Her face softens, but she waits until I’m finished speaking before she leans in to kiss me gently. “I don’t care what any other guy is thinking about me. They can lust all

they want because it doesn't change the fact that I'm only interested in you."

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My belly dips low at her confession, and I cup her chin, skimming my fingers along the smooth skin. “Say that again.”

Her tongue wets her top lip briefly. “I only want you.”

I groan as I take her mouth, needing to taste her, to connect with her for just a moment, glad she’s not offended at my train of thought, that she understands where I’m coming from.

A halting knock has me breaking away, gaze cutting to find Dave in the doorway, fist raised in mid-air. His mouth opens and closes once, then he whips around, disappearing.

“Shit.” I step back, clasping my hands behind my neck, and glance at Emma, her eyes wide.

How could I be so careless? I didn’t even shut the door.

“Do you need to...”

“Yeah.”

I race out of the room, catching him further down the hall, thankful there’s no one else to witness this. “I—”

“I didn’t see anything,” he says, holding his palms out in front of him.

My train of thought splinters, not that I even knew what I was going to say to begin with. A denial? A threat? A plea for silence? “I, uh, thank you.” Still, a weight of guilt settles over my shoulders. I never wanted to be this kind of boss. For my employees to see me this way. Especially someone I respect, like Dave.

He nods. “I worked for your father for a long time. I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

He continues on down the hall, but all I can do is blink as I watch him go. What the hell was that supposed to mean? What was Dad doing that Dave would need to keep secret? I wouldn’t put questionable business practices past him, but what if it was something like he just witnessed? Would Dad have had an affair at work?

And before or after Mom’s death?

No, it probably wasn’t that. Dad didn’t have time for stuff like that. He was all business all the time.

Unlike me.

I head back to the conference room, Emma crossing to meet me, her voice pitched low as she asks, “What happened?”

I shut the door behind me, not wanting to take any chances. “He’ll keep quiet.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, eyes still wide. “I’m sorry—”

“No. It was my fault.” Everything in me wants to reach out and comfort her, but that’s the last thing I should do right now. I need to reinstate boundaries at work. This can’t happen again. “I’m going back upstairs, okay?”

She nods, biting at her bottom lip.

“Everything’s fine,” I assure her. “We just have to be more careful here.”

“Okay.”

I smile at her, hoping it comes across as warm and encouraging, even as dread pools in my stomach. The thing with Dave could have easily turned south. And what if it had been someone else? Someone that wouldn’t keep silent? Or worse, wanted to blackmail me? What if Richard had come in and seen that right after I insisted me and Emma only had a professional relationship?

I leave before she can intuit anything from me, and head toward the elevators, needing to compose myself. Everything will be okay. We’re in the clear.

But I can’t help feeling like we’re on borrowed time, that it’ll only take one minor slip-up for something worse to come about.

The question is, how long will I continue to flirt with fire?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Connor

“I thought I might find you here.”

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I close my eyes briefly, half pleased she sought me out, half wishing she'd stayed away. It's not safe to be alone with her at work.

"I couldn't concentrate in my office." I'd tried for nearly an hour, but it just wasn't happening.

She joins me at the living room window in Dad's... No, my apartment. I have to start thinking of it as mine.

"I didn't get a chance to mention how good you were at the meeting. Everyone seemed to be on board with fewer meetings."

"What a legacy," I murmur. "The CEO who slashed meetings in half."

"Well, you have time to focus on bigger picture things now that you're not swamped with the day-to-day minutiae."

I release a long sigh. "Yep." I get that she's trying to be helpful, but I'm not in the mood.

She fiddles with the hem of her shirt, wrapping a loose thread around her forefinger.

"What do you think of the apartment? Different, huh?"

I turn to her, sticking my hands in my pockets. "You don't have to try and distract me or cheer me up or whatever."

She rolls her lips between her teeth, looking down at the ground. "You said Dave

wouldn't say anything, right?"

"Right."

"So I just don't want you to be upset over something that didn't even happen."

But it could have. There's no use in saying that aloud, though. She's perfectly aware.

"Come on, you need a distraction. How about I give you a tour of what me and Hannah came up with?"

I nod, resisting the urge to drag my feet as she leads me away, wanting to wallow for a while longer. But as she describes her plans to me, all warm, dark tones that are a one-eighty from the previous white, minimalist furniture, I find myself getting into it, enraptured by her enthusiasm more than anything else.

A cozy study in one of the smaller bedrooms. A green garden on the private terrace off the bedroom. Framed art throughout the place she knows I like from prior conversations.

My mood lifts listening to her, internally smiling at the way she gestures, the light in her eyes, the passion in her voice. Maybe I should let her move in here instead. She obviously cares about what she has planned. And she'd seemed so impressed that first day up here. Besides that, her house looked like it was in need of some major upgrades. Would she...

What am I thinking? If I'm worried about someone just seeing us together, there's no way I can move her in here.

She lightly touches my arm, bringing me back to the present, her expression kind even as it clearly shows she knows I wasn't fully paying attention. "Can I show you

something?”

She leads me to the bedroom closet, which I haven’t actually been in yet, and pulls a box from the top shelf. “What’s this?”

“Personal effects.”

I blink at her, taken aback. “What?”

She smooths her hand over the lid, my heart beating painfully as her fingers flirt with the edge of the box. “I had everything in the apartment put in storage for you to decide what to do with later. Except this. I meant to talk to you about it, but so many other things have been going on.”

That’s an understatement. “What’d he have worth keeping?”

“I didn’t realize what it was at first. And when I did, I closed it up. But it seems to be some of your mother’s effects.”

My hand grips the closet door frame, unprepared for that. “Can I…”

“Of course.” She takes off the lid and hands me the box, my gaze zeroing in on the silver-plated hairbrush she always kept at her vanity. God, how can a single item hold such strong nostalgia?

I take a seat on the ground, leaning against the wall as I dig out the next thing, a picture of my parents on their wedding day.

Emma kneels beside me, reading the back of the photograph. “Harold and Eileen. Nineteen eighty-nine.”

“You like those sleeves?”

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She moves to see it better, holding a hand over her mouth to contain a laugh. “One of the fashion trends that thankfully died out.”

“So that’s not how you’re doing Serena’s dress?”

She gives me a look, and I bust out laughing, the weight of getting caught earlier finally lifting.

“Not that your mom isn’t gorgeous in her own right, but dear God let those puffed sleeves and that beaded headband stay in the eighties.”

“I think you’re jealous.”

She smirks, settling in more comfortably next to me. “You caught me.”

“I can’t believe he saved this stuff.” I sift through the rest of the box, finding more photographs of me and my brothers as kids, a few notable event tickets, and even a few pieces of her jewelry. “Do you think he was actually nostalgic, or he chucked it in here and forgot about it?”

“Most of it was already in here. But the wedding photograph and one other was in his nightstand drawer.”

My brows raise. “Which one?”

She takes the box from me, searching through it until she finds a photo of us three boys and Mom at the beach, squinting into the camera.

“Was your dad taking the picture?”

I shake my head. “No. He was supposed to come, but had to work. Mom asked the nanny to take it.”

“You had a nanny?” She then holds up a hand, stopping me before I can reply. “Wait, never mind. Sometimes I forget who I’m talking to.”

“Come on, having a nanny isn’t that far out there.”

She gives me an exasperated sigh, making me chuckle. “Connor, you’re currently living in a suite at a five-star hotel. You’re a little out of touch with reality.”

I grin. “All right, fair enough.” I return the photo and close the lid, setting the box next to me. “I’ll have to show Gabriel and Archer this soon. I’m glad you didn’t put this in storage yet.”

Her hand lightly trails up my arm. “I figured you’d want to see it. To know he kept something close to him about family.”

Why were those in his nightstand drawer? Did he actually look at them? Trace the curves of our faces with his fingers? Wonder what that day at the beach would have been like if he’d shown up?

I won’t get any answers sitting here in this closet, though. And honestly, do I care as much about trying to figure out Dad as I did a few weeks ago? Sometimes it’s better to let sleeping dogs lie.

Or, in my case, dead fathers.

Emma’s hand continues to trail up and down my arm soothingly, but when she tries

to interlace her fingers with mine, I pull away. “I’m sorry, I can’t. Not after what happened this morning.”

Where a few days prior she would have pushed for more, this time she retreats, folding her hands in her lap.

“It’s not that I want to say no,” I tell her, needing to justify myself. “I’m not... rejecting you.”

“I know,” she murmurs, so softly I can barely hear her.

I stand, stepping out into the main area to make sure no one else is here, paranoid now someone will catch us, and then rejoin her, crouching again. “Will you come to my hotel tonight?” I whisper. “Just because we shouldn’t do anything at work doesn’t mean we can’t do it off the clock.”

She gives me a small smile, spreading her skirt out over her lap. “You have that gala. Angelina included it in that packet.”

Fuck. And it’s not like I can invite her. I don’t want the gossip sites inferring anything’s going on between us while she’s still my assistant. It’ll be hard enough when they find out later.

Assuming there is a later.

“Tomorrow night, then?”

“Tomorrow night,” she agrees.

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“And next week, after Vivian comes back...” I started to ask her on Saturday, and we got interrupted. “Would you want more?”

She studies me, her face uncharacteristically serious, enough that I began to sweat. What is she contemplating? “I don’t know what next week will hold,” she finally says. “But yes, I want more.”

I should be happy. She agreed to continue this relationship after she leaves here. But there’s something in her tone that’s worrying. “What’s happening next week?”

Those calloused fingers of hers twist in her lap, tugging on that loose thread again. “It’s nothing.” She says the words, but so unconvincingly, I’m not sure how she can utter them with a straight face.

“You were off about something this morning too. You said it was about your dad?”

One corner of her mouth tips up reluctantly. “What guy actually listens?” She looks down, watching her fingers twist repeatedly. “He was supposed to help us out with the mortgage this month and he didn’t. That’s all. But I’ll figure it out. I always do.”

“If you need—”

“No. It’s not anything for you to worry about.” She stands, brushing off her skirt. “I better get back downstairs, though. I have to fend off all those people who want meetings with you.”

She smiles again, more genuinely this time, and leaves me, the room empty without

her in it.

I have to return to my office too. If I'm attending this event tonight, I'll need to get everything done before then. And before that, I have to figure out a way to help Emma. She shouldn't be worrying about money. Not when I have more than I could ever use in a lifetime.

And after that, she'll be in my bed tomorrow night. The thought alone has my heart racing.

And this time, there's no holding back.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Emma

I rub at my temples, trying to ward off the forming headache. My eyes skim the page in front of me, words jumping out at me.

Carla Shepherd. Thirteen thousand dollars. Fourteen days.

I ignored the first bill that came in a couple of months ago for Mom's hospital stay in January. And then the second. And the third. They're obviously not forgetting. But I can't show this to Mom. She's been doing better the past few days trying out some of the doctor's recommendations. This will only set her back.

It already cost me an arm and a leg to transfer the utilities to my name, especially after I found out Dad hadn't paid the last two months and our power and water were about to be shut off soon. How am I going to pay for this too?

"Everything okay?"

I fold the bill in my hand, stuffing it in my desk drawer, and turn to Connor. “Yeah, of course.”

He eyes me carefully but takes me at my word, even as his gaze shifts to the drawer I just obviously hid something in. “I’ve got an errand for you.”

“Great.” Maybe my headache will retreat if I escape for a minute.

He hands me a slip of paper with an address on it, but I’m still not familiar enough with Manhattan addresses to recognize exactly where it is. “I need something picked up here. You can take my car.”

He can’t have it delivered? You know what? It’s fine. I’m paid either way.

He steps back as I stand, being careful not to get too close, my chest aching briefly having to stay this far away from him. I respected his wishes yesterday in his apartment when he said there can’t be anything between us at work anymore. I understand, I really do.

I just hate it.

He gives me a secretive smile as I round the desk, but stays silent as he returns to his office and shuts the door. What was that about?

Connor’s town car is waiting for me at the curb when I exit the building, and I sink into the buttery soft leather seats as the driver pulls into traffic. Closing my eyes, I take a moment to just relax, letting the worry about Mom’s hospital bills, about our home, about what I’m going to do for money in less than two weeks now when Vivian comes back all fade away. Let me not stress about it for however long this errand takes me, at least.

When the car stops, I find myself outside a boutique, and I have to make sure I'm at the right address before I step out. What would Connor need from here? There are only women's dresses in the storefront window.

The bell dings over the door as I enter, and like a shark circling her prey, a sales assistant approaches me, ready for her commission. "Miss Shepherd?" she asks.

