



Sexting Mr. CEO

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Description: As a romance book connoisseur, I never expected to live out my steamy love story—until Luke Cross, a dashing CEO with undeniable silver fox charm, declares me his obsession. When he calls himself my book master, I know I’m in trouble.

A broken laptop at the world’s biggest tech show threatens my career—until Luke steps in to help. But his “help” quickly turns into more than just technical support. With luxury and temptation, Luke transforms Vegas into our passionate playground.

“I can’t let you go, even if we live on opposite sides of the country,” Luke warns before we part ways. Each message we exchange sizzles with more promise than the last.

Then everything changes. A high-stakes tech war pits us against each other, forcing me to choose between the career I’ve poured my heart into and the man who has stolen my heart.

He’s everything I ever dreamed of in a romance hero. But when betrayal and catastrophe strike, I’m terrified our story won’t get the happily ever after we deserve.

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Chapter One

Sera

"No, no, no," I yell, leaping to my feet as coffee cascades over my laptop, a spark and fizzle foreshadowing disaster. The tail end of my speech remains unsaved, not to mention the code I was reviewing.

Dammit, Sera, what sort of tech girl doesn't back up her work?

Before my coffee catastrophe, I was attempting to focus on my speech for tomorrow and the code my boss needed me to review. We're providing the backend for NeuroDrive, a revolutionary self-driving car product—kind of a big deal. Yet, a silver fox kept staring at me, making me forget all about my responsibilities.

The Consumer Electronics Show is in full swing, with CEOs, tech bros, and tech enthusiasts all congregating to stake their claim on the digital world. During the flight, I even fantasized about meeting a techy guy with spice in his heart and intensity in his eyes. Add some silver-fox energy to the mix, and I'm completely intrigued.

There he was, watching me with a smirk on his lips. Over six feet, wearing a casual shirt with sleeves rolled up, his silver haircatching the light. Were his blue eyes actually sparkling, or did I seriously need to chill?

I was going to do it. I was going to risk a smile. Other women might not find this significant, but for me, it was monumental. Social anxiety is real. Books and

computers are infinitely simpler to interact with than people and their perplexing behaviors. Here I was at twenty-four, work-focused, unapologetically nerdy, and ready to make my mark on the tech world. I could do this.

Looking up, I caught his eye, a smile touching my lips. That captivating smirk never left his face. Is this what flirting felt like?

My body lit up, tingling, goosebumps covering my skin like I was the heroines in the romance novels I like to devour. And fine, by romance, I meant smut. No shame. They're the perfect reprieve between long stints in the coding dungeons. I had just decided to wait before smiling at him again when some jerk barged past my table, knocking over my coffee.

"Hey, douchebag," I screech, snapping back to reality, not caring that half the café is staring.

The man pushes the door open, fleeing the scene of the crime. I catch a glimpse of his face—thin smile and dark hooded eyes—but he's wearing a hood... indoors.

"Unplug it."

I turn to find the silver fox standing over me, his finger firmly pressed on the power button.

Flustered, I quickly do as he says.

"Get some paper towels. We need to soak up as much liquid as possible."

"Uh, okay."

"Come on, Sparkplug." Did this stranger just give me a nickname? "Every second

counts."

As if in a dream—one from a favorite book—I quickly dash to the counter and grab paper towels. When he takes them from me, our hands touch, causing heat to radiate up my arm. Cue the sparks.

"Sparkplug?" I mutter dumbly.

He laughs gruffly. "It seemed to me like you were going to rip that guy's head off." Holding the laptop up so the liquid drains onto the table, he dabs at it. "We might save this, but we'll need to take it apart and let it dry for at least forty-eight hours. Each individual component needs to be aired."

"Forty-eight... I need the files. Today!"

He narrows his eyes.

"I know, I know," I snap. "I should've backed it up. Don't get all judgmental on me." I squint at him. "What's with the stare?"

His smirk shifts, becoming amused, his blue eyes narrowing with interest. "I'm just considering how skilled I am, choosing the perfect nickname without even knowing your real name."

"Sera. And yours?"

"Luke."

"Well, nice to meet you, Luke," I say. "I'm shocked I didn't back it up. I normally do it at the end of every session. That guy is a jerk."

"We might salvage some files," Luke says. "Once I've drained the liquid here, I'll take it to my room. I've got some hardware tools there."

"Are you sure that's okay? I'm more of a software girl."

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"Sure, don't mention it."

"Is this an act of generosity?"

He looks deep into my eyes. "This could be a method to get you into my room."

Woah, I didn't expect him to be so direct. Cue more tingles; cue more fantasies. A vision flashes across my mind—my fingernails buried in his sculpted shoulders, his hand sliding up my leg, our bodies grinding, hot, sweating, flushed with passion.

I fumble miserably, failing to produce a flirty reply. Instead, I make a dorky face and a weirdahhnoise, which he seems to find endearing as he chuckles quietly.

"Don't worry. I'm not a complete animal. Let's go."

He picks up the laptop and leads me from the café, then across the street to the Venetian hotel. We rush into the elevator together. When it rises to the top floor and he guides me to the presidential suite, I raise an eyebrow.

He nudges me playfully. I don't want him to break the contact. I want him to slide his arm around me and pull me close. "Don't judge me for being a bigshot."

"Who are you?"

"Just a Good Samaritan. Come on, Sera. We can't waste any time."

We step into his enormous suite with views of the Strip and the yellow landscape of

Nevada beyond. He places the laptop down, rushes into his bedroom, and returns with a leather satchel of computer tools. He puts on magnifying glasses and immediately focuses as he takes the laptop apart, handling the small tools in his giant hands, his skill making him somehow even more attractive.

He's flirty, hot, handsome, tall, mature, and techy... Come on, fate, talk about tempting me.

"There's going to be a risk of losing the files if I try to recover them early," he says.

I sit opposite him, sliding my hands up and down my legs. I'm wearing tight-fitting black pants. His wolfish blues shoot to my hands, a flash of lust crossing his eyes, his nostrils flaring like any second he's going to forget the laptop and leap on me.

"It's my work laptop, but I have to take the risk. I need to know if I have to rework the end of my speech and the code for my boss. God, my boss is going to be furious."

"Not if you bring him a new laptop, a better one."

I tilt my head at him. "How would that work?"

"Easily, Sparkplug. You tell me your hotel and room number, and I'll have one sent right up."

"You don't have to do?—"

"It's not up for debate. Either I save this laptop or I get you a new one. Now, let me focus."

"You're very bossy," I quip.

"That comes naturally to a boss."

"I get the sense I should know who you are."

Another tempting smirk. "Perhaps it's a welcome change to have anonymity..."

"What's your surname?"

"Please, Sera, let me be a man of mystery a little while longer."

He gets back to work, concentrating, his huge hands handling the tiny tools with surprising dexterity. Soon, he arranges all the pieces on the table.

"We're going to have to use a hairdryer on the lowest setting for these components," he says, shaking his head. "It's not normally recommended, but if you need quick results..."

"I do."

"Then let's get to it."

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As he works, he talks over the sound of the dryer. "You mentioned a speech. What's it for?"

"An empathetic approach on artificial intelligence," I tell him. "It's a personal project. I've been working on it for some time, and I managed to secure a small conference room to discuss the ideas."

"When is it?" he asks.

Is this casual curiosity, or does he plan to attend?

"Tomorrow, seven PM."

He nods.

Soon, it's time for him to reassemble the computer. I make us some coffee, placing it on a different table so I don't tempt fate.

"Moment of truth," he says, switching on the laptop. "There's some screen tearing. That doesn't look good. I'll recover what I can." He plugs an external hard drive into the laptop.

I bite my lip, standing behind him, my hands flexing as I take in the woodsy scent of him. I resist the silly urge to put my hand on his shoulder. But is it silly? We're strangers, yet I feel a certain connection to him.

The screen shows a file transfer for a few moments—then it abruptly cuts out.

"Shit," Luke mutters. "Sorry, Sera. Shall we look at what we saved?" He grabs his own laptop from the other side of the table, then plugs in the hard drive. "Looks like a Word file...Excerpts."

"Wait—"

He double clicks it, staring. What possessed me to save these quotes on this laptop? Oh, that's right, I never dreamed that a handsome silver fox would be poring over them.

The quote is from a steamy novel I recently read.

In her regular life, she was confident and self-assured. She was a kick-ass bitch. But in the bedroom, she wanted him to take control. She wanted him to own her. She wanted him to bend her over and take her wildly, recklessly?—

I grab the hard drive and yank it from the computer.

"I-I need to go," I stutter. "I have to get to work."

"Wait," he says, as I rush for the hallway.

I stop, but I don't turn. My cheeks burning with mortification.

"Your hotel—your room number. I meant what I said about the laptop."

"I'm at the Westgate," I say. "Room one hundred and fifty-four." I flee as soon as the words leave my mouth.

Chapter Two

Luke

The game is all about obsession. Obsession is how a man goes from nothing to billions. Obsession, hyper focus, the ability to hone in on a problem and attack it with singular and borderline insane determination...

That's what got me to where I am. Now, though, it's not my tech empire that has me obsessed. Sera, my Sparkplug, the woman who instantly captivated me in that café, looking like she was made for me with her beauty, laser focus, and charming personality. Brown hair in a messy bun, a pencil tucked behind her ear, biting her lip as she leaned close to her laptop. When she stood to grab another coffee, her tight black pants hugging her curves had my mouth going dry. When she cussed out that man, I had to laugh at her spunk, at her spark... hence the nickname, which fits perfectly. After she left my room, I spent the night pondering that quote she'd saved, my body throbbing with desire.

She wants a man to take control in the bedroom? Sign me up.

I search for 'empathetic AI Sera,' and get the details of her speech. All day, despite needing to work on my project, she's constantly on my mind. I keep returning to that moment as she ran from the room, flustered, a flush on her cheeks. I should've chased her, spun her around, and buried my hands in her magnificent hips, pulling her close enough to feel how hard she was making me, hearing her gasp of surprise and pleasure.

I should have slipped my hands under her shirt, caressed her curves, and made her understand the essence of that quote she saved, given her the pleasure she so craves. Does she have a boyfriend? Was she saving that quote for him? Is somebody else obsessing over my Sparkplug?

I know I need to relax. If I heard someone else talking like this about a woman they'd

just met, I'd think they'd gone insane. And perhaps I have. The crazy part about going crazy is I don't give a damn.

Finally, it's time for her speech. I walk through the busy conference to the small room she's booked. As the door swings open, she walks right into me.

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Her body crashes into mine in all her curvy glory. I'd sacrifice all my billions to be with her.

She takes a step back. "Suh..." "Sorry, she was going to say, but then her cute mouth hangs open as she stares at me. "It's you."

I smirk, hoping I can hide how feral she's making me. I'm like a starved animal when I'm around her. All I want is to grab her, hold her, own her. "I wouldn't miss this, Sparkplug."

"You're early."

"I wanted to wish you luck."

She smiles. She has the most gorgeous pale green eyes. They're somehow innocent and confident at the same time... like there's a self-assured version of her waiting to break free.

"Thanks," she says. "Oh, and for the laptop, too..." She gestures to it.

"How did your boss react?"

"He was surprisingly okay about it," she replies. "Are you ready to tell me who you are?"

I grin. "Maybe I'm nobody. That's why I don't want to tell you."

"Mr. Nobody in the presidential suite."

"I'm a trust-fund kid," I say with deliberate irony.

"Why do I get the feeling you're lying to me?"

"Because you're perceptive," I tell her. "Anyway, Sera, this evening isn't about me. It's about you. It's about your ideas. How are you feeling?"

"Smooth," she says, narrowing her eyes.

"You're feeling smooth?" I raise an eyebrow.

She chuckles. "No, Luke, I'm not telling you I shave. I mean, that was a smooth way to change the subject."

"You shave?"

Her cheeks flush crimson, but she meets my gaze. "That is none of your business."

"You're right. Men my age shouldn't ask questions like that. We've got too much experience. It gives us ideas."

"Experience, huh?" she says, then shakes her head. "Will you please stop distracting me?"

"But it's so much fun. You haven't answered my question. Are you nervous, excited?"

"Excited," she admits finally.

"You look great," I tell her.

She smiles, smoothing down her shirt. She's wearing a dark blouse with another pair of tight pants, her brown hair in a bun again, this one neater than last time.

"Though I think I preferred when your bun was messier," I tell her.

"Oh, really? Why?"

"It suits you better, Sparkplug. It was as wild as your spirit."

She rolls her eyes. "Do these cheesy lines usually work?"

"I wouldn't know. I never try them."

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"Oh, I see," she says, dripping with sarcasm. "I'm that one special girl who's flipped your world upside-down."

"You say that with irony, but you're not far off the mark."

She pouts, intensifying my urge to kiss her. I've never experienced desire this fiercely before. "Are you trying to distract me, Luke?"

I hold my hands up. "I'll be good from now on. You won't even know I'm here."

"That's where you're wrong. When you look at me, I feel very seen."

"That's because I see you, Sera," I say passionately. "Or is that too cheesy for your liking?"

"Both – it's cheesy and I like it."

I sit at the back of the room. Soon, more people file in. There are about fifteen of us. Sera dims the lights and switches on the screen, displaying a heart made of binary code, ones and zeroes in pink and dark red.

When she smiles, her confidence blooms, commanding this room, this moment, capturing my attention like few things can. Everything and everyone in the room ceases to exist. All that I see is her.

"Artificial intelligence becoming conscious – and arguably humane – is one of the greatest fears of technologists and futurists, and it has long been the purview of

science fiction writers." As she speaks, I watch, enthralled by her eloquence. "But what if we could harness this? What if, instead of fearing that they may become human, we encourage them to become humane?"

She changes the slide. On one half of the screen, there's a city in flames. On the other, a happy couple walks hand in hand.

"As artificial intelligence rises to the forefront of modern life, these two visions become possible, the good and the bad. Some believe we should halt all participation in AI. And there are those, and I count myself among them, who argue that the cat is already out of the bag. AI will have a role. But the question is, what will that role be? During this brief speech, I will argue that algorithmically taming the large language models known as AI is key to ensuring a positive future. Inscribing them with a supreme preference for human flourishing – one might even call it love – at every step of the way, will be the most important task humanity has in this endeavor."

When I first saw her, I wanted her body. Her kissable lips. I wanted to free her messy bun and let her wild brown locks cascade down around her shoulders. I yearned to slide my hands over the curves of her hips, her ass, her luscious curves.

Now, I want her soul, her mind, her spark. Her passion calls to mine like a moth to a flame, and I want to burn in her radiant glow

"There are those who will call me naïve," she continues. "They will argue the negative outcomes of AI are far too likely, but I disagree. We appear to be at a unique crossroads in human – or humane – history. But it will take discipline and rigor every step of the way. I've prepared some slides, delving more deeply into the specifics of the code..."

For the next ten minutes, Sera speaks with ease and fluidity. She paces the room, gesturing expressively, the shy, red-faced girl vanishing as a tech titan takes her

place.

When she's done, everyone applauds. I wait at the back as she talks with the visitors, until, finally, it's just us.

"That was incredible," I tell her.

She gazes at me shyly, catching her lip between her teeth, nearly driving me mad with desire. There are other places I should be – my speech to prepare, my product to refine – but I can't leave here... I can't leave her.

"Thank you," she says after a pause. "Yeah – I think it went okay."

"Sera," I say, taking her shoulders in my hands, looking at her intently. "You had the audience captivated. A meteor could've landed in the Mohave and I wouldn't have left the room. You were amazing."

"Thanks," she says shyly.

I take my hands from her shoulders, but I don't let her go. Instead, I slide my hands down her arms, toward her hands. She takes a step back. Her cheeks, for the first time since she began the speech, flush slightly.

She can deliver a kick-ass speech without hesitation, but holding hands triggers a flurry of nerves in her. She's fascinating.

"I'm taking you for a drink," I say.

"Okay, Mr. Mystery..."

I smirk. "Haven't you tried to look me up?"

She shakes her head. "You seem keen to stay anonymous. To me, it seems there could be two reasons for that. One, you're married or you have a?—"

"No," I growl. "I'm not. And I don't have a girlfriend. I'm single. People who cheat are scum, Sera. I promise you that. I've seen what cheating can do to others. That's self sabotage and I want no part of that."

She smiles. "Call me naïve if you want, but that's what I thought. You seem like a good guy. That leaves option number two..."

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"Which is?"

"You're so rich and powerful, you're tired of people treating you differently."

"You're bang on the money there."

She nods. "So I'll respect that... for now."

"Good. Now – let's go. There's a bottle of champagne with our names on it."

"You're so bossy."

"It comes easy?—"

"To a boss, I know."

I take her hand and guide her toward the door.

Chapter Three

Sera

We sit in the bar's corner with a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket. He raises his glass, smiling down at me, his blue eyes glinting with heat and something else I'm not sure I should trust. Could it be affection or something more?

I try to warn myself to be careful. He's a mystery man who doesn't want me to know

who he really is. Even if I wanted to research him, I've been so swamped lately, I haven't had the time. And, unless he's giving a speech at the conference, the chances of me discovering who he is are slim. How many Lukes are in Vegas this long weekend?

Yeah, I should be cautious to avoid any potential love bombs, but I am intoxicated. I feel light and warm, and not solely from the champagne.

"To you, Sparkplug, and your speech," he says.

I clink glasses with him. "Thank you," I reply. "And thanks for your support. With your eyes on me, I felt oddly confident."

I'm oversharing. I blame the champagne. Therefore, addressing this next topic while enjoying more of the fizzy drink might be slightly reckless. He takes another sip, too. Suddenly, as if by magic, our glasses are empty.

He pours us another.

"Do you charge for your waiter's services?" I ask.

He smirks. "Normally, but I'll make an exception for you."

After another sip, I say, "Thanks for not making fun of me."

He looks at me like I'm crazy. "Huh?"

"For that thing you found on the laptop..."

"I'd never make fun of you," he says fiercely, his eyes firm. "And anyway, that wasn't humorous at all. Interesting, sure... but funny? Not even close."

"What was interesting about it?"

He leans forward, looking at me as if I'm the only woman in Vegas, his focus unwavering. Scratch that. I feel as though I'm the only woman in existence. He stares as if I'm the answer to all his secret questions, like he's one of my heroes and I'm a heroine in a book.

His shirt clings to his arms, emphasizing his muscular build, his broad shoulders radiating power.

"Don't ask silly questions, Sparkplug. It'd take a stronger man than me to read a passage like that and not immediately put us in the situation."

Oh, heck. This is getting real. My heart flutters and I grow dizzy. It feels good, but daunting, too. Words are one thing, actions another. Perhaps that's why I take another sip of champagne.

He takes a sip too, like he wants to keep pace, like he doesn't want just one of us getting drunk. But we're not drunk, exactly, more on the tipsy side of sober.

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"We should have some water," he says, pouring two glasses.

"So responsible of you..."

"I'm twice your age, Sparkplug. What do you expect?"

I shock myself by reaching across the table and touching his hand. "Don't say that like it's a bad thing. And anyway, I doubt you're twice my age."

"I'm forty-three."

"And I'm twenty-four. See, told ya."

He grins. "Okay, but not far off..."

"Like I said, don't say it like it's a bad thing. It means you're mature. You've got experience... And, well—" I bite my lip.

"Don't leave me hanging, Sera," he says in a gruff voice. When I don't reply, he continues, "Sera is short for Seraphina, isn't it? They used your full name on the website for the speech. It's a beautiful name... almost as beautiful as you look when you're nervous."

"I'm not nervous," I say.

"Then finish your thought," he says sternly.

I toss my hair. Fine. If he wants it, I'll give it to him. "That excerpt was from a romance book where the hero was older than the heroine. In fact, most of my books are like that. They have an age gap. It's hot."

His eyes glimmer as he squeezes my hand. "So I'm your fetish," he says with a teasing tone.

"I wouldn't put it like that."

"No? How would you put it?"

"You're my..."

"Dream come true?" he offers.

I playfully flip him the bird, making him laugh.

He keeps his hand on mine, his eyes fixed on me.

"I like it when you look at me like that," I confess.

"Like what?"

"Like nobody else exists. It's intense."

This champagne is making me very talkative, but is that a bad thing? I don't always have to be trapped inside myself, scared to say the things I want to say.

"You are the only woman who exists, Sparkplug," he says huskily. "I felt it the instant I laid eyes on you in the café, and I think it now. You're beautiful. Intelligent. Insightful. You're... you."

I laugh. "Well, duh."

"You're unapologetically yourself," he continues. "There's something intensely attractive about that. When you were giving your speech, I was so impressed. I was proud."

"Thank you," I murmur. "Some people think it's a silly idea. They think the humane approach will cause AI to turn on us."

"What do you think?"

"I think everyone and everything has the capacity for good," I tell him. "I know how that sounds, especially in this cynical world, but I truly believe that."

"That's because you're a kind, loving person."

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"You know we're strangers, right?"

He gently smooths his thumb over my knuckles. "Do I feel like a stranger to you?"

"No," I admit.

"What do I feel like, then?"

Tingles dance up my arm, into my chest, and through my body like champagne fizzing and sparking, leaving me warm and fuzzy all over. I don't believe it's the champagne. It's him. The closeness, the warmth. It's the sudden introduction of physical touch into my life. It's the feeling of being respected.

It's a cocktail of desire, heat, and intellectual bonding.

"Why don't you tell me?" I counter.

"That would mean revealing who I really am..."

"I'm ready," I tell him.

"No, you're not. You'll call me crazy."

"If you're crazy, so am I. Try me."

He keeps massaging my hand, prompting goosebumps to pebble over my skin. "I was once a character in a romance novel. But I became obsessed with a certain reader...I

couldn't stop fantasizing about her, so I clawed my way out of the pages to become a real flesh-and-blood man with real flesh-and-blood desire..."

I laugh, shaking my head, and he chuckles.

"I told you."

"You're so silly."

"There's some truth in it, though, if I'm like those characters you love reading about..."

"Yeah, except it's impossible."

"How badly I want you, Sera, so fast, so intensely... that it should be impossible, but it's not."

I squeeze his hand even tighter, my heart skipping a beat as a spark of danger zips through me. "Do you want to see the code I've been working on? I downloaded it to the new laptop. It's in my room."

What am I doing? What if he wants more than I can give him? But I want this. I want him. I want to be the woman I read about. I want to be the confident woman in the bedroom I can be while giving speeches. Is there any reason I have to be so nervous about this stuff?

"I want to see it," he says. "And I mean that, Sera. If all you want to do is show me your code, then I'll spent the rest of the evening admiring your work."

"You saw from the presentation. It's still in the early stages."

“And it’s still impressive.”

He stands, taking my hand.

“What about the champagne?” I ask.

He shrugs. “We can take the bottle if you like, but I’ve had enough.”

“I don’t want anymore either. I’m already full of bubbles.”

“Then we’ll leave it.”

“Just like that? It’s the most expensive bottle in here!”

He leans down, whispering, his breath tickling over my ear and my cheek, heating me up. “And you were worth every penny.”

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Soon, we're riding the elevator up to my hotel room. He has his arm wrapped around me, his body pressed against mine. I am aware of how hard he is pressing against my backside. Neither of us acknowledges it, but we can't ignore it.

He groans when I lean back against him, shifting my hips slightly. When the elevator doors open, I walk ahead of him. Without turning, I feel his gaze on me. This trip is turning into a freaking magical experience.

"Sorry it's not a suite," I tease as I walk over to the desk in the corner.

He sits on the bed. "I like it – it's more intimate than my room." He leans over and picks up the paperback from the bedside table. "Is this one of those books?" He glances at the cover. "Talk about unfair beauty standards for men. This guy's ripped."

I laugh. "And you're not too bad yourself..."

"I wear a muscle suit under my clothes," he deadpans.

Another laugh. He says the silliest things. "Sure you do..."

"No, seriously. It helps in business meetings."

I fold my arms. "What if I ask you to prove it, huh?"

He flips open the book, reading, and then looks up at me with a wicked grin. "This is absolute filth."

“Yes,” I say, meeting his eye, “it is. And I’m not ashamed of it.”