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“Um, hi.” She knows who I am?

“Let’s look at you, hmm.” She gives me a once over, then turns around, heading to a display rack. What’s going on right now?

“Should I, uh, follow you?” I ask, stepping toward her cautiously.

“Yes, yes.” She beckons me forward, stopping at a silk red dress not too far off in design from the one I ruined. “From what the gentleman described on the phone, I believe this may be to your liking?”

I blink at her, confused. “I thought I was picking up something.”

“Right,” she says, still smiling. “A dress.”

I hold up a finger. “Could you give me a moment?”

“Of course. I’ll be by the register if you need me.”

I pull out my phone and text Connor.

Me: You didn’t.

Connor: I said I’d buy you a new one. Get whatever you want and use the company card. You deserve it.

I bite my lip, keeping my grin contained. He set this up for me?

I stroke the silky fabric, imagining it on me, the way it'll hug my curves, the bottom gently twirling around my legs. Will Connor's eyes widen when he sees me in this?

I check that it's my size and carry it over to the register. "Is it okay if I try this on?"

"Fitting rooms are right over here, hon," she calls out, already walking toward the door where a new customer has walked in.

I take it in, closing the curtain behind me, and undress, wishing I had my shapewear with me to tighten everything up. I slip the dress on, contorting my arms to get the back zipper pulled up, and survey myself in the three-way mirror. Not bad, if I do say so myself.

Pulling out my phone, I snap a quick picture on impulse and send it to Connor, asking what he thinks. I blush a moment later as I read his response.

Connor:Are you going to wear that for me tonight?

His invitation to his hotel room hasn't been far from my mind since he extended it yesterday.

Me:Maybe...

It's okay to flirt over text, right? I'm not technically in the office. And it's not in person. I'd felt awful enough pushing to do stuff at work and then getting caught like that by Dave.

Connor:I can't wait to take it off you.

All right, definitely okay to flirt.

“Can I help with anything?” the sales associate asks from outside the fitting room.

My head jerks up, breaking the fantasy already forming in my mind about me, him, and this dress. “No, I’m good.”

I change back into my shirt and skirt, unable to keep the goofy grin off my face. Connor wants to see me in this dress. Wants to peel it off me, in fact.

“How’d it fit?” she asks as I exit.

“Great.” Connor seemed to enjoy it, at least.

“Will you be purchasing it today?”

I hesitate for a moment. I never even checked the price tag and a dress like that can’t come cheap.

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But Connor offered to pay for it. And to be fair, he did spill champagne on the last one.

“I’ll get it,” I blurt, handing it over.

“Going somewhere fancy?” she asks, scanning the barcode on the tag.

“Oh, no. I...” I trail off, realizing I have nowhere to wear this. Angelina all but forbade me from attending anything else with Connor for fear it would set off the gossip sites again.

And now that I think about it, this is like what Dad used to do with Mom—buy her pretty things to pacify her when she was mad they couldn’t go out together. His wife might see him, after all.

But in my case, Connor’s wife is his company. It’s the media. It’s the people that will think less of him if he crosses that line and appears to be having some kind of relationship with a subordinate.

Even though it was me that kept pushing for more.

No, no. This isn’t the same as my parents. He’s not bribing me. Distracting me with fancy things because he can’t truly be with me. He’s replacing something he damaged. He said he’d do that before we even got together.

“I just wanted a pretty dress,” I tell the woman, not knowing what else to say.

“Well, I hope you find somewhere special to wear it.” She smiles at me, but I can’t quite return it, my mood soured now after remembering my parents.

I ride back to the office and carefully stow the garment bag behind my desk, looking up at Connor as he exits his office to join me.

“That it?” He motions to the bag.

“Mmm-hmm.” I turn on my computer and settle in, bringing up my email.

“What else did you get?”

I busy myself, starting a reply to Angelina about Connor’s availability for a press conference in a few weeks. “Nothing.”

“I offered you a new wardrobe.”

I pause in my typing, staring down at the keyboard as I formulate a response. “I just didn’t feel comfortable taking more.”

“Money’s not an issue. You can use whatever.”

“I appreciate it. But, to be honest, it reminded me of my parents a bit. And I don’t want to be like my mom. Becoming dependent on money from a wealthier guy.” It’s already bad enough I still rely so heavily on my dad.

He’s silent for a moment, crossing his arms over his chest. “Okay. I only meant to help, not make you uncomfortable. I don’t want this to be an issue between us.”

The knot of tension in the center of my chest loosens. “I don’t either.”

He rubs at his jaw thoughtfully. “We had talked last week about you submitting a business plan to me. I’d potentially be an investor in your company. Is that something you’re still interested in? Now that things have... changed?”

I sigh, bracing my elbows on the desk as I massage my temples, the headache returned. “I don’t know. It’s definitely a conflict of interest.”

“It’s not a problem for me. If you need time to think about it, though, that’s fine.”

I nod, finally looking up at him, his steady gaze soothing me. It’d be crazy to deny myself the chance at an actual business out of some notion of high-minded principles. But like I said, I don’t want to be beholden to him. I don’t want money to tie us together so that I can’t escape, the way my mom has done.

And how can I even take his money when I’ve been deceiving him from the start? I need to confess.

No, I can’t do that. He’ll hate me if he finds out.

I hold back my groan, cutting off the mental war going on in my head. “Thank you for the dress. I really do love it.”

“You’re welcome. Are we—” He clears his throat, lowering his voice. “Are we still on for tonight?”

I smile at him, trying to convey how amazing he is. How much I value his patience, his thoughtfulness, his willingness to put up with my ridiculousness. “I’ll be wearing red.”

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The relief that crosses his face is palpable. “Tonight, then.”

I watch him go, that sinking sensation that’s become more and more common in the pit of my stomach returning. What am I going to do about what my dad wants? And how can I keep misleading Connor about who I really am?

I push it to the back of my mind, focusing on work instead. I still have time to figure something out. Still have time to make things right on both ends.

At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Emma

Ignore the stares from others in the lobby as I head toward the hotel’s elevators, wishing I had thrown on a trench coat or something over this dress. Not that I own a trench coat, but still. I’m attracting too much attention when this is supposed to be a secret meeting. At least they have no idea where I’m going.

My belly dips low in anticipation as I board the elevator, hitting the button for his floor. Regardless of any inner turmoil I’ve been experiencing lately, there’s no way I’d miss tonight. When it comes down to it, I want Connor, and he wants me.

As the doors close, my reflection stares back at me. Curls contained in a loose topknot. More makeup than I usually wear to match the mood of the dress. And definitely more skin exposed than normal, but tonight’s a special occasion.

And soon, I won't have anything on at all.

I get off on the fifty-first floor, taking deep breaths to calm my racing heart. Why am I so nervous? It's just Connor. We've been intimate before.

But not like this. Not knowing we'll likely go further tonight than we have previously. That I'll finally know all of him.

I knock on the door, his smile as he opens it calming the butterflies in my stomach. "Hi."

"Hi."

He takes my hand, drawing me into the room, the kiss he lays on my lips long and slow, nothing frantic about it this time. We have all night.

He leans back, taking his fill of me. "You look incredible."

I twirl for him, the dress flaring out around my legs. "Better in person?"

His palms settle on my waist, hot through the silk. "Absolutely. Although I won't say no to any more pictures from you."

I bite my lip, grinning down at the ground. "I've never sent pics to a guy."

"No?" He draws me closer, my breasts brushing his chest. "I'll send some to you if you want. To make it fair."

I playfully thump his arm. "No, you won't. Angelina would kill you."

"Yeah, she would." He leans in, smiling against my neck as he leaves a hot kiss there.

“You can look all you want tonight, though.”

My belly jumps. So he definitely plans on getting naked, then. “Are we, um... Do you plan on...” Some seductress I am. I can’t even ask him if he wants to sleep with me.

“We’ll do whatever you’re comfortable with,” he murmurs, catching my drift. He presses another kiss to my neck, my toes curling in delight. “Anything you want.”

I arch, giving him more room to work with. “So am I in control again?”

He moves up further, his lips behind the shell of my ear now, goosebumps racing across my skin. “I thought we could share it tonight.”

“And, um, what do you plan on doing when it’s your turn?” He’s practically sending me into a stupor with how good that feels.

“I’ll worship you.” The low tone of his voice sends another wave of shivers through me. Can we get started on the worshipping right now?

I groan, finding his lips to kiss him. Slow, drugging kisses where we explore each other’s mouths, his hands unhurriedly roaming my curves, my arms intertwined over his shoulders, loving the strength just under my fingertips.

I press against him, needing that contact, his hard body everything I’ve been dreaming of. The spark between us flares, burning bright as he deepens the kiss, all reservations about misleading him disappearing as I simply experience this moment. I want this man. Respect him. Admire him. And if I let myself, I know I could easily fall in love with him.

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Not that I'm halfway there already.

He opens his mouth, tongue warm against mine, and I involuntarily give a shaky moan, my fingers tightening on his shoulders.

"Do that again," he says, his palms on my ass now, squeezing gently.

"What, this?" I scratch my nails lightly along his upper back and the nape of his neck, pleased as he leans into my touch. "You like that?"

"More than you know."

I softly scrape my nails over his scalp next, sifting through his thick hair, his pleasure evident in the way his grip on me tightens, the way he positions me even closer, his hard dick nestled along my core.

"Can we go to the bedroom?" I ask, not overthinking it. I'm going with my gut tonight.

"God, yes."

He leads me to the luxury suite's bedroom, moonlight filtering in through the open curtains to clearly see him by. This high up in the building, there's no one to spy on us. A private sanctuary to finally relax in.

He turns me toward him, on me again as he undoes my topknot to let my hair fall in waves down my back, cupping my jaw as he kisses me.

I make quick work of the buttons on his dress shirt, the expensive fabric soft and luxurious. His tie and jacket are already gone, probably the first things he took off when he got home, and as I slip his shirt off, I finally have a full view of that delicious body covered by suits for far too long.

Broad shoulders. Defined pecs. Flat abs. And a dark trail along his lower stomach heading due south, my fingers itching to follow it.

“I didn’t know you had time to work out.” I can’t help staring at him, wishing we could employ some kind of casual shirtless day in the office.

“I used to. Not so much in the last few weeks. But I have a feeling I’ll be getting a workout tonight.”

I grin at him, running my hands over his body, lovingly tracing those muscles. “Definitely.”

His hand flirts with the left strap of my dress, sliding it down, the kiss he presses to my bare shoulder making my breath catch. His lips trail down over my collarbone, my chest, right to the edge of the bodice. I reach up to pull the last bit of fabric down, my bra cup coming down with it, wanting his mouth on me. He gladly complies, his lips like heaven as they whisper over the sensitive area.

“I’ve been looking forward to this all day,” he murmurs, gently lapping at me now, his big palm shaping my breasts, pulling down the other strap and bra cup to give equal attention.

I make an unintelligible sound, cupping the back of his head, keeping him close as his tongue works wonders, desire hot within me. I’ve never felt this kind of craving for anyone else, never had someone affect me like this. Want. Need. Passion. It all mixes together in a deadly cocktail I lose myself to, wanting nothing other than his touch.

His mouth. Him.

“More,” I mumble, reaching behind me to unzip my dress. He sucks me harder as I bare more of myself to him. “Just like that.”

He maneuvers us to the bed, laying me down, his big frame covering me as he skillfully uses his lips and tongue, my lower body squirming with the need for relief. I kick off my heels, spreading my legs wider to accommodate him, his dick hitting exactly where I want it to, even through our clothing.

He groans, grinding into me, the pressure incredible. “I can’t wait to fuck you.”

His words send a zing through me, ramping me up. “I thought you were worshipping me,” I tease, tilting my hips up to more fully press against him.

“Hmm, that’s right.”

He lifts away, the loss of him turning me cold, but his hands are back soon, unzipping my dress the rest of the way, sliding the silk off along with my bra until I’m only in my panties.

“God, you’re so gorgeous. I’m the luckiest bastard in the world.”

No, I’m the luckiest bastard. Literally.

He scoots to the end of the bed, tenderly kissing my ankle, then up to my calf, my knee, my inner thigh, the wicked grin on his lips nearly undoing me.

“You ready for my tongue?”

I nod, unable to help my blatant eagerness, relaxing into the mattress as he peels my

underwear off, the lust in his gaze like nothing I've ever experienced. He settles in, hands spreading my thighs wider, opening me further to him as he gives a deep lick to my pussy. My back bows at how amazing it feels.

"Oh, God," I shout, one arm coming up to cover my eyes as the other grips the bedsheets.

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He chuckles low, teasing me with soft kisses right where I need him before giving another long lick, the flat of his tongue hitting my clit at the end.

He builds me up, adding first one finger, then a second to the mix, pumping in and out with care as he continues to use his tongue, both pacifying and setting me aflame. I make the mistake of looking down, the sight of his dark head bobbing, face set in concentration, sending a rush of arousal through me, body quivering with anticipation for what's sure to come soon.

I bring my hand down, running my fingers through his soft locks, and he looks up at me, the contact electric.

"I'm close," I whisper, hips bucking as he concentrates on my clit.

He makes a sound of acknowledgment, doubling down on his efforts, my thighs tensing as waves crash over me, small at first and growing higher, until I'm drowning in sensation. He keeps me grounded, sucking on me hard as I moan loudly, letting him have his way with me as the tension finally releases and he backs off, pressing kisses to my inner thighs. My muscles quiver and I tug him up, kissing him tenderly, trying to show him with my kiss just how amazing that was.

"I want to do that every night," he murmurs against my lips. "Hear you moan for me. Watch you come like that. You're so fucking sexy."

I grin, my brain still in a fog as I curl a leg around his hip, drawing him in closer. "Sounds like a good deal to me."

He brushes my hair back from my face, tenderness in his gaze. “I’ve got more in store for you too.”

“Mmm. Show me.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Emma

He moves off the bed, undoing his belt buckle and unzipping his fly, pants and boxers coming off in quick succession. I get a peek of his glorious ass as he bends over the nightstand drawer and opens a new box of condoms. He rolls one on, the action mesmerizing. “Do you need time to recover?”

I shake my head, gaze glued to his nude body. I had no idea he looked so good under those suits.

He covers me once more, his cock brushing my thigh, and I tense all over, weirdly rigid. Okay, let’s try that again. I open my legs wide, inviting him closer, but as he nudges against my core, my nails grip his sides like talons.

He retreats, concern on his face as he asks, “You okay?”

I nod, trying to shake off this strange energy stealing over me. “Yeah, of course.”

He tries once more, but as his cock pushes in, I let out a gasp. And not the sexy kind. More like something’s seriously wrong.

“Sorry.” I press the heels of my palms into my eyes, my lips trembling for some reason. “I’m not sure what’s going on with me.”

He drops to one elbow, other hand warm on my midriff. “Do you still want to do this? We don’t have to—”

“I want this.” My voice is firm, but it doesn’t change that something is holding me back. “I...” I shut my eyes, not wanting to look at him as a thought works through my brain, not fully conscious till just now. Under the haze of passion, I wasn’t letting myself work through my emotions. “I think a part of me is worried you’ll regret this,” I whisper, not realizing I was even concerned about that. And not only because I haven’t admitted who I am. More because of his previous stance on the situation.

He doesn’t immediately deny the idea, instead calmly asking, “Why do you think that?”

I fidget with the edge of the sheet. “Well, you spent so much time saying before that you’d never sleep with someone you employ. That you didn’t want this to happen. And if we do this, it can’t be undone.” I peek at him, trying to gauge his reaction, unprepared for the gentleness in his gaze.

“If this was only lust, some itch I wanted to scratch, we wouldn’t be here right now.” His palm travels up my body, cupping my cheek, the tenseness in my muscles relaxing. “But this is more than that. I don’t want to deny this connection between us any longer.” He pauses, seeming to struggle with his words for a moment before he murmurs, “I’m falling in love with you, Emma.”

Tears pool in my eyes, slipping down my cheeks before I can stop them, my heart expanding, even as that ever-present guilt weighs me down further. Now should be the time I confess. I should tell him everything, lay it all out and see how he reacts.

Watch his gaze shutter, recoiling from me as he realizes I’ve been untruthful.

I can’t ruin this. Not this perfect, beautiful moment I’ve dreamt about. The man of my

dreams telling me he loves me.

“I feel the same way,” I choke out, my words completely honest even if it’s not what I should be saying.

The joy on his face is worth the price of keeping my secret a little longer, and I wipe my happy tears away, returning his embrace, his powerful arms securing me to him.

“Don’t think for a minute I’ll ever regret this,” he whispers in my ear. “I’m committed to this. To us.”

I squeeze my eyes tight, wishing beyond hope his declaration holds true in the future. “I am too. And I just want you to know, I—” I swallow hard, letting out a shaky breath. “No matter what happens, I love you.”

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“Nothing’s going to happen,” he assures me, leaning back so he can see my face. “We may have to lie low for a while, especially until Vivian returns, but we’ll figure it all out. Leave everything to me, okay?”

I nod, trusting in him, needing to believe it’ll all turn out as he kisses me again, the fire between us burning hot, my body unresisting this time as he slips in, giving me a minute to adjust to his size until he’s fully inside me.

“You okay?” He sucks in a breath, holding himself back until I tell him otherwise.

I clench my inner muscles, the rapture that briefly crosses his face making me smile. “I’m ready for you.”

He nods, drawing out slowly and back in, the movement gradually quickening as he works us both up. My thighs widen to make more room for him, his hips shifting to sink a little deeper, both of us groaning as he hits a spot that makes my toes curl.

My God, does he have any idea how sexy he is right now making those noises low in my ear like that? Would it be weird if I asked him to do that all the time?

I tug his head down to kiss me, his lips moving masterfully over mine, that ball of desire deep within my belly growing hotter, wanting release again.

“Faster,” I murmur, the way I’ve said to him before, needing everything he has to give me.

He quickens his thrusts, gripping my hip for leverage, the blue of his eyes burning

bright as he leans back to watch me. “You like it when I fuck you hard?”

Excitement races through me at his dirty words. “Yes.”

“Tell me you like it.”

I change the angle of my hips, increasing the friction on my still sensitive clit. “I love it when you fuck me hard, Connor.”

“Oh, God.” He groans again, the sound once more sending a rush of arousal through me. “More. Tell me more.”

So he likes me talking dirty too? “I love it when you eat me out. Seeing your face between my thighs is insanely hot.”

His breaths get choppy, concentration stealing over him as he pumps in and out even faster.

“And I love it when you suck and play with my nipples. You know exactly what to do to get me going.”

His eyes squeeze shut, bracing his hands on either side of my head on the mattress. “What else?”

“I love when you finger me. You make my pussy so wet sliding in and out of me like that.”

I reach up and cup his face, my heart swelling at the way he instinctively leans into my touch. “And I love you, Connor. So much it hurts to think about.” In more ways than he knows.

That's the one that seems to do the trick, his hips going jerky as he comes, groaning low, goosebumps prickling over me at the need in his voice.

He kisses me feverishly afterward, withdrawing only to replace his cock with two fingers. "Will you come again for me?" he asks silkily, my hips arching off the bed with how good it feels. "Your pussy's so wet. I know you're close."

He bends his head down, finding my nipple and sucking roughly, the action hurtling me toward the edge.

I grip his hair, keeping him there as I fall, moaning his name, wishing this could last forever. That the real world wouldn't come back just yet. The two of us could stay in this private bubble, unaffected by our circumstances, our expectations, what others demand us to be.

Wishing that the love we confessed to one another would make the other issues go away instead of complicating them further.

His kiss brings me back to the present, and I take a moment to fully savor it. The pressure of his lips. His warm, minty breath. The way he cradles my jaw, sweeping a thumb over my cheek.

"I love you," he whispers, waves of emotion running through me at his simple words.

Comfort.

Acceptance.

Guilt.

No, no guilt allowed tonight. Not after what we just shared.

“I love you too.”

He smiles, eyes crinkling at the corners. “God, you’re amazing.” He leans in again, kissing me quick on the lips. “Give me a sec.”

He heads into the bathroom, my gaze wandering around the bedroom. I turn on the bedside lamp next to me, pausing to sniff the fresh-cut flowers on the nightstand, and search for my panties in the depths of the tangled sheets, discovering them crumpled in the corner of the enormous bed.

I stand and pull them on, finding my bra flung across the room. I pick up my dress off the floor, holding it up to shake out the wrinkles the best I can, and turn as the bathroom door opens, taking in Connor’s glorious form once more. It’s criminal for one man to look that good naked.

He strides over, wrapping me in his arms, my body relaxing into his embrace. “Don’t tell me we’re getting dressed.”

“I need to get home.”

“Really? Already?”

“Yeah, I have to get up early for work. My boss is a real hardass.”

His chest rumbles with laughter and he leans back to look at me, keeping his hands around my waist. “I think he’d cut you a little slack if you were late. Especially after tonight.” He angles in to nibble at my neck, a thrill running through me despite

everything we just did. “You could even stay the night if you wanted...”

The idea is tempting. But probably more of a headache than it’s worth. “I didn’t bring anything for that. Toothbrush, face wash, pajamas—”

“I can get any of that sent up from the front desk. And you definitely don’t need any pajamas.”

His hands move playfully down to my ass, squeezing me, and I laugh. “Next time, okay?”

“I’m holding you to that,” he murmurs. “I want to wake up with you in my arms.”

My heart melts. “You will. Soon.”

I step away, shimmying my dress on, and present my back for him to zip up. He does so achingly slow, leaving a trail of kisses, the beginnings of arousal stirring in me.

Oh, and he knows exactly what he’s doing too, from the sly smile on his face as I turn around.

I slip on my shoes and fix my hair in the bathroom mirror before heading into the sitting area, finding him dressed too in casual wear.

“One last kiss,” he says, stopping me before I get to the door, bringing me in close, his lips sweet as he tries to persuade me to stay. And though the idea is exhilarating, I’m not ready yet. I need to come up with a plan where I can fully be with him. No secrets between us, nothing hanging over my head. Tonight was amazing, but I have to figure out a long-term solution.

“You’re incorrigible,” I whisper, lingering a minute longer.

“Insatiable. I can’t get enough of you.”

“Should I come over again tomorrow night?”

“Yes,” he replies immediately.

I bite my lip to contain my smile, still not used to being this free with him. Despite everything we’ve already done. Despite us admitting how we really feel. The sensation is heady, the path of possibility clear. This could actually work.

I open the door, barely across the threshold before he grabs my hand, turning me to kiss me deeply again. “Okay, this is the last kiss,” he promises. “I need everything I can get to tide me over till tomorrow night.”

I twine my arms around his neck, grinning like a fool against his lips. “It’ll be here before you know it.”

The sound of a door closing further down the hall has me pulling away, not wanting to get caught. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” he whispers, gaze full of love.

I turn and sigh, floating on a cloud toward the elevators. He loves me. This unbelievably amazing man actually loves me.

Or the idea of me, at least. He doesn’t know the whole truth, but he will.

I resolve myself to telling him tomorrow, to making things right between us. He’ll understand what I was up against, how I didn’t have much of a choice, and then we’ll be together. Equal. Partners in this scary adventure of navigating a relationship amid everything working against us.

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But we'll make it. I have to have faith we will.

There's no other alternative.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Connor

I zip through the last unread email of the morning, satisfaction running through me as the number next to my inbox goes down to zero. And with only two meetings planned for the day, I have plenty of time to study the specs Product Development sent me, rather than skimming over them during my lunch break like I had to previously. Before Emma convinced me to take a chance and do things my way. I finally have some breathing room. And I owe it all to her.

God, last night had been amazing. The way she'd responded to me had been a fantasy come to life.

It was risky saying something so soon about love, but I hadn't been able to hold it in. Not after hearing her worry that I might regret doing anything with her. I'm past all that. She's taken root within me, burrowed into my heart.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Knowing we're on the same page, that she's falling for me too... A shit-eating grin crosses my face as my chest glows with warmth. So this is what it's like to be in love. What my brothers must feel like all the time. It's nice to finally join the club.

My office door opens abruptly, Emma there with narrowed brows, a single piece of paper clutched in her fist. Okay, not what I was expecting our first interaction since last night to be like. I thought maybe we'd smile secretively at one another, brush our hands together in passing. I admit, the idea of having a secret relationship with no one around us the wiser is a bit thrilling.

She shuts the door behind her, the click of the lock audible. "Did you do this?" She holds up the paper, but I can't read it from this distance.

"Do... what?" My heart's in my throat, not sure if she's angry, upset, or confused. Possibly all three, from the looks of it.

She strides over, smoothing out the wrinkles before handing it to me. "Did you pay my mom's hospital bill?"

Oh, that. "I, um—" I set the paper on the desk and rub at the back of my neck, not that it helps any. "Yes," I admit. "But it was before you'd said anything about money."

Her hands spread wide in a helpless gesture. "How'd you know about this?"