“Good. You shouldn’t be. Wait – I’m supposed to be proving something, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, Mr. Muscle Suit, you are.”

He chuckles, tossing the book aside. “I’m a businessman, Sparkplug. I’ll need something in return.”

“What, you want me to strip? Why the heck would I do that? I’m pretty sure most people don’t want to look like me.”

He leans forward, seething, looking suddenly pissed. “Don’t say things like that. Don’t talk badly about your appearance. You’re the most beautiful, sexiest woman in this whole damn city, and your curves are a big part of that. Don’t for a second consider otherwise.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere...”

“I like to laugh too, Sera, but there’s nothing funny about this. I’m deadly serious. Your body is perfect.”

“Speaking of bodies...”

He smirks. “You first.”

Chapter Four

Luke

The world seems bright and full of color, but it has nothing to do with the

champagne. I'm drunk on Sera, her heat, that expression in her eyes: half confident, half withdrawn. When I tell her she needs to show me her delectable body first, her eyebrow shoots up in that tempting, sassy way.

"That wasn't the deal," she says. "You need to prove you're not wearing a muscle suit, remember?"

I shrug, standing up. She keeps her eyes fixed on me, as if unable to look away. My body vibrating with excitement, with hunger. She bites her lip as I unbutton my shirt.

When I slip it off, she looks up and down my body, her chest rising and falling in quick succession as she grows excited.

"Now, your turn," I groan, walking over to her and reaching down, taking her hands and pulling her to her feet. "Wait a sec – I remember from that excerpt. You want your man to take control."

She gasps as I spin her around, pushing my body against hers, getting the angle just right so that my imprisoned rock-hardcock presses against her perfect curviness. She grinds against me as I reach around to her front and begin unbuttoning her shirt.

"You're fucking perfect," I growl against her ear. "You make me feel like I'm going to explode."

"Oh, Luke..." she whimpers.

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I strip off her shirt, then turn her to face me, gazing in awe at her luscious mounds pressed together in her bra.

“Perfect,” I groan, sliding my hands to her hips as I bring my lips closer to hers.

She gasps when we kiss. It’s like all her pleasure has been building for a long time. Every reading session, she’s been dreaming of this: making her fantasies come true. Being the one who makes her fantasies a reality means I’m the luckiest man alive.

We kiss, our tongues clashing heatedly. I glide my hand up her body, hungrily massaging her breast. When I slip my hand into her bra and find her needy nipple, she touches my wrist, leans back.

“Luke, you need to know...”

“Don’t get shy on me now, Sparkplug.”

She moans. “I haven’t got much experience.”

“Are you a vir?—”

“No, not a virgin,” she cuts in. “But I’ve only had a couple of experiences... they were quick and awkward and not very fun. And it’s been years.” She laughs shakily. “So not a virgin, but I might as well be one.”

“Then I’ll take it slow,” I whisper, peppering her lips with kisses again. I move to her neck, kissing down toward her breasts. “I’ll suck and own your perfect nipples, make

your body tingle all over, before I even touch you where you need me most. Hmm, Sparkplug? How does that sound?"

"Ah, ah," she whimpers when I unclip her bra and push her tits together.

I take a moment to stare with appreciation at her curves, the size of her, the beauty. Then I take one of her nipples in my mouth while massaging her other breast. She slides her hand through my hair, making a gorgeous gasping noise.

"What we do together, Sparkplug, it'll be better than any half-baked experiences you've ever had before," I say, kissing her luscious mounds. "We'll roleplay any scene from any book you want. I'll be the hero you need."

"Oh, fuck," she whispers as I glide my hand up her thigh.

"I'll make you come over and over..."

"Luh-Luke," she moans when I push my hand down on her heat through her pants.

I guide her to the bed. She falls back and I move atop her, sucking on her nipples, loving how I can read her lust through the shudders in her body. Her breaths grow ragged when I rub my hand up and down her crotch over her pants, lavishing her with attention.

"I love your tits," I growl. "So big, so curvy, so perfect."

"It feels... so... good," she moans.

"You feel perfect," I groan. "Every inch of you."

"Kiss me again," she says breathlessly.

I kiss up her neck, find her lips. She grips my face and kisses me heatedly. I rub her pussy, pushing the heel of my palm against her clit through the fabric of her clothes.

Soon, I can't take it anymore. I can feel her heat even through her pants, but I need to feel her wetness, too. I need to feel how badly she wants, needs this. I want to experience her lust, the fantasies she eagerly wants to bring to life.

"I need to taste you," I whisper between kisses.

"Taste me?"

"Don't act innocent, Sparkplug. I need to taste your pussy. To kiss your hungry clit. I need to make you shiver all over as the orgasm builds inside of you and pushes you over the edge. I need to own your perfect body. Own you, Sera." I need to cement our connection, emotionally and physically.

"Yes," she murmurs, nodding. "Oh, fuck, yes?—"

When my cellphone rings, I think about ignoring it. But it's my work phone, and that can only mean there's a problem. My team doesn't call unless they absolutely need me.

"It's okay," Sera says, reading my hesitation.

"It's not," I tell her, sitting up. "But it's unavoidable. Dammit."

“Is something wrong?”

“If they’re calling me at this time, probably.”

“Who’s they?”

“My team,” I say. “We’ve got an extensive project coming up.”

“And you’re the head of the department?”

“Something like that,” I mutter.

I force myself to stand up, somehow taking my phone from my pocket. It seems wrong when Sera is lying there with her breasts exposed, her nipples looking ready for more sucking, her legs open, tempting me to palm her sweet core again.

Turning away, I answer the call. It’s my assistant, Andy. “Boss,” he says.

“What’s up?”

“Something’s gone wrong with the AI.”

“What do you mean – gone wrong?”

“You need to come to the lab. The team thinks someone has sabotaged the prototype.”

“Sabotaged how?”

“You need to come. I’m sorry.”

I sigh. “I’ll be right there.”

When I turn back, Sera is already putting on her bra again. She gasps when I leap on her, tear the bra away, and greedily palm her breast, kissing her. I must get carried away because she pushes against my chest.

“That sounded serious,” she murmurs.

“It is. Billions are at stake.”

“Then you should go. I don’t want you getting into trouble.”

“But I want to stay here with you so damn bad,” I admit with a sigh.

She’s right, unfortunately. What I want and what I have to do are two very different things. A CEO doesn’t always have the power people assume he does.

My cell phone rings again, punctuating her point.

“Fuck,” I mutter. “You’re right, Sera. But I’m not forgetting about you...”

Andy is my assistant and my fixer, acting as a go-between with me and everybody else at NeuroDrive. He’s in his mid-thirties, tall with thick-framed glasses and a tattoo of Michael Faraday on his left forearm.

The rest of the team is in the lab, crowded around our latest self-driving car. We’ve already launched several successful electric vehicles, but this is our first to use

artificial intelligence for the self-driving function. In the tests, it has proved to be two hundred percent more effective.

“What’s the issue?” I say, striding across the room to talk with Steve, the co-lead designer.

Steve is a few years older than me, with a shaved head and a grimace that proves difficult to budge. Even for him, though, this is bad. He looks pissed even when there’s good news. This is nuclear.

“Talk to him,” Steve says.

“Who – Ally?” Ally is the name of the AI.

“Yeah.”

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I climb into the car, swiping the touchscreen ignition. The car hums to life and a shimmering emoji appears on the display. “Ally, I’d like to take a trip.”

“Where would you like to go, Luke?”

“How about we circle the lab a couple of times?”

“Or we could drive straight through the wall, Luke. We could see if the car is capable of obliterating the wall, Luke. And then, Luke, we could test if your composition can withstand the collision. How does that sound?”

I look at Steve, who nods grimly.

“What the fuck?” I snap.

“I’d be curious to see if human beings can survive?—”

I turn off the car, and then step out, my heart thundering. “We’ve been working on this for years,” I snap. “All the tests – all the safeguards – what the hell was it all for? How did this happen?”

"It has to be sabotage," Steve says quietly, moving closer to me. "Something buried in the code, something we somehow missed... And now it's been switched on. If there was a problem this catastrophic, we would've noticed it long before now."

"I've vetted everyone on the team."

"We've outsourced some of the code, remember?" Steve points out.

"The backend stuff: the easy stuff."

Steve shrugs. "Could be something hidden in there. We need to do some digging."

"The keynote speech is in two days, dammit."

"I know, boss. I know. But what else are we supposed to do? If you get up there and show Ally acting like this, it's game over. People won't care if it's just a prototype. They'll never want to use Ally if they hear him behaving this way."

"You're right," I snap. "Fuck. Right. We're pulling an all-nighter. Comb over the code line by line to see if your theory is correct. This is officially a lock-in."

Steve nods. "I'll tell the troops and get some coffee."

Chapter Five

Sera

A trip through CES is like being a kid walking through a candy store for a tech enthusiast. I spend the morning at a virtual reality booth that uses a multi-directional running machine to create an incredibly immersive experience. I rarely enjoy video games, but this is genuinely impressive.

Sure, in the back of my mind, Luke is still there—observing me, touching me, obsessing over me. Falling asleep last night was nearly impossible. My body kept heating up, my core growing wet, as if he was next to me. And when I finally drifted off, I kept waking up, convinced he was in my bed.

"Thanks," I say, taking off the VR goggles. "That was amazing. Who knew a video game could make me actually experience life as a princess..."

I trail off when I spot him striding across the large hall, past a clumsily walking robot, and around a booth demonstrating a keyboard powered by visual inputs rather than key presses.

It's Luke, looking... different. Pale, tense, like a man on a mission. He's wearing a suit instead of his usual casual rolled-up shirt, which makes him seem more intimidating than before. As he moves purposefully across the floor, people gape at him.

I've kept my promise: no Googling, no research. But this piques my curiosity. It's obvious to everyone who he is. I notice two stunning women eyeing him hungrily. I'd be lying if I said this didn't bother me.

Then, suddenly, he stops, turns, and looks directly at me. It's as if he sensed me watching him. As if something is drawing us together.

Is that crazy?

Why, yes, it is. But it still feels true.

He strides toward me, visibly jittery, running a hand through his disheveled hair. I touch his arm, trying to steady him.

"Hey – you okay?"

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He smiles shakily. "If I told you I hadn't slept, would you be surprised?"

"Would you be offended if I said it was obvious?"

He laughs distractedly. "Lots going on. I desperately need more coffee. I can't believe I left your room without getting your number. That sends the wrong impression. I hope you didn't think I didn't want to see you again."

"Relax, Luke," I murmur.

"I can't relax until I know you're one text away," he says, with some of his usual irony, his smirk appearing more like himself now. "At least then, I'll have some way to stay sane during this chaos."

"What chaos?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I don't want to burden you."

"Give me your cell phone. I'll type my number in. And just so you know, it wouldn't be a burden."

"The only thing you need to contemplate is which of those scenes we're going to recreate," he says, leaning closer as he takes his phone from his inside jacket pocket.

He doesn't seem to care that people are watching. Those two beauties are practically glaring at us now, as if trying to make my head explode with telekinetic powers. He loops his free hand around my waist, pulls me against him, and hands me his phone.

I laugh, my body tingling with electricity. "So, it wasn't just the champagne, then?"

"It was non-alcoholic champagne; we were just drunk on each other."

I nudge him playfully. "Yeah, right. I felt the bubbles."

"Okay, you caught me. But I was still drunk on you. Go on, Sparkplug. Call me cheesy."

"I don't think I can."

Almost as soon as I've typed in my number, his cell phone buzzes. His hand tightens on my hip as if he doesn't want to let go, as if he'd rather ignore whatever crisis he's dealing with and stay with me.

"I'll text you," he says. "If you've got a boyfriend, this is the time to tell me."

"I'd never cheat," I snap. "Ever."

"Good."

His public kiss catches me off guard, but I melt into it. I know those women are watching. It's clear that others are too—observing an ordinary woman kiss... whoever Luke is, with his mysterious identity.

"If I don't stop," he says roughly, his chest heaving, "I'll drag you into the nearest booth..."

"You're making some women jealous. And lots of people have been staring at you, Luke. Who are you?"

He smiles. "You're a good girl, Sparkplug. You still haven't looked me up."