I sigh, knowing this next part doesn't reflect well on me, even if my intentions were good. "You were acting weird yesterday when I came out of my office and you crammed that paper in your drawer. When you left to go get your dress, I just wanted to make sure it wasn't anything serious."

"Connor, that was thirteen thousand dollars."

Does she have any concept of how little that is to me? My net worth fluctuates by millions on a daily basis. "It's not a big deal."

“It’s a big deal. That bill has been hanging over my head for months and you just—” She swipes her arm out dramatically. “Wiped it clear without even flinching. This would take me years to pay off.”

“You shouldn’t have to worry about stuff like that. Not when I can help.”

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, tears pool in her eyes. “I don’t want to constantly feel indebted to you.”

I stand, crossing over to her, taking her in my arms even after my vow the other day to not touch her at work anymore. At any rate, the door is locked. “You don’t owe me anything if I choose to do something like that for you. It was a gift. No strings attached.”

“There are always strings,” she murmurs against my chest. At least she’s not pushing me away.

“I’m serious. I expect nothing in return. I was just trying to help.” I rub soft circles on her back, soothing her. “And now that I know money’s an issue, I won’t do anything without your permission again. But you have to realize, if we’re going to be together, you have to get used to me spending money on you. I want to spoil you.”

She shakes her head, stepping away even as she reaches for my hands. “I don’t deserve it.”

“Of course you do. I love you.”

Her bottom lip trembles. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

“Okay.” Why does she sound so solemn?

She swallows, casting her head down. “When I started working here, I—”

My desk phone rings, startling both of us, and she stops what she was saying, letting go of my hands to wring hers together in front of her.

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“Here. I’ll get rid of them.” I pick up the receiver and drop it, silencing it. “You can keep going.”

She nods, still staring at the phone. “I, um—”

My cell rings next, and I groan as I pull it out of my pocket and look at the display. “It’s Angelina. She must’ve been the one calling.” And from what I’ve found, she doesn’t respond well to no. “Would you mind waiting a minute?”

“Yeah, sure.”

She drops in one of the guest chairs as I answer my phone, Angelina skipping any pleasantries to bluntly ask me, “Have you seen the photos?”

I sigh, sinking into my own chair. I can just imagine the PR crisis she has on the horizon now. “No. What happened?”

“You happened. You and Emma making out outside your hotel room last night.”

Ice spreads through my veins. “What?”

Emma straightens in her seat, taking notice of my tone, and gives me a questioning look. I motion her over, jiggling my mouse to wake up the computer, and open a new tab, typing in the first thing I can think of.

Connor Bishop kissing

She looks in alarm at me, then clasps her hand over her mouth as the search page loads, displaying images of the two of us outside my doorway last night, our profiles clearly visible as we lock lips. There's no mistaking it's her in that red dress, especially since it's so similar to her other one from the benefit.

Fuck. Just what we need.

"Are you looking at it?" Angelina asks in my ear.

"Yes." What else can I say? It's not like I can deny it. There's photographic evidence right there for anyone to see.

"I'm not going to lecture you, if that's what you're afraid of. But we have to respond soon. How do you want me to spin it?"

I glance at Emma, her face crestfallen.

"Let me call you back. Ten minutes tops."

I hang up, reaching out to pull her in my lap. No use staying away from her now if the cat's out of the bag. "We'll figure this out."

She inhales shakily. "This is exactly what you didn't want. I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault. I was the one who kissed you. I should've been thinking more clearly."

"Who do you think it was?"

I shrug, unsure how we would even go about finding something like that out. Maybe the hotel has security footage I could view? "Another guest, probably. It's a public

floor. Anyone can be there.”

“I heard a door close last night. Right after we kissed. But I don’t know which one.”

I let out a long breath, wrapping my arm tighter around her midsection. “Let’s see what the damage is.”

I click on the first search result, an article from some gossip rag popping up.

“Oh my God, that’s Tiffany,” Emma exclaims, pointing at the screen.

“What?” Who’s Tiffany?

“The woman who did your interview last week. I recognize her name from the business card she gave me. Is she stalking you or something?”

Great. The paparazzi are on the hunt.

I scroll down a little, the title catching me off guard. Connor Bishop’s Newest Flame—Who She Is and Her Ties to the Business World.

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“Oh, no. I didn’t want them to drag you into this.”

“It’s fine,” she says distractedly, reading the article. “It was bound to happen at some point.”

She’s right. It really was. I was just hoping it would be a while from now. Once Vivian was back and Emma was unattached from Bishop Industries.

I skim the screen, realizing Tiffany did some serious digging. Emma’s age, where she went to school, even her Etsy shop. Does the woman have no shame? What a complete invasion of privacy. How’d she find this stuff out so quickly? Those photos were taken last night.

But it’s not till Greg Montague’s name jumps out at me that I seriously take notice. Emma seems to reach that part at the same time, her body stiffening on my lap.

“Connor, I—”

“Hold on.” I finish reading the paragraph, more confused than ever. “It says a public records search revealed the home you live in is owned by Greg Montague.”

She’s silent, hands moving to grip my arm, still around her waist.

“Is he your landlord or something?” Wait. That doesn’t make sense. “No, you said you didn’t know who he was.” Back when she had first mentioned finding files about the buyout.

“That’s what I started to tell you earlier,” she whispers, clutching my arm tightly. “He’s my dad.”

A faint ringing sounds in my ear, but it’s not a phone this time. It’s the room going out of focus for a moment. “What?”

“I wanted to tell you—”

I lurch out of the chair, tumbling her off my lap. “You lied to me?”

She turns around, her face splotchy, twin spots of bright red on her cheeks and the rest leached of color. “I can explain. And I should have said something before now, yes—”

“You acted like you didn’t know him.” And I’d completely believed her, no reason to doubt anything she’d claimed.

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“You said I should buy his company.” Twice, if I remember right. The second time just after we...

My stomach reels. She wouldn’t have... Is it possible she only started things up with me to ask about her Dad’s company? Was it all a lie?

“I didn’t have a choice,” she pleads. “He made me.”

He made her? What the hell is that supposed to mean?

I stumble back, unsure of what’s happening right now. “How could you not say something? How much did you lie about?”

She steps closer, reaching for me. “Connor, I’m still the same person. This doesn’t have to change anything.”

Doesn’t have to change anything? I don’t even know who she is anymore. “Were you working for your dad the whole time or something?”

She crosses her arms over her chest, hunching into herself. “I already decided I wouldn’t ask you about Montague Media again. It was a stupid mistake and I’m sorry. I never wanted to deceive you but my back was up against a wall.”

I stare at her, unsure if I’m really seeing her, if this whole thing isn’t a bad dream. “I think you should leave.”

A single tear trails down her cheek, and she hastily brushes it away. “Can we please talk this through? I promise I was going to tell you everything. I was trying to before Angelina called. And I don’t want to leave things like this between us.”

I run a hand through my hair, gripping the strands till it aches. “I can’t look at you right now.”

She lets out a hiccuping sob, my barb hitting its target. And even though I knew it would hurt, I still don’t expect the pain that flares in my own chest.

“Am I fired?” she whispers, staring down at her shoes.

She’s only here for a week and a half longer. Maybe Vivian will come back early if I beg. “I think that’s for the best.”

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I turn away so I can't see her response, afraid it'll sway me. Who is she? How did this even happen?

"Connor—"

"I trusted you," I blurt out, squeezing my eyes shut. "I—I loved you. But you apparently had your own agenda. How can I believe anything else you say right now?"

There's another quiet sob, and a moment later the door lock clicks and she exits, the room silent.

I curl my fists, unsure how to even begin processing this. One day I'm declaring my love and the next I'm unable to look at her? Was anything between us real?

I sit back down, immediately sending out emails to the two people I have meetings with to cancel them, knowing I won't be able to concentrate today. How did this even happen? How did Greg...

I grip the edge of my desk. If Emma is Montague's daughter, that means she's also Serena's sister. Did Serena know? Did Archer?

I dial Archer immediately, not thinking it through, only concerned with uncovering the truth.

"Did you know?" I ask him as soon as he answers. "About Emma?"

“Know what?” he asks, annoyance in his tone at my abruptness.

“That she’s Serena’s sister. Half-sister, I guess.”

There’s silence, long enough that I fear the call dropped, then Archer’s voice, low as he says, “She’s what?”

Relief courses through me. He didn’t know. If he was hiding this from me too, I can’t say for sure what I’d do. “She’s Greg Montague’s daughter. I just found out.” I relay the pertinent details, leaving out the bit about falling in love with her and now feeling utterly betrayed.

“Holy shit,” he murmurs. “There was something I couldn’t pinpoint before. The eyes. That’s why Gabriel kept going on about the eyes.”

That’s right. At the wedding venue.

Oh, God. Emma’s still making Serena’s wedding dress. “Will you tell her? Serena?”

“Yeah. I can’t keep this from her. I’ll wait till she gets home from work, though. This is, uh... Well, it’s kind of crazy.”

“It is.”

“And you had no idea?”

“None.” Why would I? It’s the last thing I expected.

“Maybe Serena can get some more answers out of her. Find out why she did it.”

“I don’t care why she did it. She lied to me.”

I regret the outburst as soon as I make it. Archer's always been a hawk, picking up on the tiniest detail.

"Sounds like it's personal for you."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You're the one who called me."

Why does he have to be so damn sensible? "I'll talk to you about it later, okay? I've got things to figure out." Like begging Vivian to cut her time off short.

He clears his throat softly. "Well, I'm here if you need me. I know I always wasn't... available over the years. But you helped me out a lot last month in the Philippines and I want to return the favor if I can."

Damn. Why'd he have to put it like that? "Thanks. But I just need to think this through by myself for a bit."

"Call me if you want to talk. I mean that seriously."

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I nod, not that he can see me, and hang up, staring at the phone for who knows how long. I swallow heavily, something thick and hot wedged in my throat that won't go away. My eyes burn, but I refuse to touch them, afraid it might let that unidentifiable something loose.

What the hell am I going to do?

Chapter Thirty

Emma

“What are you doing home so early?”

I toss my purse on the entryway table, not caring that it completely misses and lands on the floor. That about sums up my day. My life, actually.

“I got fired.”

Mom sits up from her spot on the couch, turning off the game show she was watching, and gives me a once-over. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks.”

I'd caught sight of myself in the polished elevator doors on the ride down at Bishop Tower—the splotchy face and raccoon eyes. But I couldn't bring myself to care enough to do anything about it. At least I'd scored a seat on the subway, no questions asked, as others steered clear of me.

“Come here.” She folds her arms out wide, and I reluctantly join her, afraid to get too comfortable. I don’t deserve soothing. I seriously messed up. I let this whole thing go on too long, let myself get too close. I should have come clean to him earlier if I actually loved him. And now he found out about me in the worst possible way. Some jerkwad reporter wasn’t supposed to do it.

She rubs my back, but all I can think of is Connor doing the same not an hour ago trying to make me feel better about the money issue. And even with that, he shouldn’t have had to comfort me for paying off my mom’s hospital bill. He did it with good intentions, not as a way to control or placate me.

“Well, call up your dad and ask him to spot us until you can find something else and my disability gets approved.”

“He won’t.” I doubt he’ll be that forgiving. Not after everything he’s said previously. “Mom... I think he’s going to kick us out.”

She stops rubbing my back, her spine stiffening. “He wouldn’t do that. I’ve lived here for twenty-five years. He bought this house for me when I was pregnant with you.”

“Is your name on the deed?”

“Well, no, but—” She stands, leaning on the arm of the couch for support. “What makes you think he’ll make us leave?”

I can’t tell her how he basically tried to pimp me out. It’ll destroy her. “He’s having financial problems. He needs to sell this house.”

She grips her forehead, staring down at her feet. “Greg has plenty of money. It can’t be that bad.”

Across the room, my phone rings in my purse, my stomach filling with dread as I get up to answer it. Sure, it could be anyone calling. But somehow, I know exactly who's on the other end.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Why'd you let yourself get caught like that?” he yells. “Huh? What were you thinking?” He must have seen the pictures online, then.

I walk into my room, silent, distancing myself from Mom, not wanting her more upset.

“Now some wannabe journalist has connected you to me, Connor will get suspicious—”

“He knows,” I interrupt him. “And he fired me. He's not buying Montague Media.” Might as well lay it all out and save some time. No use in drawing this out.

And really, after losing Connor's trust like that, his love, how can anything Dad has to say be worse? I'm already mentally prepared for him to make good on his threats.

“How the fuck could you do this to me?” he thunders after a moment. “After all I've given—”

I set the phone down, gathering up a few loose threads on my desk, waiting him out. What's the point in listening to him rant for who knows how long?

When it seems like he's slowed down, I pick it back up. “So what are you going to do?” I ask, wanting an answer already. Put me out of my misery worrying about what'll happen. “Can me and mom stay in the house at least till we find somewhere else?” There's no point in pleading for his forgiveness. I'm past caring.

“You’re not going to apologize? You screwed up, Emma.”

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“No, you screwed up.” I’m so sick of having to bite my tongue around him. What’s the purpose of keeping the peace any longer? It’s not like we ever had an actual father/daughter relationship I care about saving. “You got yourself in this mess and set me an impossible task to fix it. How can you blame me?”

“It’s not that hard to get someone to buy a company. Especially since you’re sleeping with him for real, apparently.”

Well, not anymore. Connor made that clear.

My throat tightens, tears pricking my eyes before I will them away. “You made me continually lie to him. He lost all his trust in me.”

He gives a cynical laugh. “I know that tone. Don’t tell me you actually care about him. That you fell for him. He doesn’t love you back.”

“Not everyone’s like you.” God, it’s good to get this off my chest. “Some people are capable of human emotions.”

Silence again, and then, “Pack your stuff. Be out by tomorrow.”

I hang up, finally letting the emotion loose, my eyes burning as tears fall in hot splashes down my cheeks, shoulders hunching. I knew I was pushing it, but I still did it anyway.

It was time, though. I can’t rely on him forever the way Mom has.

I give myself another few minutes to feel sorry for myself, then brush away the tears, heading back out into the living room to break the news to Mom.

“Where will we go?” she asks, the confusion in her voice heartbreaking. But shouldn’t I be the one asking her that? She’s the parent, after all.

“I don’t know yet.”

“What are we going to do for money?”

Again, I don’t know. “I’ll find another job. I have a little saved from my Etsy shop too.”

She rubs her upper arms, glancing around the room. “We’re supposed to pack this all ourselves? And then put it where?”

“Mom, you’re asking me questions I don’t have the answers to. For now, how about you decide what’s most important to take with us?”

She shakes her head, seeming lost. “I’m calling Greg.”

Wow, she must be desperate if she’s actually going to initiate a call. She’s used me as an intermediary for years. “Go for it.”

I ransack all the cloth tote bags in the house I can find and bring them in my room, carefully packing all the materials I’ll need to finish Serena’s dress. That’s priority number one.

From Mom’s room, there’s quiet sobbing, interspersed with Greg, please and we just need some time. Doesn’t sound like it’s working too well, though, from the way she’s having to continually say it.

I shut my bedroom door, blocking out her voice, and sit at my desk, pulling up my bank app on my phone to check how much I have in my account. What sort of hotel can we afford? Man, what I would give for one of the properties Connor inherited. They must be sitting there unused.

A text comes through, panic coursing through me momentarily.

Serena: We still on for lunch today?

I completely forgot about the plans we made on Saturday, but I've kind of had other things on my mind. I guess she hasn't heard the news, then. Should I break it to her about who I really am? Or wait to see if she finds out otherwise?

No, it should come from me.

Me: Are you busy? Can I call you?

I wipe my palms on my pants, suddenly realizing I should have thought about what to say before asking her to talk.

I nearly drop my phone as it rings. It's her.

"Hello?" I immediately clear my throat, hating how hoarse I sound. "Serena?"

"Hey, is everything okay? Are you still able to make it for lunch?"

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“I, um... No. I’m not. And I have something to tell you.” At least I can tell her on my own terms the way I couldn’t with Connor. “It’s about my family. My dad.”

“Okay...”

I close my eyes, savoring the concern in her voice, hoping it stays there once I break this next part to her. “My father is Greg Montague,” I blurt out, ripping it off like a band-aid. “Your dad. I’m your half-sister.”

“What?” The word is barely audible, more a breath than anything else. I should have told her to sit down or something before I dumped that on her.

“He had an affair with my mom a long time ago, bought a house for us to live in, kept us a secret, basically. And he made me swear I would never try to contact you. He didn’t want anyone to know he had a bastard child. But then Connor introduced us and things kind of snowballed... Anyway, I just wanted to tell you myself before you found out some other way.”

I chew on my thumbnail, wishing I could see her, judge her reaction. Will she be happy? Or mad that I lied to her too?

“Oh my God, this is crazy,” she finally says. “Mom was so convinced he was seeing someone else, asking him about business trips he couldn’t explain, but he always denied it. Not that she was any model wife, trust me. She had her own affair later.” There’s rustling on the other end, like she’s moving, and then she asks, “So we’re sisters? Family?”

My throat closes momentarily, overcome with relief. She sounds excited. Delighted, even. “You believe me?” Seriously, the first thing I’d be asking for with claims like that is proof.

“It makes sense,” she says, utter confidence in her voice. “Our eyes really do look alike, you know. Dad’s eyes. And this might sound crazy, but as soon as we met, I felt this kind of... affinity toward you. Like it was so easy to talk to you.”

“I felt the same way,” I whisper. “I’m so glad you’re not mad about this. That I kept it from you.”

“No, I understand how it is when Dad says you can’t do something. It’s impossible to go against him.”

Relief crashes through me. She understands. She won’t hold it against me.

“So, why tell me now?” she asks. “What changed?”

I wipe my palms on my pants again, shaking them out to stop them from sweating. “Dad and I kind of had a falling out recently. He’s kicking me and my mom out of the house he bought us.”

She makes a scoffing sound. “Are you serious? How many times is he going to pull that stunt? He did the same thing to me after I got married.”

I loop a finger around a lock of my hair, twisting it. “Yeah, it’s crazy. I’m packing my stuff up now.”

“Where do you live? I can come help you pack if you need.”

“Brooklyn. And no, I don’t want to bother you with anything like that.”

“Oh my God, I just realized. Back a while ago, when Archer was investigating Dad’s financials, he mentioned Dad owning a house in Brooklyn. I thought that was so weird he owned property there, but I get it now. Is he selling it?”

“Yeah.”

“You heard about the gambling debts?”

“Connor told me.” The reminder of him sends a fresh wave of pain through me, but I tamp it down. I can be miserable later once I’ve figured everything else out. “Dad’s been pretty psycho lately. Probably because of that.”

“He’s been psycho for a long time. This just made it worse.” She chuckles to herself. “I’m sorry, I hope you don’t mind if I speak badly of him. I went no contact with him a while ago.”

“No, that’s totally fine. I think that’s what’ll end up happening to us too.” Now that I’m not of use to him any longer.

“So, where are you moving? Closer to Manhattan?”

“I’m not sure.” I take a deep breath, hating to admit to her how low I’ve sunk. “Just a hotel for now, I guess. Then I’ll try to figure out—”

“Wait, wait. He’s kicking you out now? Like, right now? And you don’t have anywhere to go?”

“I—”

“Come stay with me and Archer. We have a guest bedroom all set up.”

“No, I can’t do that.” Live with Connor’s brother? He’d be furious. I can’t put him in that position. “My, um, my mom would have to come too.” I mean, that’s a valid excuse. “It would be too awkward. Considering the... affair and all.”

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“Do you have the money to live in a hotel for who knows how long? Or enough for a deposit on an apartment?”

I press my lips tightly together, knowing she has a point. “No.”

“Listen, I don’t have a problem with your mom staying, if you don’t mind sharing the guest bed. Seriously, I want to help if I can. I had a similar situation not too long ago, and it would have meant the world to me to have someone do something like this for me.”

I waver, squeezing my eyes tight. Would I be awful if I accepted her offer? I haven’t even told her what I did to Connor. Will she take everything back once she finds out?

“Could I come over tonight? To talk about it?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll make dinner, so come hungry.”

A weak laugh escapes me. I can’t believe how generous she’s being. “Okay, thanks.”

I make my goodbyes and hang up, relief and dread warring within me. She took the news about being my sister great, but will that good feeling last when I confess the true reason why I was Connor’s assistant?

I try not to focus on that question too much as I finish packing all the necessary things in my room, then knock on Mom’s door softly.

“Come in.”

Her eyes are red-rimmed, a crumpled tissue in her hand.

“I’m guessing Dad didn’t budge?”

“No.” She leaves it at that, and I’m a little surprised she doesn’t attempt to defend him. She usually does.

I stick my hands in my back pockets, looking around the room. God, she’s got a lot of crap in here. “I might have someone we can stay with while we figure things out. I’m going to her place for dinner to talk about it.” I’ll wait to tell her it’s my sister until I actually know for sure it’s happening. “But I can help you pack whatever’s most important before I go.”

She gives me a sad smile and nods. “That’d be great, baby. Thanks.”

I pull her suitcase out of the closet, pausing as she says, “Greg told me what he wanted you to do.”

“Yeah?” I grab her most-used shirts, hangers and all, and stuff them into the bag.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I sigh, still turned away from her, and go through her pants next. Four pairs should be good. “I didn’t want you to worry. It might have set you back.”

She’s quiet, watching me pack her things, then gets up, joining me. “I can finish up.”

“I don’t mind.”

She takes a pair of pajamas out of my hands. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said a few days ago, and I should be doing more.”

“What about your pain?”

“I’ll manage. The suggestions the doctor gave us have helped, just like you said they would. Go finish packing your stuff.”

I step back as she takes over. Well, that hasn’t happened in a while. Maybe she’s finally turning things around.

I wander out into the living room, taking in the couch Mom constantly reminded me not to jump on years ago. The armchair I somehow managed to fall off the top of and sprain my thumb when I was six. The television you sometimes have to hit on the side to get it to stop flickering. The bookshelves crammed full of books we haven’t picked up in ages.

I breathe in all the familiar things and say goodbye, wishing it didn’t have to be like this, but I suppose our position here was always tenuous, at the mercy of a man with little in the way of conscience. This house was never a gift. It was a way to keep us under his thumb.

Well, he has nothing to hold over us any more, at least.

And I have a new future to figure out.

Chapter Thirty-One

Emma

I shake out my sweaty palms, waiting for Serena to answer the door, my gaze going up as it finally swings open, meeting frosty blue eyes instead of the warm, green ones I was expecting.

“Archer, hi, I—” I get stuck on those eyes, the coldness in them just like Connor’s earlier. The center of my chest aches at the remembrance, but now’s not the time to focus on that. “Serena invited me over.”

He crosses his arms, dress shirt straining at the seams. “She told me.”

He doesn’t move out of the doorway, the action not boding well for the possibility of me moving in temporarily.

“Is she here?” I surreptitiously try to peek past him, but he’s too big.

“She’s fixing up the guest room. Says she asked you to stay.”

And I’m guessing based on his narrowed eyes he opposes that? “I have some things to explain to her first.” I bite my lip, glancing down at the welcome mat under my feet. “She might change her mind.”

“Connor told me what happened.”

My head jerks up. “Everything?”

One side of his mouth quirks. “I have a feeling not all of it. But about Montague Media.”

I nod, keeping the tears that have been prickling at my eyes all day at bay. “You didn’t tell Serena?”

“Not yet. Thought I’d give you the chance first.”

I clear my throat. “Thank you.”

He opens the door wide, finally stepping aside to let me in. My feet are frozen, though, not ready to head for the guest bedroom. “How did he seem?” I whisper. “Was he upset?”

“Yes.”

My eyes squeeze shut, not sure why I even asked.

“You better have a good explanation,” he warns in a low voice. “I know Serena’s your sister, but I’m not letting someone in her life that’s going to keep lying to her.”

I understand where he’s coming from, I really do, but it hurts all the same. “I’ll tell her everything.”

“Tell me what?”

I look beyond Archer to see Serena standing at the far edge of the living room, Petey by her side. Okay, not off to a good start.

“I’ll let you guys be,” Archer says, disappearing into the home office he and Connor met in the last time I was here.

Serena motions the dog toward his bed in the corner, and takes a seat herself on the couch. I join her, gripping the hem of my shirt to twist it. If Archer's that mad, will he put a stop to the idea of me staying here?

"Is something going on?" she asks, face set in concern. "You sounded serious."

"Yeah." Heat crawls up my neck, my cheeks burning, and I momentarily wonder if she suffers from the same affliction, or if that's solely from my mom. "Connor already told Archer, but I wanted to be the one to tell you. You know, why I was really working for Connor."

She settles into the cushions more comfortably, tucking a leg under herself. "What do you mean?"

I pluck a white dog hair off the couch, wondering how long I can delay the inevitable.

Ugh, just say it already.