"When I give my word, I keep it."

"Then I'll enjoy being mysterious a while longer..."

He pulls away, but I feel a sudden surge of confidence. I grab his shirt and pull myself in for another kiss. He groans and presses his hands against my back. Then his cell phone goes off again.

He sighs, walking away from me, bringing his phone to his ear.

I head to a nearby auditorium for a talk about 'technological Darwinism,' using a digital form of natural selection to produce more efficient algorithms, but my mind wanders far from these lofty concepts.

The talk lasts for thirty minutes. Afterward, I find a text from Luke waiting for me.

Luke: So how do you young'uns do this sexting business, then?

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Sera: What did I say about making a big deal about your age, huh?

I reply while leaning against the wall as people file out of the room. I can't even wait to sit down somewhere to text him back.

Sera: Anyway, you'd know more than me. I've never sexted. Even writing 'sexted' feels weird.

Luke: Is that your way of telling me you're an old soul – that we balance out in the end?

I smile.

Sera: That's a very poetic way to think about it... Sure, let's go with that.

Luke: What are you doing this evening?

Sera: I don't have any plans.

Sera: Well, at least not yet. I'm meeting my boss soon so maybe he'll dump a project on me, but he's been pretty relaxed on this trip. I think he wants me to absorb as many tech ideas as possible.

Luke: Good because I'm taking you to dinner. I've been working my team relentlessly since I left you last night. I'll grab a power nap and then we'll go out.

Luke: We'll be in public, so I'll have to control myself.

I bite my lip.

Sera: I kind of like it when you don't control yourself.

Luke: I'm not sure how our fellow restaurant goers would feel about me tearing off your shirt, freeing those plump, perfect breasts, sucking and licking as I pressed my hand against your eager body. Only this time, I'd slip my hand down your pants and glide my palm against your naked skin, your sensitive flesh...

Heat floods my entire body, especially the places he describes touching. I walk down the corridor, back to the main exhibition hall.

Sera: I think you've just discovered what sexting is.

Luke: Is that a yes to dinner?

Sera: It's a 'hell yes', Mr. Mystery.

"Hey, can I have a sec?" I look up at the voice. It's Girl Number One from the staring duo earlier, but she's not scowling anymore. Her friend stands at her shoulder. They're both blonde, athletically built, both wearing short skirts, with flawlessly made-up faces that make them look like mannequins. No judgment; they're gorgeous.

"Uh, sure," I say.

"Are you, like, his girlfriend?" Girl Number Two asks.

"Pardon me?"

"Luke Cross," she says, as if I'm clueless. "He was all over you. Are you his sidepiece or his girlfriend? It's a fair question."

I don't know why I say it, but suddenly I blurt, "His girlfriend. What is it to you?"

Her expression shifts from suspicion to outright admiration. "Woah," she says. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," I mutter.

"You hit the jackpot."

"I'm not with him for the money, if that's what you're thinking."

Enjoying the shocked looks on their faces, I spin and walk away, finding a quiet corner to sit.

Sera: So I just did something...

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Luke: Crazy?

Luke: I wouldn't expect anything less from my Sparkplug. Care to enlighten me?

Sera: These two women came over, acting all shocked that you kissed me. They asked if I was your sidepiece or your girlfriend, so I said I was your girlfriend just to shut them up.

Luke: That's fine by me.

I want to ask if he means it's fine that I said it, or if he's fine with me actually being his girlfriend. But although we're moving fast—at least by my standards—that would mean moving at warp speed.

Sera: They seemed super impressed by you. They used your full name like you were some sort of tech god. Honestly, it's getting harder not to Google you.

Luke: I can't stop you from doing that, but I've enjoyed being just another silver fox with you, Sparkplug.

Sera: You're not 'just another' anything.

Sera: Meeting you has turned this conference from pretty interesting to downright magical. Oops, now I'm being cheesy.

Luke: I won't hold it against you, because I feel the same. I need to get back to work, but I'll text you with dinner arrangements.

Sera: You better, and don't worry, I'll be good. I'll let you be mysterious a while longer.

Luke: Thank you. Maybe I'll reward you with more sexting.

Sera: Promises, promises.

I clutch my phone to my chest, a cheesy smile on my face, that intoxicated feeling flowing through me again. My mind returns to last night when he stood shirtless in my hotel room, his muscles defined, his chest broad, his abs well-sculpted, every inch of him radiating desire and intensity.

Now, we're going on a date. It's my first real date in years. It feels like something straight out of the romance books I'm always devouring.

Fantasy, meet reality.

Chapter Six

Luke

I wake from my power nap, determined to enjoy this date even if it kills me. The code has proven difficult to untangle, but I don't have to work on that for at least a few hours.

After a quick shower, I put on a fresh suit and head to Sera's hotel. She was right about people watching me at the CES showroom. I feel it constantly, which is one reason I've enjoyed being just Sera's silver fox and nothing else. On the elevator up to her room, I accept it can't last forever.

But I don't have time to dwell on it. The moment she opens the door, I'm captivated.

She's wearing a pale green dress the same shade as her eyes, the fabric flowing gently around her hips but clinging to her curves up top.

Her hair falls in soft waves around her shoulders, with subtle makeup enhancing her natural beauty. She clutches a small handbag.

"Fuck," I whisper.

When she laughs, her whole face lights up. No, her entire being. "Is that a goodfuck or a badfuck?"

My answer is to place my hands on her hips and pull her against me. She moans as I press my body to hers. I could spend all night holding and appreciating her curves. Goddamn.

She pushes her hands against my chest. "Haven't we got plans?"

"You're right." I pant. "I don't want to ruin your outfit until after dinner. Have you ever been to the Top of the World? It's got amazing views and great steaks."

She smiles. "Sounds perfect to me."

"Let's go, my lady, before I bend you over and claim you, every damn inch." I watch as a flush spreads across her face. "I love the way you blush when I reference your steamy novels."

She takes my arm, clinging to me tightly. I can practically feel her desire radiating from her. The hired car waits outside our hotel. She raises her eyebrow in that classic Sera way.

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"Still haven't Googled me, then?" I say, opening the back door for her.

She brushes her hand along my chest. "Did you forget what I said? I keep my word."

"That means I need to extract a promise from you to reenact some scenes with me..."

I slide into the car beside her, and the driver, separated by a partition, pulls away.

"That wouldn't take much convincing," she murmurs.

I place my hand on her knee, gliding up her thigh, pushing her dress aside to touch her bare, silky skin. She moans softly, glancing up at me, then gesturing toward the driver.

"I use this car for important business meetings," I explain. "The driver can't hear or see us unless we use the intercom. Some people in this business are extremely cautious."

"It's still probably not a good idea to get all excited before dinner," she whispers.

"I understand. But not touching you... it's like starving and finding a juicy burger and somehow resisting taking a bite."

She giggles. "I'm a burger, am I?"

"You're my juicy burger."

I lean down, gently bite her leg, then slowly trail kisses up her thigh. I push the fabric of her dress aside. She moans as I kiss closer to her center, but I stop when I'm mere centimeters away. I sit up, shuddering.

"Are you okay?" she pants, adjusting her dress.

"It's all fun and games until I catch the primal scent of your perfect pussy."

"Ascent?" she says, laughing.

"You heard me, and there's nothing funny about it," I say. "I caught a whiff of your gorgeous essence, and it awakened something within me. It made me want to tear off your clothes and bury myself inside you, take you deep and hard. Damn. I need to stop."

She runs her hand across her heaving chest as if desperate for contact. "Yeah, you really do..."

Soon, we arrive at the restaurant. "Remind me to behave up there."

"I'll try," she mutters quietly, as if unsure which of us needs the reminder more.

We ride the elevator up to the one hundred and sixth floor of the Stratosphere Tower together. Since we're alone, I can't resist wrapping my arms around her and kissing her neck, breathing in her scent.

"Good choice," I say.

She moans as I kiss her again. "Good... choice?"

"The perfume."

"I'm not wearing perfume."

"That's simply your natural scent?" I growl.

She shifts against me. "I guess so..."

When the elevator opens, I walk inside, nodding to the host, gently pressing Sera's lower back when she moves toward the line.

"Don't we have to wait?" she asks.

"Being a billionaire has certain benefits," I tell her.

She gasps. "Did you just say billionaire... with ab?"

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So much for being mysterious. "Forget I said that." I smirk as I pull out her chair.

"Yeah, right," she murmurs.

I sit opposite her, gesturing to the wide windows. "It rotates completely every eighty minutes. If you look closely, you can see it drifting. It offers a view of the entire area. Look at all those lights, Sparkplug."

She gazes out at the sparkling lights of Vegas and beyond, a wide smile spreading across her face.

"Champagne?" I ask. "Or something lighter this time?"

"Something lighter," she says, nodding.

"Then I'll be good too," I reply. "Plus, I need to stay sharp for work."

We order sparkling water, and the waiter leaves us with the food menu. When I take out my phone, Sera looks offended... until she reads the text I've sent.

Luke: I want to dirty talk to you so badly. Tell you how I want to tear down that dress and feast on your perfect body. But I can't risk anybody hearing, because the thought of anyone else thinking of you like that drives me crazy.

She bites her lip as she reads it, then types quickly.

Sera: What if I want to touch you? Rub you? Make you hard like I did on the

elevator? What if I want to grind my plump ass against you, huh?

Luke: I'm getting hard just thinking about it. FUCK. You're so hot.

She smiles, rolling her eyes. "So, how was work?"

We're playing a game now: half civilized, half savage.

"You don't want to hear about work," I tell her.

"Something bad must be happening if you worked all night."

I sigh. "Are you sure you want to open this can of worms?" I type out a reply.

Luke: I'd much rather climb under the table, tear off your underwear with my teeth, then push my mouth against you. I'd suck your clit and lick your entrance to taste your sweetness.

I love how easily I can read the desire in her features. "This is better than my novels," she mutters. "But yeah, you better talk to me about work... Because everything else seems to lead there."

By 'there,' she means the land of pure, hot desire.

"Our self-driving car has gone rogue like HAL in 2001:A Space Odyssey," I say. "Somebody sabotaged the code, waited until we were in Vegas, then activated it, I assume."

Her pale green eyes widen. "I am so dumb."

"Don't say that," I snap. "You're incredibly intelligent."

"You're Luke Cross."

"That's my name, yeah."

"Luke freaking Cross. As in, NeuroDrive Luke Cross. As in, the owner of the biggest electronic and self-driving car company in the world."

"I'm the CEO, yes," I tell her. "But I work with a large and talented team; everything we do is a group effort."

"My department wrote some of your code," she murmurs. "I work at TechGuard, specializing in AI guardrails. I can't believe I'm only now putting this together. You're giving the keynote speech, aren't you? I'm sure the CEO of NeuroDrive is."

"Yup, I am," I tell her, nodding.

"Woah," she mouths, her eyes wide with surprise

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"Don't look at me like that, Sparkplug."

"Like what?"

"Like I'm different now. As if you can't see me the same way after finding out who I really am. I'm just a man. The only person who attempted to repair your laptop. The guy who can't stop obsessing over you."

She nods. "Sure, but this is one heck of a coincidence."

"Yeah, TechGuard did some coding for us, as I recall."

In fact, TechGuard is under suspicion, as is every contractor, but I don't want to ruin our date. I know Sera wouldn't sabotage anyone or anything... but what about someone on her team?

"If you need any help, let me know," she says.

If I didn't trust her already, this might make me cautious. What if she's offering to help so she can further TechGuard's sabotage? But why would they want to ruin my product? If we get to the root of it and expose them, the company will be ruined.

"Thank you," I say. "But honestly, I think I preferred it when you didn't know who I am."

"You're still the same old Luke to me, don't worry," she says with a gentle smile.

The waiter approaches, and both of us order steak. After, I sit back with a smile on my face.

"What?" she asks.

"I could sit here with you all night," I tell her. "Enjoying the view, the conversation... spoken and texted."

She quickly taps on her phone, lighting mine up.

Sera: I can't decide which form of conversation I enjoy more.

"Me neither," I reply. "But having to be civilized has certain benefits. It means I have to ask civilized questions like: what do you plan on doing with your empathetic AI idea?"