"I don't know what your relationship with Dad was like," I start, "but mine was... not good." To say the least. "He hid me and Mom away. Supported us, but made it clear we were lucky to have his money. That we should be grateful, that we were in his debt, essentially. And, well, he finally cashed in all those years of indebtedness recently."

"But what does that have to do with Connor?"

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I look down at my lap, hands clenched tightly together. “Dad had me work as Connor’s assistant. He bribed the hiring manager, just to make sure I got the job. He wanted me to get close to Connor and convince him to renew the buyout of Montague Media. By any means necessary.”

There’s dead silence in the room, but I’m too afraid to face Serena. What if she’s disgusted? Even so, I still need to get it all out. I can’t leave it half explained.

“He... He told me to seduce him. To make it so Connor couldn’t say no to me.”

I’m confused when there’s a light touch on my arm, the couch cushion depressing as she shifts close to me. “Did he threaten you?”

I look up, the anger in her gaze startling. “What?”

“Was Dad holding something over your head? With me, it was my animal shelter. He said he’d stop funding it if I didn’t go along with his plan.”

He had a plan for her, too? “My house,” I whisper. “He was going to kick us out, quit paying Mom’s health insurance, everything. We’d have nothing.”

Her mouth tightens. “He’s such an asshole. Sick to do that to you. I’m so sorry you had to go through this.”

My stomach drops. She doesn’t understand. “No, you don’t get it. I—I did it. I got close to him. I mentioned buying the company. I lied to him, broke his trust.”

“And what was your alternative?” Her dander’s up now, so different from how I’ve seen her before. “Get evicted? He did the same thing with me. Forced me into that marriage with Gabriel. Threatened my nonprofit if I didn’t. It was important to me, so I agreed. And later, when I tried to back out, he threatened more. So I did the only thing I could. I followed him. I had nothing otherwise.”

I didn’t realize our situations were so similar.

“Even after I did what he asked,” she continues, “he still took everything away. Withdrew funding for the shelter, sold my apartment, even kept my belongings to resell. If it hadn’t been for Archer, I’d have been screwed.”

I stare at her, slack-jawed. “He did all that to you?” His real daughter?

She nods. “I only realized later how much Dad had been controlling me. How he’d kept me reliant on him for so long so I couldn’t go against him. So trust me. If anyone understands what dealing with him is like, I do. You were damned either way. You did what he said and he still made good on the threat.”

“Oh, God.” I cross my arms, hugging myself, and bend forward. “You’re right. I should’ve got out sooner. Not put me and Connor through any of this.”

“Did you actually... seduce him?” she asks carefully.

I nod reluctantly. “But I also fell in love with him.”

The tears come hot and fast then, the arm she wraps around my shoulders a balm to my soul. I didn’t realize how much her acceptance would mean to me. I’d buried the hope that she’d understand, not truly believing it’d happen.

“So Connor knows, then? What Dad made you do?”

I relay the events of this morning at work, as well as my conversation with Dad afterward. She nods along with my story patiently, the opposite of Connor's reaction earlier. Maybe if I'd explained myself better, things would have gone differently, but I'd been so blindsided.

"Do you think there's any way he could forgive me?" I ask her after I've finished.

"Did you explain it all to him?"

I massage my temples, trying to remember. "I don't know. It all happened so fast. He was angry and I just—God, I felt like the biggest piece of shit. I was going to tell him everything before that too."

"Why don't you try talking to him again?"

I shake my head before she's even finished. "He doesn't want to see me. And I don't blame him one bit."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. I'll talk to—"

"No, please. I'm not involving others." It's already embarrassing enough as it is.

She nods. "Okay. But will you at least stay here in the meantime? I hate to think of you having nowhere to go."

Well, if she still wants it, it's not like I can turn her down. "As long as Archer's okay with it. I don't want to put him in an awkward position with his brother."

"He'll be fine with it," she assures me. "Connor may be his brother, but you're my sister."

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I give her a watery smile, just managing to hold back the tears. At least one part of my life is going right again. But with this problem solved, it leaves me time now to ruminate over everything else.

The ache from earlier returns, the Connor shaped hole in my heart expanding. I have to believe it'll get better. Minute by minute. Hour by hour. Day by day.

Otherwise, it might swallow me whole.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Connor

"Come in."

My office door swings open, the person who enters not who I was expecting.

"Are you checking up on me?"

"That's what brothers do, right?" Archer answers, shutting the door behind him.

"I'm fine. You didn't need to come."

He studies me, that sharp gaze not missing the dark circles under my eyes, my lack of normal business attire today. The thought of putting on a suit was too exhausting. It's a wonder I made it in at all. But it's not like anyone else will answer my calls if I'm out.

Emma's filled my dreams on the few occasions I could sleep the past two nights. Pleading with me to listen to her in one, pushing me into traffic in another. In the final dream this morning, I walked in on her in bed with my dad. After that, I hadn't tried to go back to sleep.

"Have you talked to Emma?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "No." Since when is he interested in my love life? Not that I admitted anything about that to him. "Everything's been said that needs to."

He takes a seat in the chair in front of my desk, crossing a leg over one knee.

"Serena invited Emma to stay with us temporarily while she looks for a place. I wanted to make sure it's cool with you."

Why does she need somewhere to stay? What's wrong with her house? "What are you talking about?"

"Since her dad kicked her out."

I hate the way my heart jumps in my throat, my first instinct to check if she's okay before I remember what happened. What she did.

"Did you know about that?" Archer asks when I remain silent.

"Are you sure it's the truth?" I counter with. If she lied about everything else, she could be lying about this too.

He cocks his head to the side. "I trust her," he says finally, surprising the hell out of me. Out of the three of us brothers, he's always been the most suspicious of people. And the least forgiving.

I narrow my eyes at him, sensing I'm walking into a trap. "You don't trust anyone."

He shrugs easily. "I know. But she came over to talk to Serena and I listened to them in the living room from my office."

"You eavesdropped?" That's very unlike Archer.

"I wasn't taking any chances. I needed to hear her explanation for myself if she's going to be a part of Serena's life." Now that sounds more like him.

I look down at my desk, straightening the keyboard. "She had a good enough reason for you?" Seriously, it must have been if Archer's on her side.

"She didn't for you? Seems like her dad and ours are runner-ups for Father of the Year awards."

My lips twist. "She only said Greg made her. But it's not like anyone can make you do something. She still chose to do it. Even after we—"

I cut myself off. He doesn't need to know the details of what we did.

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But I can't get it all out of my head. Did she only sleep with me as a part of the act? Or was that separate from the rest of it?

"After you slept together?" he asks drily. "You weren't exactly subtle about how you felt about her. That night we went to dinner, you couldn't keep your eyes off her."

"Yeah, but it was all a lie," I mutter, crossing my arms.

He leans back, nodding his head. "Have you ever done something for work you weren't comfortable with? But you did it anyway because Dad made you?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Remember the bribing incident?"

God, don't remind me about that fiasco. "What about it?"

"I know for a fact you were mad at Dad for going behind your back and paying those officials, but you didn't have a choice. You had to go along with it."

"It's not the same thing. We've all done things we didn't necessarily agree with for Dad. But it never affected anyone we knew personally. And when it came down to it, we made the right choice. Gabriel didn't marry Serena at the wedding, even knowing Dad would cut him off. You didn't turn your back on your wife when Dad told you it was him or her. But Emma did. Her loyalty was never with me."

"I think it was," he says softly. "Not at the beginning, but after she got close to you."

You didn't hear how torn up she sounded about everything."

"Then why didn't she tell me? She should have trusted me."

"She was afraid of how you'd react. You know, exactly how you're doing now."

"I'm allowed to be mad. To feel deceived. I told her I was falling in love with her, and she said the same. I assumed I could trust her."

"You can be angry," he concedes. "I would be too. I just don't want to see you throw something away out of pure spite. The way Dad would have."

My teeth grind. "Don't compare me to him." I've finally got out from under his shadow here at work.

"Sorry." He rubs at his jaw. "But I'm a little surprised you wouldn't even consider forgiving her after everything her dad threatened. Maybe I'm biased because of what Serena told me about him, though. All the shit he put her through. Sounds like he did pretty much the same thing to Emma."

This is the first I'm hearing about threats. "What did he threaten?" I ask, unable to stop myself.

"Everything, basically. She couldn't work before because her mom needed help, so the two of them were dependent on him for money. He told her if she didn't do what he said, he'd take it all away. House, health insurance, allowance. And she has virtually no savings because she was trying to pay off her mom's medical bills that Greg wouldn't cover."

I brace my elbows on the desk, hanging my head in my hands. "Shit."

Looking back, there were so many clues. Mentioning the financial problems they were having, how her father had expectations of her. Why didn't she just accept the money I kept offering?

But she'd also said she didn't want to end up like her mom, reliant on a man. And no wonder if that was what her dad was holding over her head.

"I'm guessing you didn't know that part?"

My jaw sets. "No."

"Maybe you should talk to her, then? I thought you would have by now after you cooled off."

"Yeah," I mutter. This changes... everything.

She still lied to me, yes, but it also sounds like she didn't have much of a choice. She was right when she said her dad made her.

Fuck.

I lean back in my chair, staring up at the ceiling. "Has Serena ever lied to you? Could you forgive her for something like this?"

He chuckles. "A couple of weeks into our marriage, she confessed she hadn't been acting the entire time we'd been putting on a show for the media. She'd been in love with me since high school."

I sit up in my seat, staring at him. "What?"

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He gives me an amused grin. “I’d felt so guilty having these lustful thoughts about her, and she was over there encouraging it.”

“Then why’d she agree to marry Gabriel?”

“Because Greg made her. Threatened the same kind of stuff to her he did with Emma. He purposely kept them under his thumb so he could pull these kinds of stunts.”

He shifts in his seat, leaning forward. “Serena keeping that to herself is obviously nowhere on the same level as your situation. I get that you’re hurt. I’d be too. But you should at least hear her out. Listen to her side of the story before completely dismissing her.”

“Did she ask you to come here and say that?”

“No.” He gives a slight smile. “In fact, she outright asked Serena not to talk to you about any of it.”

She’s always trying to figure things out for herself, isn’t she? “And you decided to ignore that?”

He shrugs. “I needed to make sure you had all the facts.”

My stomach twists. Would Emma have ever reached out otherwise? “Usually I’m the one to do stuff like this.”

His mouth lifts on one side. “Thought I’d take over the reins for a bit.”

“I’ll talk to her,” I tell him, the decision bringing up a slew of emotions I’ve worked so hard on crushing. Hope. Longing. Anticipation. I’ve spent the past two days focused on that feeling of betrayal every time I started to miss her, every time I wondered if I’d overreacted.

Archer nods. “Whatever you decide, I’m just letting you know Serena wants Emma to come to the wedding too. I hope you can be civil.”

“Yeah, of course. I won’t ruin your big day.”

He watches me a beat longer. “I’ll leave you to it, then,” he says, standing. “She’s moved her and her mom’s stuff into our guest room. If you have an issue with it, I can book her a hotel instead.”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t want her to be... homeless or anything.”

Just a few days ago, it would have been me taking care of this. Me finding a place for her to stay. Making sure she was okay.

Now it’s my brother. Her brother-in-law.

God, this is a clusterfuck.

Archer leaves and I once again hang my head in my hands. Can we come back from this? Can I get past the lie? If what Archer said is true, I need to hear her out. Have her tell me herself.

But as I reach for my phone, there’s that punch in my gut all over again, my hand wavering before it drops to my side.

What the hell am I going to do?

Chapter Thirty-Three

Emma

Connor: The designer's finished with the apartment. It looks good.

I stare at the message for the tenth time in the last five minutes, still unsure how to respond. Radio silence for three days and now this comes out of the blue? As if nothing's happened between us?

Is he trying to open the lines of communication? Simply letting me know since I was in charge of the project? Did he send it to the wrong person?

With my luck, it'd be the last one.

I peek over my sewing machine, double-checking the door to the workroom is shut tight. It's only my second day here at Bewitching Bridal as their newest seamstress, and I don't want to get caught slacking on the job. I'm just thankful I had a good recommendation from Mackenzie, who knows the owner and got me an interview so quickly.

I tap my thumbs against the back of my phone, debating how to respond. If he's extending any kind of olive branch, I need to grab it with both hands and hold on for dear life.

Me: That's great. I'm glad you like it.

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I hit send, almost immediately groaning at my inane response. But it's not as if I can just start begging him to take me back. If anything, I thought he'd never want to speak to me again.

Maybe he figures we should be on better terms now that we're in-laws. We'll both be at Serena and Archer's wedding in a few weeks. It'll be a small affair, so even more of a chance we'll run into each other. Not that I've been looking forward to it for that very reason, staying up late every night working on Serena's dress to make sure it's absolutely perfect.

Connor: Would you want to come see how it turned out?

I'm frozen. Is he inviting me to see him? Or the apartment?

Me: I'd love to.

Connor: When are you available?

My shift ends at seven, but I'll need to go back to Serena's and change first.

Me: I can be there at eight. If that's okay with you.

Connor: Sounds good.

I cover a hand over my mouth, hardly able to believe that just happened. I desperately want to ask if he's willing to talk, if I can explain myself, but I'm afraid to push the line too much.

I finish the rest of the day, vacillating between bliss at the hope brewing in my heart, and utter panic that I'll somehow screw everything up even worse.

What should I wear? What if he was only asking what time I'm available to make sure he's not there? It's Saturday, though. He shouldn't be at work. Did he move in already?

Ugh, why am I torturing myself with these questions? I need to focus on getting the dress I'm working on finished. It's a good thing I built up a fast pace for my Etsy shop because the expectations here are no joke. After I'm done with Serena's dress, I should open my shop back up too. Every bit of extra money counts now if I'm going to get a new place for me and Mom. I don't want to wear out my welcome with Serena and Archer.

At seven fifty-five, I'm at Bishop Tower, half-surprised my badge still works to access the building.

Looking at my reflection in the elevator doors, I arrange my hair carefully around my shoulders and smooth out my dress, then double check my teeth for anything stuck in them.

This doesn't have to be a big deal. I'm just looking at the apartment I helped design. There's a chance he's not even there.

Tell that to the butterflies swirling like mad in my stomach, though.

I reach the sixtieth floor before I'm ready, hitching my purse higher on my shoulder as I momentarily debate whether I should go up through the private elevator or the stairs down the hall. I peek in his office, finding it empty, and tiptoe in. In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess.

Upon reaching the apartment, I quickly scan the open room, no sign of Connor anywhere. My stomach sinks, the butterfly wings fading. This is why I shouldn't get my hopes up.

I set my purse on the foyer table, the metallic gold surface stunning. I'd loved this piece when picking it out with Hannah, and it's even more beautiful in person.

Really, though, everything in here is amazing. The oversized rug in the living room is a statement piece in its own right, the pattern seeming to pick up every other hue in the room. The starburst chandelier in the dining room shines brightly over the polished table, the area much more intimate than it was previously.

I move over to the wide window, the gauzy curtains letting in the last of the day's sun, painting the walls in a golden light. I already miss the view of Manhattan I've gotten used to and the hustle and bustle down below.

"What do you think?"

My heart jumps in my throat, mouth trembling for a moment before I firm it. I glance over my shoulder, finding him in the doorway leading to the back bedrooms. He's barefoot, dressed casually in jeans and a navy t-shirt, the stubble on his jaw thicker than I've ever seen it before. "It's amazing."

I stare at him, knowing I shouldn't even as I continue to do it. But he's not looking away either, our gazes locked. My chest burns hot, both hope and shame twisting together.

"I miss you," I whisper, unsure what else to say, how to keep the longing out of my voice, out of my heart. Did I really think I could come here and not spill my feelings?

He looks down, breaking the contact, and I swallow hard past the dryness in my

throat, my cheeks flooding with heat. Even so, I don't regret it. If he's willing to meet me, he must be willing to hear me out.

"Want a tour?" he asks, not acknowledging my comment, but that's okay. As long as we're here speaking calmly, maybe we can have a rational conversation without anger in the way.

"I'd rather talk."

He studies me for a moment, then nods, going over to sit on one of the new couches. I cautiously follow, the leather cool against my legs as I perch on the opposite end.

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“I have some questions for you.”

“Of course.” I practically trip over my words in my haste to say them. “I’ll answer anything you want to know.”

One of his eyebrows quirks up. “Truthfully?”

Sorrow weighs me down momentarily before I shake it off. “Yes. No more lies.”

“How did it start?”

Okay, fair enough question. “Dad was having financial troubles after Bishop Industries backed out of the buyout of his company. I guess your father blacklisted him and no one else would buy it. I didn’t realize why he needed to sell it, not until you told me about the gambling debts.”

I peek over at him, but there’s no change in his expression. “When he got word that Vivian’s position was open for a temp, he bribed the hiring manager. He wanted me to convince you to buy Montague Media. And he said the fastest way to get close to you was to flirt with you, to make you think I’d...” I clear my throat, knowing I have to say this next part after promising him the truth. “That I’d sleep with you.”

“And that was your plan?”

“Not by choice. You saw how awful I was at flirting. You had to ask me not to touch you.”

A reluctant grin creeps over his face, the sight of it warming my heart. “That’s because you were too good. That day you spilled water all over yourself, I couldn’t get out of my chair because of my hard-on.”

I stare at him. “Really?” Did I affect him that much even then?

He nods, his smile dropping. “Why’d you do it?”

I twist my hands together in my lap. “Dad told me I owe him. That there wouldn’t be any money otherwise. He’d completely cut us off and take back his house, cancel health insurance, all that. And Mom’s never worked, so there’s nothing to fall back on. I don’t have any other family, any friends I could have stayed with, especially with Mom in tow. We’ve relied on him for everything. I tried telling him I couldn’t do it, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer. I didn’t know what else to do.”

He lets out a long breath, but doesn’t seem surprised at my admission as he rubs at the back of his neck. “I wish you could have told me. That you trusted me enough.”

“I do trust you.” I reach for him, then remember myself, snatching my hand back. “More than anyone else in my life. But I felt awful all the time about it. How could I confess who I really was, why I was really here, without you hating me for it? At first, I was afraid you’d fire me, and then, when we got closer, when I started to fall for you, I—I knew it had to come crashing down at some point, that I had to tell you sometime. But I didn’t want you to hate me just yet.”

“I don’t hate you,” he says quietly. “But I can’t tell what’s real and what’s not anymore. If everything we did was because you wanted to or because you had to.”

“It was because I wanted to,” I whisper, my throat closing up. “I admit, I pushed for more than I ever would normally. I’ve never been so forward with anyone. But it also felt right. Once I knew you wanted me too, I was... powerful for a change. Someone

was listening to me, was interested in me. Loved me,” I finish softly.

“So you liked having someone’s attention?”

“No.” I rub at my eyes, wishing I’d worded it differently. “It’s nice to be appreciated, but...” I swallow, needing to say this next part, even though I’m not sure how it’ll be received. “I love you for a million other reasons. You’re kind and thoughtful and generous, but you still have a backbone when you need to. You’re smart and patient and you make my stomach flutter every time I see you. You’re the first person I think of when I wake up and the last before I go to sleep.”

One side of his mouth lifts. “Now you’re just trying to flatter me.”

“It’s the truth. And it’s killed me to keep it all from you. But I didn’t know how to say it without everything crashing down.”

He nods, appearing more at ease now. “Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

God, what else is there to say? “I’m done with my dad. I’m never speaking to him again.” That’s an easy thing to give up, though. “And in the full interest of disclosure, me spilling that water on myself was a total ploy. Oh, and I made up those files about the buyout.”

“So you didn’t actually ruin them?”

“No. I didn’t want to admit I’d invented them to begin with.”

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “That day we hooked up in my office... Right after, you mentioned Montague Media.”

I nod, swallowing hard. “That was shitty of me. Dad was cutting off the utilities at

our place and said it'd be Mom's health insurance the next week. She needs it, especially for her prescriptions, and I was already worried about the counterfeit ones she'd picked up. It was a last-ditch effort because you'd brought up the buyout from your meeting. But I shouldn't have done it. I felt so guilty about it afterward, I decided I'd never bring it up again."

I take a shaky breath, steeling myself. "I hope one day you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I understand I broke your trust and I'm so incredibly sorry. But you knew the important things about me, the things that mattered. The connection between us was always real."

I look up at him, his gaze steady on me. "Archer told me a lot about why your dad made you do all this," he says.

My brows lift. Did Serena tell him?

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“But I wanted to hear it from you,” he continues. “And to be sure of my feelings. A lot’s changed in the past few days.”

Changed for good?

Or worse?

Chapter Thirty-Four

Emma

“What are your feelings?” I whisper, not letting my heart leap the way it wants to. He hasn’t actually said anything yet.

“I’ve missed you. I understand where you’re coming from now. And I want to move on from this. As long as you can guarantee me there are no more surprises.”

I choke back a sob, covering my mouth with my palm. “There’s nothing else,” I murmur, overcome with emotion.

“Good. Would you be open to going to counseling together? To make sure we’re on the same page?”

I nod frantically. “Absolutely.”

He reaches a hand out and I grab it like it’s a lifeline, squeezing tight.

“Come here.” He pulls me toward him, and I gladly follow, climbing onto his lap and wrapping my arms around him. The feel of his powerful body next to mine, safe in his embrace after days apart, is like heaven.

Tears leak out, wetting his shirt as I press my face tightly into him, overwhelming relief coursing through me. I didn’t know I could be this light again after all that’s happened.

He rubs soft circles along my back, murmuring, “I’ve thought about you pretty much nonstop. I’m sorry I was so angry.”

“You had every right to be.”

“If I’d calmed down and listened to you that day so you could explain everything, it wouldn’t have been so bad. I can’t believe Greg did that to you.”

I lean back, wiping the last of the tears from my eyes. “I’m not wasting any more of my energy on him. I only want to think about you. About us.”

He cups my face gently, the love that’s been missing from his gaze finally there again. “I like the sound of that. But—”

No. No buts. I hate that word.

“I’m still who I am. The media will still write things about me on gossip sites. Still search me out for pictures. Still pry into my personal business. There’s nothing I can do to change that. And I hate to put you through that. I’d shield you from it if I could.”

“I’m prepared for anything. I know it’s not the same as it was with my parents, that you’re not hiding me away like a dirty secret.”

“No, you’re not that.” He tucks an errant curl back behind my ear, love in his action. “Not at all. I can draft something for Angelina to release confirming our relationship. I don’t want either of us to hide anything anymore.”

“But the company—”

“If there’s backlash, so be it. I’m done worrying about it. You don’t work for me any longer, so there’s no conflict of interest. People can think whatever they want.”

“If you’re sure. I don’t want to cause trouble for you.”

“You’ve been trouble from the start, haven’t you?” He grins, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “But so worth it.” His hands settle on my waist, steadying me, palms hot through the thin fabric of my dress. God, it’s good to feel his touch again.

“What are you doing for money?” he asks. “Are you okay?”

“I got a new job. Yesterday, actually. I’m officially a seamstress.”

“What about your business idea?”

“I’d still like to do that someday. But with a loan from a bank. I don’t want to be in your debt.”

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His lips purse. “Well, the offer still stands. The same if you need somewhere to live. I have property that’s sitting unused right now.”

God, whatever he owns must be worth millions. I probably couldn’t even afford the taxes. And I can’t ask that of him.

“Thank you, but I’m saving up for a deposit on an apartment. And Archer’s in contact with his lawyer to see if there’s anything we can do to speed up Mom’s disability paperwork and get her on Medicaid.”

“Emma, it would be nothing for me to—”

“I want us to be equal. As much as we can be, at least. And that means you have to let me do some things on my own.”

“Okay. Understood.” His hands flex on my waist again, reminding me of our position. “Like I said the other day, if it’s an issue for you, I won’t push it. I’ll just spoil you in other ways.”

He leans in, trailing kisses down my throat, my neck arching, wanting his mouth everywhere. And finally, blessedly, his lips are on mine, both of us groaning at the overdue contact. There’s promise in his kiss, the love I felt the last time we were together still there.

Thank God. That he understands. That we can work on moving forward. That this perpetual weight is lifted.

“I missed you so much,” I whisper. “Like I didn’t know was possible.”

His palm cups the back of my head, holding me securely to him. “I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere again.”

I smooth my hands over his broad shoulders. “Will you show me the rest of the place?”

He gives me one last kiss and picks me up, encouraging me to wrap my legs around his waist. “Kitchen,” he murmurs, zooming right past. “Guest bedroom and home office.” He continues down the hallway, the California king the focal point of the end room with its massive headboard. “And my room.”

He lays me down on the bed, covering me with his big body, and I kick my shoes off, sliding my feet over the soft duvet. I admit, I imagined myself here with him when picking out the furnishings.

And now, finally, here I am.

Our bodies intertwine, the long, drawn-out kisses he gives me doing more than he knows to heal my heart, beginning to believe things are truly back to normal between us.