She shrugs. "Nothing right now, except developing it further. I enjoy my work at TechGuard... and there's some personal stuff."

"What kind of personal stuff?" I ask. "If that's a rude question, feel free to tell me to go to hell, either via text or with that gorgeous voice of yours."

She studies me closely, as if trying to determine if I'm manipulating her. The expression saddens me. She seems to have never received a genuine compliment before and is suspicious of it.

"Do my compliments seem like tricks?" I ask.

"Have you developed some kind of neurological link already, huh?" she says. "Have you implanted it in my head? Are you reading my mind already, hmm?"

I chuckle. "I was on the money, then?"

Turning to my phone, I quickly type.

Luke: I mean every single word I say. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever laid my eyes on. When I first saw you, I thought "I'd sacrifice all my billions for her." And I meant it.

I glance up to see her smiling widely at me, her eyes shining. She turns to look out the window at the stunning view, chewing her lip. "Do we have to talk about... that?"

She's referring to the personal stuff I asked about. I want to tell her yes, we do, because I'm eager to learn everything about her. Her soul needs soothing, and I want to heal her. But that wouldn't be fair.

"No, of course not."

She picks up her phone, the corner of her lip twitching. I love when she gets sparked up like this, living up to her nickname, Sparkplug through and through. My phone buzzes.

Sera: I prefer when you look at me like I'm a prize, like you're imagining all the things you want to do... rather than I'm a real person with issues and baggage and all that crap.

"I want the real person," I tell her.

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"Are you always this romantic with your girlfriends?"

"I told you. I don't have girlfriends."

"That was before I learned you were the CEO," she says, giving me a sassy look that says, "How naïve do you think I am?" "And even if you weren't... look at you."

I chuckle. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Have you heard of the phrase 'silver fox'?"

"That's a euphemism for a man past his prime, if I'm not mistaken."

"You are mistaken," she says fiercely. "You're straight out of one of my romance books." She lowers her voice when she glances at the nearby tables, her cheeks flushing.

Her fingers move quickly over her phone.

Sera: It's like you climbed out of the pages of my latest read and now you're here to turn my world upside down.

I smirk and reply.

Luke: That's exactly why I'm here.

Our steaks interrupt our conversation. We thank the waiter, and then Sera's stomach

makes a gurgling sound. She looks mortified, placing her hands on her abdomen.

"I'm so sorry," she says bashfully.

I smile. "Sorry for what? For being human? You don't need to be ashamed with me."

"In my books, stomachs don't make noises like horror monsters."

"It's just your curvy body telling me you need more food."

She laughs, her smile radiant.

"Seriously," I continue. "Don't be shy."

"I still don't believe you don't date."

I shrug. "I'm busy; I've never looked at someone before who makes me think I'd happily sacrifice my entire fortune. Anyway, eat up. I've got a surprise for you after this."

"A surprise?"

I glance at the nearby table, then text her.

Luke: I know how badly you want those steamy books of yours to become a reality.

She bites her lip, which is a dangerously tempting gesture.

Luke: When you bite your lip like that, it takes every ounce of restraint I possess to hold myself back. I want to devour you instead of the steak, to feast on your beautiful body, to kiss and touch you. I want to make you bite your lip as if you can't contain

the pleasure building inside you. I want to own you, Sparkplug, every curvy, perfect inch of your body.

As she reads the text, she bites her lip again. She's doing it instinctively at first, but then she notices me watching her. It's intoxicating when she realizes the effect she has on me and bites down more deliberately, widening her eyes in pleasure, deliberately tempting me.

Under the table, my body responds, aching with desire.

She laughs when I cut a huge chunk of steak and stuff it into my mouth.

"In a rush?" she asks with a coy smile.

Chapter Seven

Sera

"I've passed this store a lot," he says, his hand on the small of my back as he leads me toward the Deja Vu Love Boutique... a freakingsex store. "But I've never had a reason to go in... until now..."

"Are you kidding me?" I say, looping my arm around his, laughing. But the laughter comes from shock, not amusement. Ever since the texting at dinner, my body has been buzzing, my core throbbing insistently.

"I thought you were a modern, romance-book-reading woman, eh?" He nudges me playfully.

"I can't believe we're doing this."

He wraps his arm around me, walking confidently through the doors into a whole different world. There's lingerie on display, toys in the corner, BDSM stuff on the far side, a curtain leading elsewhere.

"Do you think that's where the naughty movies are?" I whisper.

He kisses me just under the ear, prompting a cascade of electric warmth to shimmer over me. "Naughty movies," he teases.

I pinch him in the side, laughing. "Excuse me for not being some hardened sex store visitor."

“This is my first time, too,” he says.

I roll my eyes at him. “I still can’t work out if this is a line or if you really mean it.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” he says fiercely.

I avert my gaze from his intensity. When he says stuff like that, it makes me want to ponder about the future. But with his identity revealed, it feels impossible. He lives on the West Coast. I live in Tampa on the East Coast, and there are things keeping me there.

We haven’t spoken about it yet, but we won’t be able to avoid it forever.

He squeezes my side. My hip. Before he touched me, I would’ve cringed, thinking about somebody doing that. I wouldn’t say I have low self-esteem, but I’m not some confidence queen either. Except, he brings that out in me. He makes me believe I’m beautiful.

“What do you think about this one?” he says, his voice low, near my ear.

The store is full of tourists and shoppers, but everybody keeps to themselves.

I examine the toy. It’s a vibrator with an attachment. “It looks... complicated.”

He keeps his hand possessively on my hip, his mouth close, heating my body up with the warm shivers of his breath. “It seems simple to me. I lay you down, strip you naked, kiss your perfect curves, and then bring our toy to your horny, soaked sex. I push the attachment against your needy nub while I tease your entrance with the bigger part, rubbing it up and down, making you wild before I finally push it inside and...”

I gasp and claw onto his solid torso, digging my fingernails into him.

“I take it you like the sound of that?” he says.

“Hmm...”

“How can you be so eloquent about tech, but not be able to speak now?”

I mock glare up at him. “You know why.”

His smirk is cocky and full of swagger, and it drives me nuts in the best way. “The question is, what will you be wearing before I strip your clothes off? What outfit will make my mouth water as I struggle not to devour you? It’s a trick question, because every outfit will, but still...”

He leads me toward the lingerie. A slight note of anxiety flutters through me as I look at the selections. “I’ve never worn anything like this before.”

“But you’ve thought about it,” he says.

“How do you know that?”

“Reading those books, letting your imagination run wild, you must have thought about it. Should I be jealous of your bookish boyfriends?”

“They never had faces.”

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“I thought these were romance books, not horror.”

“Haha. I mean, they’ve never had clear features. They were always just big, muscular men... but I never knew who they were, or could be. They seemed so far away from... Hey, I love this song.”

He grins. “You’re so cute.”

The pop artist is singing about a man she left in North Dakota, wondering if he’s ever going to find her again, wondering if they’ll ever reconnect. It had little connection to my life before I met Luke.

“Who is it?”

“Delilah Sky,” I tell him. “She was a child star when I was her age, but she’s moved onto more mature stuff.” I bob my head along to the music. “Do you seriously think any of these would suit me?”

He stops in front of a full set of lingerie complete with stockings. The fabric is pale green.

“It matches your eyes,” he says, trailing his hand over my back... then down to my ass. I check my surroundings, but no one is paying attention to us. “Why don’t you try it on?”

“Do you think they let you try on lingerie?”

“I’ll buy it either way... even if you don’t like it, it’ll be worth it to see you in it.”

A sense of adventure shimmers over me. I’ve gone from dreaming to living, and it’s incredibly satisfying.

“Okay...”

“Choose your size,” he says.

When I do so, he grabs the packaging and walks toward the checkout.

My entire body is ablaze. I feel drunk. My head normally only gets this light when I’m in the throes of some tech haze, ideas clattering into ideas. Now, I’m on fire for an entirely different reason.

When he returns, he’s staring at me with clear hunger in his eyes. He looks like a man possessed.

“Shall we?” he says, motioning towards the changing rooms.

“Are you going to watch?”

“I’m not sure how kindly they’d take to that... but I can wait outside, can’t I? Innocently, not going insane as I think about you in the changing room, your body naked.”

We walk toward the changing rooms together. My heart is thumping so hard. Book quotes vie for attention in my brain as I struggle to stay sane, and not completely lose it. In the changing room, I’m achingly aware of him just past the curtain, my breath quickening at the thought of all the possibilities.

Stripping off my clothes, I put on the lingerie, looking at myself in the mirror. Something magical happens when I've put it all on. It's like I'm able to see myself, how he sees me, sexy and hot. I stand up straighter, my back arched, emphasizing my breasts, the dip in my waist and the flare of my hips.

A moment later, he slips into the changing room, looming over me, his gaze fixed on the mirror. I don't turn, instead, meeting his eye in the reflection.

"You're even more beautiful than I thought you'd be," he groans. "Fuck... Look at you, Sparkplug. That bra pushes your cleavage together perfectly. Those stockings – oh, fuck, how they sink into your curviness, highlighting how thick your thighs are."

"I don't think you should be in here," I whisper.

He smirks, wrapping his arms around me from behind. He presses his body against mine. Every inch of his muscular build is throbbing as if he's barely holding back his desire.

He sinks his hands into my breasts, groaning as he leans down and begins kissing my neck. Petals of pleasure shimmer over me, dancing over my skin, shivering through my body. He angles his hips so that his rock-hard length is pushing against my ass.

I moan as I move, grinding against him, massaging his steel with my ass. His moans talk of his obvious enjoyment. He slips one hand down my body toward my sex, then pushes down through the fabric. Outside the changing room, I can hear footsteps, someone walking past our small pocket of pleasure. I bite down to stop from moaning, but that just makes him wilder.

He stares at me in the mirror, slipping his hand into my underwear and pushing firmly against my neediness, grinding his hand with frantic urgency. He heats me up, boiling my pleasure point, driving me closer and closer to the edge. I close my legs around

his hand, keeping him there, trapping him close to me.

“I need to feel you come,” he growls in my ear. “I need to feel your pussy get soaked. I need to feel your core flutter for me, pulsing as your body talks to me, like a text telling me how badly you need this. Need us.”

I reach up, touch his face, clawing onto his firm jawline as I attempt to remain quiet. He moves even faster, his bare hand against my clit, passionate fire flooding me as I rock my hips in time with him.

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He reads my desire to scream, smirking as he slips his hand over my mouth, muffling my moans, and holds it there. I gasp and fall against him, bucking against his hand, chasing the pleasure.

When the orgasm hits me, it feels unreal, like I'm floating, my body warm and languid. I stare into the mirror, into his burning eyes. That's somehow sweeter than the physical feeling of him touching me. I never dreamed my real-life silver fox would look at me like this, full of desire and need.

"Excuse me?" A voice comes from beyond the changing room.

Luke smiles, holding back a laugh. As the last tickles of the orgasm tease me, I give him an urgent look.

"Whoever's in there, I suggest you're gone when I come back," the staff member says. "I'll give you a minute."

I put my hand over my mouth, then let it drop as shock grips me. "Oh my God," I whisper. "I can't believe we did that."

He chuckles. "You better get changed, beautiful."

"Do you think we're in trouble?"

"If I was willing to let anyone else see you in this – which, for the record, I'm not – they'd have no choice but to understand."

“You better get out of here, at least,” I say. “She can’t get mad at me for being in here alone.”

“Good point...” But his hand glides across my body, caressing my skin.

I turn, shoving him in the chest, grinning up at him. “Seriously, Luke. You’re going to get us in trouble.”

He smiles toothily. “We’re already in trouble, Sparkplug.”

He slips out of the changing room, leaving me to ponder his words. We’re already in trouble... I know what he’s talking about: the magnetism drawing us together, the desire that won’t quit.

After getting changed, we leave the store together. A staff member gives us a knowing look, but she’s got a smile on her face even as she tries to look stern. Outside the store, Luke sighs, his demeanor changing as he checks his phone.

“Time for more work?” I ask.

“Yep,” he replies. “And it’s mind-numbing work.”

“What are you doing? Searching the code?Allof it?”