His hand glides along my thigh, pushing my dress up, my body aching for his touch. He squeezes my ass, pressing me further into him, both of us getting turned on at the more intimate contact.

“I slept here last night,” he says, grinding against me through our clothes. “And all I could think of was how much I wanted you here with me. How much I missed the way we are together. How right it feels. Please tell me you’ll stay the night.”

“Yes.” I can’t deny him this, not when I want it too. To have him hold me in his arms, my head on his chest, his heartbeat steady in my ear.

He undresses me, each part he uncovers like a baring of my soul, fully open to him. There’s no hiding anymore.

His hands roam my body, his warmth permeating me, and I revel in his touch, giving myself over. There’s nothing more I want than to be with this man.

His lips follow the same path of his hands, trailing over my curves, shivers running rampant over my skin, excitement and lust coursing through me as he tenderly nuzzles at my breast.

I grip the hem of his shirt, drawing it up over his head, tracing the muscles of his upper back, his biceps, his forearms, moving between us to unbutton his jeans next. He moves off me for a moment, removing his jeans and boxers, and covers me again, his bare skin glorious against mine.

His dick brushes my inner thigh, so close to where I want it, and as he shifts, he slides along my seam, already wet with arousal. I hiss in a breath at the feel of him, and he repeats the action, my neck arching off the pillow, careful not to move my lower half. How can such a small point of contact have such an effect?

“Someday, I want you with nothing between us,” he pants, breaths harsh as he rolls over to the nightstand and grabs a condom.

I nod, widening my legs as he returns, letting out a shaky breath as he pushes inside, a rush of emotion filling me. “I love you,” I whisper, needing to say it, to tell him how much he means to me right now.

“God, I love you too. Despite everything, I couldn’t stop loving you.”

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, drawing him down to me, his chest brushing mine as he thrusts gently, building us up.

Time escapes me, my senses fully attuned to him. The way he grips my hip as he pumps into me. The strength of his body just over mine, in complete control of his movements. The taste of his kiss still on my lips. And that low, low groaning in my ear, the sound of it revving me up, blissful that I affect him that much.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he murmurs, quickening his pace. “You make me so fucking hot.”

I nudge his shoulder, knowing he likes it even more when I take control. He moves to his back, watching me with bated breath as I straddle him, taking his cock and guiding him into me.

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That beautiful groan escapes him as I ride him, bringing myself up to the tip and dropping down, the sensation of fullness inside me incredible. I encircle his wrists, encouraging him to cup my breasts, loving the way he shapes my weight, the way he gently thumbs my nipples, the way he gazes at me like I'm the second coming. I've missed that adoration.

His lips part in soundless wonder as I change the angle of my hips, bearing down on him, that elusive edge hurtling closer, and I brace my hands on his chest, ready for it. This man makes me feel more than I ever have in life. And I'm never letting him go again.

My mouth trembles as my climax steals over me, bucking against him, unable to help my shaky moan. He grips my hips, steadying me as he thrusts roughly, voice low as he says, "Let me hear you, baby. What I do to you."

I collapse against him, groaning the same as he did earlier, not caring how desperate I sound. How out of control. How completely gone for him I am. I'll never hide anything from him again, including my reaction to him.

He follows soon after, his hold on me tightening as his rhythm goes jerky, the wordless sounds he makes bringing a smile to my lips.

He kisses me deeply after he finishes, still inside me, the two of us connected. If I could, I'd stay like this forever.

Eventually, he gets up to head into the bathroom, and I sit up, realizing I should text Serena and Mom to let them know I won't be home tonight, and tiptoe out to get my

purse.

When I return, Connor's sitting on the edge of the bed, frowning at the space I vacated. I come up behind him, hugging his middle.

"I had this awful thought that you'd left," he whispers, intertwining his fingers with mine. "That I'd lost you again."

I press a kiss to his shoulder. "I just wanted to text my sister and mom that I won't be back home till tomorrow so they don't worry."

He squeezes my hand, almost reflexively. "I never want to go through any of this again. Losing you... I couldn't even process it."

"I'm here," I promise. "Forever. There are no more skeletons in my closet."

He gives a soft grunt. "And hopefully none in mine. Dave mentioned something earlier in the week about keeping Dad's secrets. I was afraid to ask what he was referring to."

I can only imagine. "Well, if it hasn't come out by now, it probably won't. But whatever happens, I'm by your side."

He's quiet for a moment, his shoulders releasing a tightness I didn't even realize was there. "It's good to hear that."

I hug him tighter, wishing I could soothe him more. "You never have to worry about that again. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you before."

"I understand." He turns to face me, taking my hands in his. "And I trust you. I do. I just needed some time to pull my head out of my ass. Archer helped with that." He

grins briefly, looking down at our joined hands. “I remembered all the other ways you’ve shown me you’re there for me. Helping me come to terms with my dad, my job, this new life I’ve been handed. I wouldn’t have made it through the last few weeks without you.”

He rubs his thumb over my knuckles and looks up at me, the love in his gaze melting my heart.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for you too. Hearing you tell me everything your dad put you through, that you had to do it all alone... I was an ass for reacting the way I did initially.”

“Connor, you were totally justified. But I don’t want either of us to be weighed down by guilt anymore. Can we start fresh?”

“I can’t think of anything I want more.”

He lays me down then, my back to his front, and pulls the covers over us. I’m surrounded by him, luxuriating in his body heat warming me through, the heavy weight of his arm wrapped around me, his soft breaths against the nape of my neck. I sink into the plush mattress, peace filling me.

I have no idea what tomorrow will hold, so much changing in my life in such a short period of time, but I know there’s no one else I’d rather have by my side. Protecting me. Understanding me. Loving me.

I have everything I need.

Epilogue

Connor - 1 year later

“Oh, he’s not busy. You can go right on in.”

I glance up at the sound of Vivian’s voice from outside my office, the woman who enters bringing a smile to my face. Wild red curls. Delicious curves. And a mouth so sinful, it makes my knees weaken remembering the stuff she said to me in bed last night.

“Hey, baby,” Emma says, rounding my desk to give me a kiss.

I set down the sheaf of papers I was holding. Dave’s report on the new AI his team created can wait. “How’d it go?” I ask. “Did they approve the loan?”

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The excited gleam in her eye tells me all I need to know. “You’re looking at the future owner of Shepherd Designs.”

I stand, pulling her into my arms, loving the way she wraps herself around me in response. “Congratulations,” I whisper into her hair. “Not that I had any doubt about your proposal.”

She pulls away, grinning from ear to ear. “Well, I did have a billionaire look it over for me.”

“It’s the least I could do.” Especially since she won’t let me fund her shop. “Did you decide on a location yet?”

She takes a seat, launching into her dilemma about whether she should choose the less spacious, pricier space available on Prince Street that has great foot traffic, or the more out of the way building in Brooklyn that’s bigger and cheaper.

I sit and lean back in my chair, letting her words wash over me, pleased to see her so animated about her new business.

Things are going well for both of us on the business front. After a minor drop in stock prices when news of our relationship first got out a year ago, Bishop Industries is better than ever as I’ve finally implemented ideas that are definitely not the way Dad did things.

“What are you smiling about?” she interrupts herself, pointing playfully at me.

I hold up my hands in adon't shoot me gesture. "Nothing. I just like hearing you talk, is all."

Her cheeks flush prettily. "Oh God, I'm rambling again, aren't I? You must be sick to death of listening to me go on and on about the boutique."

"Not at all. I'm happy to be your sounding board."

She stands and leans over the desk, kissing me squarely on the lips. "You're too good to me," she murmurs seductively.

"Don't get me worked up here," I warn, breaking away.

"Would I do that?" She grins slyly, taking her seat again. "Oh, look what I got in the mail." She digs in her purse, pulling out what looks like a postcard. "Gabriel and Mackenzie's save the date."

I take it from her, examining it. "Why'd they send this? They told us when the wedding would be already."

She rolls her eyes good-naturedly. "It's just what you do. You've lived in hotels too long to actually get any mail."

She's got me there. And if I receive anything here at Bishop Tower, Vivian takes care of it.

"And," she continues, "I think Serena and Archer will have some news for us soon."

She says it in a sing-song way, like she has some juicy gossip. I lean in, wanting to be a part of whatever she knows. "What is it?"

“I told you they’ve been trying for a baby, right? Well, Serena texted me and Mackenzie this morning in our group chat asking when we could all get together because there’s something she wants to tell us.”

Holy shit. Could Archer actually have a kid on the way? “You don’t know for sure, though.”

“No, but what else could it be?”

I shrug half-heartedly. “They’re moving?”

“No way. Archer’s consulting business is going great and Serena would never let go of her shelter. She’s even opening a second site.”

“Okay, okay.” I grin at her. “We’ll see if you’re right soon enough.”

I can’t believe how well she’s fit into the dynamic of my brothers and their significant others, from pretty much the very beginning. I’m lucky to be so close to Gabriel and Archer now after all those years physically apart, and Emma’s grown closer not only to her sister, but Mackenzie too.

“Okay, one more thing to tell you. Brian asked Mom to move in with him.”

I sit up straighter. “What?”

“It took me by surprise too. It seems like they just started dating, but she reminded me they had their seven-month anniversary last week.”

Yeah, I guess it has been that long. She met her boyfriend at some fibromyalgia support group Emma convinced her to join a while back, and it’s made a huge difference in her quality of life now that she’s taking full control of managing her

disease.

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“Do you think it’s too soon?” she asks. “She’s so excited, and I know he’s a good guy...” She rubs her arms, expression lost for a moment.

“They’ll be fine,” I assure her, reaching for her hand to squeeze. “They’re adults. They know what they’re doing.” And this definitely helps my own plans.

One corner of her mouth curves up. “You’re right. I still worry about her, though. I’m not sure that will ever go away.”

I rub my thumb along her palm, choosing my next words carefully. “So does this mean you’ll consider my offer now?”

Her fingers tense. “Your offer?”

“To move in with me. You said you couldn’t leave your mom the last time I brought it up.” And that had been months ago.

“I half thought I’d lost my chance after turning you down before,” she whispers, fingers flexing as she intertwines them with mine.

“You know I’m open to second chances.”

“And for that, I’m forever grateful.” She slips her free hand over our joined one, staring down at it. “I’d love to move in with you.”

I reach across the desk to tip her chin up until she meets my eye. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Really.” She bites at her bottom lip. “This year has been the happiest of my life. Dad’s finally out of my life, Mom’s doing better, I have an amazing sister, I’m starting the career I’ve always wanted. And to top it all off, I have you. The most perfect boyfriend in the history of boyfriends.”

Well, that’s a title I won’t refuse, but something’s missing from her statement. “It sounds like you’re leading up to something.”

She gives me a half-shrug, shaking her head ruefully. “Nothing ever stays good this long. I guess I keep waiting for something to go wrong. And now here you are making it even better.”

“I’m... sorry?”

She laughs, the sudden tension in my stomach easing. “I know it’s ridiculous. And I’m working on it, promise.”

After we finished meeting with our couples counselor earlier in the year, Emma decided to meet individually with a therapist to discuss issues stemming from her childhood with a professional.

“Is there something I can do?” I ask. “I’ll help however you need.”

“No, no. It’s my problem.”

“Your problems are my problems. I want to start a life together and this is holding you back.”

That wrinkle between her brows creases. “I thought you just said moving in.”

“Yeah, but that’s only the beginning. I mean, marriage, kids. I want it all with you.”

Her hands drop from mine, coming up to cover her mouth as she thuds against her chair. “You... want to marry me?”

I blink, taken aback by her own surprise. “Emma, you know how I feel about you. How many times a day do I tell you I love you? And we’ve been dating for a year. Where’d you think this was going?”

“I—” She uncovers her face, shaking out her hands. “I was just happy to be with you. I don’t let myself hope about the future like that.”

I give her a look.

“And I’ll be talking about that with my therapist this week,” she says, giving me a wobbly smile.

I stand, rounding the desk, and pull her out of her seat to wrap her in my arms. “If I haven’t explicitly said it before, I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

She nods against my chest, voice muffled as she replies, “I want that too. So much.”

“Okay, move your stuff in. Then let me know when you want to go ring shopping.”

She pulls back, disbelief all over her face. “Are you serious?”

I cup her cheek, leaning in for a quick taste of her lips. “I’ve never been more serious in my life.”

She smiles so wide, it makes my chest ache, and throws her arms over my shoulders, squeezing tight. “I love you.”

I return her embrace, my heart full with her here with me like this. “God, I love you too.”

Finally, things are moving forward the way I want. With work. With my family. And with Emma, the woman who came in and turned my life around when I was least expecting it.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.