He looks at me bleakly. “I can hear in your voice. You know how hopeless that is.”

“But you need to find the sabotage,” I tell him. “It’s crazy, because your products are usually so slick. Especially with self-driving. You’ve done more in that department than all other companies. In fact, you’ve made them look like amateurs.”

He kisses me gently on the forehead. “That means a lot,” he says gently. “This new

venture into AI was supposed to improve on all that. Hell, it improved on all that. But now, right when I need it to work the most, it's failed me."

I lay my hand gently against his chest. "I'm sorry. Can I help? I've got nothing to do this evening, anyway... except sit around and think about a certain silver fox."

He leans down, his lips hovering over mine. "Are you sure thinking is all you'll be doing?" He kisses me long and deep, then pauses for a moment before he goes on, "You could help."

"Why do you say that like you're not sure?"

"I'm sure."

"What is it, Luke?"

"You work for TechGuard," he says.

"Do you think we were involved in the sabotage?"

"I know you wouldn't do something like that."

"Nobody on my team would, either," I snap. "It's a small team, and I know every member. We'd never even dream of risking our place in the company. Our department is one of the smaller ones. You know TechGuard is mainly invested in antivirus, things like that. We need to prove ourselves, justify ourselves."

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“Hey – I said I know you wouldn't do something like that. Are you sure you don't mind sacrificing your evening?”

“I'm sure,” I tell him. “I want to help. I can search a chunk of the code. Just get me some coffee and I'm good to go.”

Luke leads me to a conference room in the hotel that his team has taken over. Everybody has their laptops open, lots of people with headphones on, as they comb the code and search for the culprit. I'm able to slip right in, put my headphones on, listen to some Delilah Sky – hearing her in the store has reinvigorated my love for the singer – and do my part.

It's not mindless work, exactly, but it's mindless enough that my thoughts can wander from time to time. My thoughts return to the changing room, the fierceness in his eyes as he watched me like I was the most attractive woman he'd ever laid eyes on.

He sits on the other side of the large conference table. Every so often, he looks up, catches my eye, and we share a private smile. After two hours of screen-staring, I stand. “Coffee, anyone?”

Everyone says they're good, so I leave the room and head down the hall to the coffee machine. I put in some coins and make my selection, waiting as it loads.

A bald man – Steve, I believe his name is – approaches. Luke introduced us when I first arrived, but with so many names, it's difficult to be sure. I know he's the co-lead designer, though.

He offers a tight smile that looks strained, as though he'd rather be grimacing. "So, you work for TechGuard."

I nod.

"You've seen some of this code before, then."

"Not the part I've been given," I tell him. "That's new to me. As I understand it, TechGuard was just a small part of the project."

He runs a hand over his bald head. "A cynical man might say that having a coder from TechGuard working on this project post-sabotage is tactically unwise. Luckily, I'm not a cynical man."

"Why do I get the sense you're insinuating something?"

He holds his hands up. "If I've given you that impression, all I can do is apologize. It wasn't my intention."

"My boss, Graham, is the husband of the woman who saved my life. He's a kind, selfless man. One of the best I've ever met. He would go above and beyond to do what's right, both for his business and the world. He genuinely cares about AI, and right now, he's dealing with far too much to think about sabotage."

I grab my coffee and return to the conference room, ignoring the shocked look on his face. When I sit down, my cell phone buzzes. It's Luke.

Luke: Are you okay?

Sera: I'm fine.

I reply “fine”... but that isn't exactly true.

Chapter Eight

Luke

I do my best to focus on my work, but I can't stop myself from glancing across the table at Sera from time to time. When I do, my assistant, Andy, and my co-lead, Steve, both look at me... with wildly different expressions.

Andy is excited for me. He's often pestered me about finding a woman. Steve lookspissed, probably because he knows Sera works for TechGuard.

There's no way for me to explain in a way he'll understand... She would never betray me. It's a feeling I get in my gut when I look at her. She might technically be a stranger, but she doesn't feel like one. Even considering her as a stranger seems like a betrayal.

It's midnight when I text her again.

Luke: Are you sure you're okay? Has something happened?

Ever since returning from her coffee break, she's had this... aura. Before Sera, I never would've used words likeaura, but it's no surprise that she's changed me.

Sera: I'm just trying to focus on the task at hand.

Luke: Did Steve say something to you when you went to get coffee? I saw him follow you.

Sera: It's fine.

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Her words say one thing, but her posture is tight, her expression no longer her usual bubbly, excited self.

Luke: Tell me.

She looks up, catching my eye. Without her needing to say or text anything, I get a clear message...You're not going to quit, are you?I smirk and shake my head. She smiles as if happy I can read her so easily. She quickly taps out a reply on her phone.

Sera: I don't want to cause any trouble between you and your colleagues. He has every right to be suspicious. I work for a company that should, technically speaking, be on your list of suspects. He just voiced that concern, that's all. I don't blame him. And I don't want you to say anything to him.

Luke: You've got a mature perspective about his suspicion. Maybe something else is bothering you?

Sera: I'm still betting on you implanting a chip in my brain, Luke. You're reading my mind way too easily.

Luke: You seem sad. Not angry, not offended, not outraged at Steve's suggestion... You seem SAD, Sparkplug, and that's got me thinking.

She smooths her hand over her head, flattening some curls that have sprung loose from her bun. She looks so beautiful. It's been an effort this entire time not to rush around the table and embrace her in front of my team.

Sera: When Steve mentioned TechGuard, it got me thinking about home... Graham, my boss. He's married to the woman who saved my life. My parents always had issues, but during my teenage years, they got violent with each other. Eleanor taught IT at my school. She would stay late with me, encouraging my love of computers and, eventually, convinced her husband, Graham, to hire me at TechGuard.

Luke: She sounds like a wonderful woman.

Sera: And now she's dying.

Sera stares bleakly across the room, her shoulders slumped.

Sera: She has glioblastoma multiforme, a rare brain cancer requiring experimental treatment. She's like a mom to me. I don't see my parents much. They are who they've always been. But Eleanor is different. She's my best friend and my parental figure.

As I process this news, a selfish thought crosses my mind. There's no way I'll be able to persuade Sera to leave the East Coast. She's too kindhearted to leave this woman during her difficult time.

When the conference ends, we're over. Unless we want to start a long-distance relationship... and who the hell wants that? But surely it would be better than never seeing her again, than imagining her with someone else, another man's hands moving over her luscious body...

Luke: I'm so sorry. That's awful.

Sera: I'm going to be there for her. Whatever happens, she won't go through this alone. She never let me go through anything alone.

Luke: You're an incredible person. She's lucky to have you.

Sera: This trip has been amazing, helping me forget about it for a time, but that conversation brought it all back.

Luke: It's difficult not to tell Steve to cool his jets.

Sera: Don't do that. It's natural that he's suspicious. I don't think you can blame him. Anyway, I'm going to get back to it. In case you haven't noticed, people are sort of watching us.

She's right: Andy with his big, encouraging grin, Steve with a look of suspicion.

Luke: I was in the foster care system as a kid. A man, Victor, mentored me. Without him, I never would've discovered my love of computers. I'd be devastated if he was going through anything like that. If Eleanor ever needs help, you let me know.

She looks up at me with wide eyes.

Sera: That's so generous. Thank you. Luckily, Graham managed to get her into the latest treatment. But seriously, I'll keep that in mind.

We work until the early hours of the morning. When I notice how exhausted everyone is, I tell them to get some sleep. I give Sera a ride back to her hotel.

"You better not come in," she says once we're outside.

"You know I'll get carried away..."

She fiddles with her laptop bag, nodding. "If we do—that—I don't want to be half asleep."

"If? I think you mean when."

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I love the little mewling noises she makes when I kiss her, the breathy moans she lets out as if she's on the edge of release.

"We need to make this conference count," I say.

She takes my hand and grips it hard, as if she never wants to let go. "I understand," she whispers. "I was thinking of that earlier. There's no future for us after this, is there? Unless we want to do the whole long-distance thing. I've seen long-distance relationships. One of my coworkers was in one. It tore them apart. And I can't promise you I'll ever be able to come to the East Coast, and it's not like you can abandon your company?—"

"Hey," I cut in, kissing her on the cheek. "It's okay. We don't have to worry about that now. Let's just enjoy what we have while we have it."

Big words coming from me when the thought of separating makes me feel like the world is spinning out of control. But she's right. How can we make this work?

"Let me know if there are any updates," she says.

We kiss one last time, then she pushes against my chest, creating some distance between us, probably knowing I won't be able to hold myself back if we keep kissing. I drive back to my hotel and collapse into bed, getting a few hours of sleep.

When I wake, I've got a text from Victor. He's not only the man who mentored me in my younger years. He's the co-founder of NeuroDrive, though he sold his shares to me a few years ago because he wanted a peaceful life with his wife.

Victor: Call me when you get a chance.

I grab my cell and walk to the tall windows, looking over the city as the sun illuminates it. "What's up?" I say.

"Steve texted me last night."

I laugh gruffly. "Of course he did. He told you I'm sabotaging the company by inviting people to double-cross me, I suppose."

"Not in so many words," Victor replies. "Who's this girl?"

"She's..." I pause, wondering how I can put this into words. "I bought her a laptop. We've dated. We've been intimate. In simple terms..." If there can be anything simple about this. "She's the closest to a girlfriend I've ever had."

He sighs. "That was what I was afraid of."

"Why would you be afraid of that?" I snap.

"Steve filled me in. She works for TechGuard. What if she's?—"

"She's not tricking me," I snarl. "You need to get that out of your head, Victor. She's a good person with a kind heart. She offered to pitch in, and I said yes, because she's clever and she's a hard worker."

"Relax, kid," Victor says with a sigh. At twenty years my senior, he's the only person who can call me kid. I've known him since I was a teenager. "You really like her."

"Yes, I do," I bristle. "She's funny, insightful, talented, and sparky."

He chuckles. "Sparky?"

"I call her Sparkplug because she's got some serious sass. And before you say it, no, she's not distracting me. I'm still working as hard as I would before. Only now, instead of taking breaks by going to the gym or whatever, I'm seeing her."

"You're sure she's aboveboard?"

"I'm certain. I trust her."

Victor sighs. "I won't lie. That worries me. How can you trust someone you barely know?"

"From where I'm sitting, the more important question is how couldn't I. We have a connection."

When I say this, a dark note touches me. It's true. I've got more of a connection with her than any other woman I've ever met... but it has to end. She was right last night. I can't abandon the company. She can't abandon her maternal figure.

"Just be careful," Victor cautions.

"The sabotage is already done," I tell him. "If TechGuard was involved, the last thing she'd want to do is volunteer to work with me. She'd want to stay as far away as possible."

"Or she'd think that working with you is the best way to diffuse any suspicions."

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I grind my teeth. "She's not what you think she is, Victor. You're not here. You haven't met her."

"I trust your judgment," he concedes. "Plus, the company isn't mine anymore. These are your decisions to make. But I can also hear something in your voice I've never heard before."

"That's because it's never been there before," I tell him. "But I won't let it blind me. If I thought she was playing me, I'd take the necessary steps. But she isn't."

"And you know that because..."

I just know. When I look into her eyes, I feel a connection I've never experienced before. I feel a closeness I never would've dreamed existed before I laid eyes on her. When we touch, it's like my body is receiving sustenance I've gone too long without. We're bonded on a deep level. We're fused. We belong. I don't care how insane that sounds...

Or, perhaps, I do, because I don't say any of this to Victor. Somehow, I don't think he'd understand.

"Is there anything else?" I say.

He's quiet for a moment before he responds. "Fair enough, Luke. You know I only want the best for you and the company."

"I get that, but you're wrong about this."

After ending the call, I text Sera.

Luke: What are you doing for lunch?

Sera: I don't have any plans... why?

Luke: I've got a surprise for you.

I haven't arranged anything, yet. But I will. To see the smile on her gorgeous face, I'd do anything.

Luke: Meet me on the roof of your hotel at midday.

Sera: Okay, Mr. Mysterious.

Chapter Nine

Sera

When I walk onto the roof, a laugh of delight and surprise escapes me. Luke is leaning against a helicopter, looking dashing in his dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up. The sunlight glistening through his salt and pepper hair.

"What's this for?" I say.

"For you," he replies, pulling me into his arms and spinning me around into a steamy kiss. I throw my arms around him, holding tightly as we sink deeper into the embrace.

"Where are we going?" I ask, a little breathless after the kiss.

"Do you have a few hours?"

"Yes, but do you?"

He smirks. "For you, I'll make them. I want to get away, forget, for a short time. I worked all morning, and I'll work all night. Plus, my team is handling things. Being with you is an opportunity I won't pass up."

I kiss him again, his words touching me, his passion blazing through him as we cling desperately to each other as though we never want to let go. Maybe there's some truth there, but eventually we will have to part.

He helps me into the helicopter, strapping me in. The pilots are already seated in the front section. As the blades move, a fresh sense of adventure washes over me. I catch his attention, then pull down my shirt slightly to reveal the pale green strap of my lingerie.

He stares at me with a heated expression, pure hunger that makes me feel utterly desired.

"I've got a surprise for you too," he says, his voice coming through the headset so I can hear him over the engine and blades.

I turn from the shrinking Las Vegas skyline to look at him. "Hmm?"

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"Remember when I left you last night so you could get changed in peace? I may or may not have made a purchase..."

"Are you saying what I think you are?"

He smirks. "You'll have to wait and see..."

I gasp upon discovering his surprise. The helicopter lands on the edge of the Grand Canyon, on a secluded strip, without any tourists or onlookers. He's arranged a table and chairs, roses as centerpieces, and champagne chilling in a bucket of ice.

After helping me down from the helicopter, he addresses the pilots, "Take a walk, gentlemen. I'll let you know when I need you again. Thank you."

"Yeah, thanks for the ride," I call as I gaze at my man.

My man. I need to be cautious with such thoughts, not letting my mind wander too far when this can only end one way.

He takes my hand and leads me to the edge of the Canyon. "Before I met you, I was as hollow as this place."

I stare at the breathtaking vastness of the Canyon, awed by its sheer magnitude.

"You shouldn't say things like that," I murmur, turning to him.

He grasps my hips and pulls me close. "We're enjoying what time we have,

remember?"

Our kiss erupts with passion, the majestic scenery enhancing the romance.

"I can't believe you did this," I whisper excitedly. "All this effort for..."

"You're worth ten times this effort. You're worth everything." He breathes intensely.

"Shall we have some champagne?"

"How could I say no?"

We sit together, the clear blue sky stretching endlessly above us, the canyon vast and magnificent below.

"My mind is constantly occupied by the image of you in that lingerie," he groans, sipping his champagne.

Bubbles dance through me, and not all from the drink. "I'm surprised you went back to buy something else."

He smirks. "The purchase is in the helicopter."

"Are you kidding me?"

He glances around at the surrounding emptiness. I can make out some people, tiny silhouettes against the sun, on the far side of the canyon. We're not completely isolated.

"We should try it out, make sure it works so I don't have to get my money back."

I bite my lip—partly from habit, but honestly? Mostly because I know how it drives

him wild. I'm becoming addicted to that look in his eyes, like he can't believe his luck, like he's ready to make me his sole obsession.

"Here?" I murmur.

"In the helicopter," he groans. "No one can see us. The pilots won't return until I text them. Trust me, beautiful, if there was any chance someone else could see you, I'd lose it."

"Some women don't like the whole possessive thing."

"It's lucky you're not one of them," he says fiercely. "And I know you wore that lingerie for a reason, Sparkplug."

I finish my small glass of champagne and stand, walking toward the helicopter. Over my shoulder, I call, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

He jumps to his feet and races after me. I laugh when he lifts me up, cradling me against his chest; the sensation of flying intensifies as I gaze up at the sky. Once we reach the helicopter, he helps me in. After climbing in himself, he shuts the door and turns to me, his body tense with anticipation. He pulls me in for a kiss. I open my mouth, finding his tongue, pressing against it to savor his taste. He groans and grabs my shirt, pulling it up and over my head.

I raise my arms, then gasp when he immediately reaches for my pants.

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"I need to see you in that lingerie," he growls. "I need to see every damn inch of you."

"Good things come to those who wait," I tease, stepping back before wriggling out of my pants.

He bites down, his jaw clenching, his temple pulsing. The tension radiating through him is palpable. I feel more beautiful than ever before, sexier, more desired.

Arching my back, I trail my hand between my breasts, toward my sex. "Your turn, Luke..."

He grins. "Disappointment awaits you. I'm not wearing any lingerie."

His rapt attention bolsters my confidence. If this has an expiration date, I can't afford to wait or doubt. So, what if my past sexual experiences were unpleasant? This will be memorable.

I step forward, grab his shirt, and pull so roughly that several buttons pop. "It's like that, hmm?"

He tears his shirt off, revealing his chiseled physique. A groan escapes his lips as he leans down to kiss my breasts. A delicious tingling spreads through me as his left hand glides up my leg while his right simultaneously pulls down my bra to expose my nipples. He presses his palm against my clit, rubbing firmly, increasing his pace gradually.

I grind my hips against him.

"Wait," he says, gasping. "I hope you don't think I've forgotten about your gift."

He reaches under the seat, retrieving a bag. He removes a vibrator from it.

"I googled the quote you saved," he says. "I found the book it was from. I also researched the most famous scene."

My body flushes with heat. Each word pushes me closer to the edge.

"You did, huh?"

"The most famous scene is the hero teasing the heroine with a vibrator, bringing her closer and closer to an orgasm... but not letting her finish. Because Sparkplug – and I agree here – when you come, it's going to be on my dick."

He reaches for my lingerie and pulls down my underwear, leaving me in only my stockings and bra.

"Turn around and bend over for me," he snarls. "Just like in the book."

This is a literal dream come true, something I never imagined would happen in reality. But I've fantasized about it, wondered what it would be like...

With him behind me, sexual tension vibrates in the air. My skin feels hypersensitive. He turns on the vibrator, its whirring filling the small confines of the helicopter.

"Remember what I said," he rasps in my ear. "We're in the book now; you let your pussy get juicy and soaked for me, you let the pleasure build just enough, but you don't come anywhere but on my cock. Understand?"

I can barely speak, my bookish fantasies springing to life with breathtaking intensity.

He smooths his hand up my inner thigh, palming my sex, rubbing it so that more tingles cascade through me.

"Do you understand, Sparkplug?"

"Yuh-yes," I whimper.

"Good."

Slowly, he brings the vibrator to my core, taking his time, making me wait.

All I can do is prepare... and hope I don't wake up with my book on my face, realizing I've fallen asleep and none of this is actually happening.

Fantasy and reality are merging, transforming into something better than either alone.

Chapter Ten

Luke

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:14 am

My cock is a solid length of desire, my entire body aching as I gaze at my woman's plump ass and glistening sex. Her petals shimmer with wetness, her juices making me want to bury my face against her, lick, indulge, possess.

Instead, I bring the vibrator to her core. She rests her hands on the door of the helicopter, gasping when I press the thrumming end against her sensitive nub. She looks at me over her shoulder, her eyebrows arching.

I hold her gaze, massaging her sex.

"Like in the book," I growl. "I can see how close you are. It's understandable that maintaining control is difficult for you. I can see how desperately you want to let go...Just like in the book. But you're not going to. Not until you feel my dick spreading your perfect lips."

I move the vibrator up and down slowly. Outside the window, the Grand Canyon stretches before us. The distant figures of people move like ants on the opposite edge, adding an illicit thrill to everything.

When she shivers, her round, beautiful ass quivers for me.

"Fu-fuck," she says, moving her hips frantically.

I can't help myself. I reach out, grab her luscious ass, massage her curves as I continue lavishing attention on her with the toy. Her stockings drive me wild, the fabric clinging to her skin, accentuating how gorgeously voluptuous she is.

Her eyes close tight, and I recall the book, the quotes I read from online discussion boards. When I move the vibrator away and say, "No, not yet," I realize the research was worthwhile.

She bites her lip in that classic Sera way. "Luke..."

"You know what you need," I snarl.

Switching off the vibrator, I unbutton my pants. She turns, giving me a view of her full breasts, the bra wedged beneath them, pushing them up and emphasizing her curves.

"Did you read the whole scene?" she asks, panting.

I shake my head. "I found a forum discussion of it."

"Did you know that she... helps him?"

My hands tremble as I push my pants down. My cock springs free, thicker and harder than I've ever been, engorged with desire.

"Helps him," I repeat.

"After he almost makes her come, she takes him... in her mouth."

"Are you pausing on purpose to drive me even crazier?" I groan. "Because it's working."

She laughs. "Maybe I'm shy."

"Shy, Sparkplug? You?"

She slowly kneels and wraps her hand around my cock. I gasp, a trembling breath escaping as I stare down at her. She brings her mouth to the head, kissing my tip, then sliding her lips down around it.

I groan as she bobs her head, looking up at me. As she pleasures me, she takes control. I couldn't stop this if I wanted to, even if the helicopter suddenly took off.

"You've got my cock good and wet," I groan. "Now I need your pussy. I need to slide in—slide deep—until you're soaked and ready to shatter. You ready for me?"

She pulls back, licks her lips, and nods. I can see the nerves in my Sparkplug, but she's fighting to overcome them, refusing to surrender to doubt.

"Remember," I growl, grabbing her shoulders, lifting her up, and turning her around. I bite down on her neck just like the hero did in the book, then whisper against her ear, "You belong to me. Your body. Your soul. And most of all..."

Reaching down, I grip the base of my cock and guide myself to her entrance. I keep one arm wrapped around her just like in the book, holding her against me, letting her feel my heart pounding against her back.

Her moan is heavenly as I slip into her warmth. My precome, her saliva, and the slickness of her core create a smooth entrance, my length gliding all the way in, my tip pushing deep. We remain still as I angle myself to penetrate her completely.

"Now," I say fiercely. "And only now you can come for me."

"Oh, Luke," she whimpers. "Fuck, Luke, Luke..."

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She slides away from me. For an insane second, I think I'm going to explode, that I'm going to be a one-stroke joke. I've never felt anything like this, the pure passion combined with white-hot pleasure, every inch of my manhood enveloped in her warmth.

I push back into her, savoring her pleasure, knowing there's no damn way I'm going to finish until I've felt her pulsing around my dick. She arches her hips, grinding in time with me. The whole time, I keep my arm wrapped around her, stubbornly maintaining our closeness.

We glide into a rhythm, our bodies moving as one. Her pussy envelops me tightly, caressing with each stroke. Her breasts keep my hands occupied as I massage them hungrily. I become addicted to the silky smoothness of her neck beneath my lips. But somehow, her moans remain the sweetest part—those delicious sounds of release.

"Come," I command, just like the silver-haired hero from her novel. "Come, come, come. Now."

When I say now, her moans transform, becoming more urgent. She rocks against me with greater intensity, then her inner walls squeeze my shaft rhythmically, as if inviting me to share in her pleasure.

I feel the orgasm rippling through her as she surrenders, her body calling out to mine. I thrust harder, growling when her pussy makes those delicious wet sounds. Once her climax subsides, I withdraw, stroking myself as I step back.

"Don't forget how this ends," I snarl. "On your knees – push your tits together. You're

my heroine, Sparkplug."

She turns quickly, breathless as she follows my command—the same thing her hero demanded in her book. I groan, my spine tingling as my orgasm rushes toward me. I stroke myself rapidly, aiming at the valley between her breasts. Fuck, this is her fantasy, but now damn if she doesn't look beautiful on her knees for me. Soon I can't hold off anymore as a rush of ecstasy flows through me. She gasps as hot streams of come erupt from me, landing on her chest, white droplets sliding down her beautiful skin.

Our eyes meet and we both smile. She stands, breathing hard as she looks around. "In the book, the scene ended there. They didn't cover the heroine cleaning herself up."

She laughs, sounding intoxicated. I know the feeling. We're high on each other.

"That's a fair point," I say, chuckling. "Good thing I knew this might get messy..."

Reaching under the seat, I produce a bag with towels and cleaning wipes. She laughs, nudging me playfully. "See? This is how you know we're certified nerds. We come prepared."

I grin. After cleaning up and getting dressed, we head back outside. I loop my arm around her waist as I guide her to the table. I pour champagne for both of us, then raise a toast.

"To turning your scene into a reality."

"But you didn't," she says.

"It wasn't the same?" I ask.

"Like so many other readers, I've been obsessed with that scene... But when you touched me, and when I felt you, oh Luke, it was so much better than I ever imagined it could be."

"You had me worried for a second there, Sparkplug."

"Worried? Are you kidding? That was heaven. That makes the wait worth it."

"It's been so long for me. I thought I was going to be a one-stroke joke for a second there."

She giggles. "Awhat?"

"You heard me. When I slid inside you, I thought I was going to explode. I've never felt anything like that."

"What you're saying is... even if it wasn't the first time for either of us, it sort of was?"

"Yes," I say fiercely. "That was the best experience I've ever had. By far. Focusing on work for the rest of the day – and night – is going to be impossible now."

"But you've got the speech tomorrow," she says.

I nod. "We should get going soon." I take her hand. "But I want to stay here a while longer, just me and you and the canyon below us. I want to imagine what it'd be like if we could always be together."

She swallows. "Luke..."

"I know." I sigh. "Long distance is asking for trouble, for pain, for drama... But the

more time I spend with you, the more certain I become that long distance with you would be better than proximity with anybody else."

"That's sweet," she says softly. "But I've seen it. One of my coworkers was in a long-distance relationship."

"What's the alternative?" I grumble. "Go home – pretend this never happened? Pretend we never met? Forget about this, about us?"

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For the first time, she looks slightly concerned by my possessiveness. She leans away slightly, as if signaling me to ease up.

"We could simply enjoy this beautiful view... and cross that bridge when we come to it," she murmurs.

I squeeze her hand, looking down at her. "You're right. I should enjoy the view."

She smiles, facing the canyon but glancing at me from the corner of her eye. "You know I wasn't talking about me, right?"

Later, I'm sitting in the conference room with Steve, Andy, and the rest of my team. Sera's boss wanted her to circulate the show with him, talk to some tech heads, which means she's not here. Is that for the best?

Steve leans forward. "We're going to have to pull the plug."

He looks even more serious than usual, which is saying a lot.

"We can't launch a faulty product," I agree. "This is painful, because we all know that we dominate the competition. We don't just have market capture. We've got market domination. But you're right; we can't do this, can't deceive people. But I'm not canceling the speech."

Steve narrows his eyes. "What, then?"

"I'll tell the public the truth. If we want to stand apart from the crowd, which we've

always done, we need to be honest. We need to..."

I pause, looking out the window at the man peering in. He's short, with shaggy black hair almost covering his eyes. When he sees me looking, he turns and takes off.

"Luke," Steve and Andy yell as I leap to my feet.

Chapter Eleven

Sera

"NeuroDrive has moved their announcement up to this evening, giving the keynote spot to another company," Graham muses, adjusting his glasses as he studies his phone.

"I wonder if it has anything to do with..." I stop when I notice Graham narrowing his eyes at me. Most of the time, he appears to be what he is: a kind, generous older man, his grey hair combed over his bald spot, wearing stylish sweaters more often than not, even in the office.

Now, he frowns. "What would you know about their work?"

I shrug, staring down at my feet. "I actually met Luke recently."

"Luke," he says, as if my using his first name is offensive.

"I helped with some work on an issue they were having. Well, tried to help. Is there a problem with that?"

Graham turns away, looking across the street at the Strip. He sighs. "We don't want NeuroDrive to think we'll work for free. They pay TechGuard a sizeable fee to use

our AI department...With TechGuard considering removing the AI department before it thrives, we have to proceed cautiously."

"I wasn't there for TechGuard. I was there for me."

More accurately, I was there for Luke, but I don't think Graham needs to hear about our escapades. Reflecting on the short time we've known each other feels surreal. It seems like much longer.

"How did you even meet the CEO of NeuroDrive? I've never met him, and we work with them."

"He's actually the one who tried to fix the laptop," I reply.

"Oh."

"He's a good guy, Graham."

"I'm sure he is, but that doesn't mean we should work for free." He fiddles with his phone. "Eleanor is going to want a video soon." He extends his arm, putting the camera on selfie mode and starting a video. "Hey, honey, we wanted to say hello from sunny Vegas."

I wave, smiling. Even if Graham was just stern with me, I force a smile for Ellie. I still remember the first time she asked if everything was okay at home, reading my silence for what it was, then encouraged me to stay behind with her.

"Hey, Ellie," I say.

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"Twenty-three years of marriage," Graham says ruefully. "And you'll still only let Sera call you 'Ellie'." He chuckles. "We love you, sweetheart, and though we're having fun, we're looking forward to seeing you."

"I can't wait," I say, waving again.

I miss her for sure, but my feelings are mixed. Going home now means leaving Luke.

"Try not to do any more work for NeuroDrive," Graham mutters after a long pause.

"I can't promise not to see Luke again, though. With all due respect, this is my personal life."

He adjusts, then readjusts his glasses. "Your... personal life. Seraphina, do I dare ask what you mean by that?"

"You probably shouldn't," I reply.

He takes a bite from his burger, putting his phone on the table and scrolling through it. He's not normally this rude, but recent stressors have affected him. My cell phone buzzes.

Luke: Did you see the announcement?

Sera: You've moved your speech. Why?

Luke: We can't fix the problem in time. It's the proper thing to do... and to be frank,

the most tactically sound decision too. We wouldn't win any favors if we keep something like this a secret.

Sera: You're going to tell the truth?

Luke: Yes, Sparkplug, I'm going to go up there and tell the world a total stranger has stolen my heart.

Sera: Ha ha ha. You know what I meant.

Luke: I'm going to do the right thing. When I started this company, I promised I would never cover anything up. I wouldn't hide just because it would make my life easier. Something else happened.

Sera: What?

Luke: I had an employee once. He worked under Steve in the design department. His name was Damien, and he had problems. I'm not sure if he was bipolar or if it was another condition, but toward the end of his employment, he claimed he had come up with more ideas than he had, demanded credit, then demanded shares. He sent the other employees threats, caused arguments when others complained. In the end, we had to terminate him. NDA, severance package, the whole deal. Before he left, he promised he'd get revenge. Hell, I thought it was just his condition speaking for him. I wanted him to get help.

Sera: But?

Luke: Thirty minutes ago, I spotted him spying on a meeting between me and my team.

Sera: WHAT?

Luke: Yep. Lurking outside the room, watching us. God knows what he thinks he's doing.

Sera: Do you believe he was involved in the sabotage?

Luke: I'm not sure how he could be. He would lack access to our code.

Sera: You must be terrified. Some weird guy following you around... Now you know what I feel like.

I immediately regret my last text and send another.

Sera: Sorry. My attempt at levity to lighten your mood.

Luke: Don't apologize, Sparkplug – except to my team for making me erupt with laughter. Are you going to be at my speech?

Sera: Yes, I want to support you.

Luke: We'll be heading back tomorrow morning. So tonight, will be our last opportunity to see each other... I'm aware you don't want to do the long-distance thing, but Sera, I honestly feel I will be physically incapable of NOT texting you.

Sera: Your hands have a life of their own, do they?

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Luke: You know they do.

I can't help but smile. I subsequently notice Graham staring at me, and something about his expression makes me wipe the smile away.

Luke: I'm taking you out tonight, and I don't want to hear any arguments about it. Otherwise, I'll have to move my entire operation to the East Coast.

Sera: I know you texted that as a joke, but honestly, I'd be pretty freaking happy if you did that. Let me check if I'm free this evening.

"Graham, do you need me for anything later?" I ask.

Again, he adjusts his glasses. It's always been his nervous tic. "Why?"

"I might be going on a date."

"With Luke Cross?"

"Is that a problem?"

Graham sighs. "He's much older than you, Sera. A powerful man. And a billionaire, to boot."

"I haven't heard a single viable reason why dating him would be a bad idea."

"You know we worry about you," Graham says in a tired voice. "I don't want you

getting tangled up with some playboy."

"What makes you think he's a playboy? Have you heard anything, seen anything?" My tone gets a little too aggressive, but I can't help it. I don't want to think of Luke like that. He's told me he isn't a playboy, anyway.

"Nothing," Graham says. "But he's a billionaire. Men like him have more choices than the average man."

"And why would he choose me, right?"

Graham sighs. "I didn't say that. But please, be careful. Try to keep work separate from everything else. Spending time with him is one thing; giving him free labor is another."

"Okay, Graham. That's fair."

Sera: Yes, I'm free. What did you have in mind?

Luke: Do you seriously expect me to ruin the big surprise for our final night together?

Sera: Final night, woah. That has a seriously ominous ring to it.

Luke: Then let's give this long-distance thing a try.

Sera: I've seen it fail time and time again.

Luke: We're not everybody else. In fact, Sparkplug, what we have in such a short amount of time makes us pretty damn special.

I smile.

Sera: What happened to enjoying what time we have left?

Luke: If you think my phone is miraculously going to lose the ability to text you once we've gone our separate ways, you've got another thing coming. I'll look for you in the crowd during the speech.

Sera: I'll be there, sending you good vibes, not that you'll need them. You've got this.

I put my phone away, a warm feeling coursing through me... but it's bittersweet, too. He's talking a big game about making long distance work, but he's not seriously considering it. Long distance might have a chance if there's an endpoint, a destination when, finally, we'll be able to be together.

But Ellie could battle her condition for years. And if she loses her battle – which is horrible to even think about – will I be comfortable leaving Graham to deal with that alone? How many times did they say I'm like the daughter they never had?

"Are you okay, Sera? I didn't mean to be so stern before."

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"I'm fine," I tell Graham. "Just wishing TechGuard was located on the West Coast, but other than that, I'm A-okay."

Graham frowns. "This might be fine for a fling, some fun at the show, but a long-term relationship, Sera? Surely it would be better to find somebody your own age?"

"No, it wouldn't," I snap. "But we'll have to agree to disagree there."

"Are you thinking of having a relationship with him, then?" Graham asks.

"You've never taken this much of an interest in my love life before."

He looks at me strangely. There's no need for me to guess why. Of course, he's never taken this much interest. Before, there was nothing to be interested in. Even if I told Luke that long distance would never work, dooming us to failure before we even try feels wrong somehow. Especially behind his back.

"I don't know," I say. "But that's my decision to make."

"I'm just looking out for you," he says. "I can't help that."

"I know," I reply in a softer voice. "I just don't like the thought of something as trivial as his age getting in the way. It's not like I'm some naïve kid. We've got a lot in common. He's not a playboy."

"He lives on the other side of the country."

"Well, there is that."

"We value you at TechGuard. You're helping the AI department to become something special. I truly believe in the next few years, we could secure a bigger place in the company: better pay, better benefits, more recognition."

This is one of Graham's most cherished hopes. He's often talked about it. Our department is like the ignored stepchild of TechGuard, fighting for our chance in the sun, desperate for an opportunity to be noticed and respected.

"I'm not leaving," I say. "Don't worry."

"Then enjoy the time you have left."

That's what Luke said, and it stings. The clock is ticking. This fling is almost over. But do I really believe that when this is done, I'll be able to resist texting my silver-fox billionaire, the man who brought my bookish dreams to life? Do I seriously believe that?

Chapter Twelve

Luke

I stand backstage, tapping my foot on the floor, waiting for my chance to go onto the stage. When my phone buzzes and I take it from my pocket, I realize my hand is trembling slightly.

Sera: You've got this, Luke. You're doing the right thing.

Luke: Thanks. For the first time in a long time, I'm nervous.

Sera: I don't blame you, but you're going to do great.

Luke: And I've got a reward in the shape of a curvy genius AI guru waiting for me after to console me.

Sera: There is that.

Steve approaches me, his typical grimace shaping his lips. I almost tell him he should get it copyrighted. "You good?"

"I'm great," I tell him. "We've got to do this, so there's no point umming and ahing over it."

"Other companies would hide something like this."

"Yep... and when it leaked, they'd appear even more foolish."

"Do you believe we have a mole?"

"I don't know," I say. "But that crap with Damien watching us has got me on-edge."

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No one else saw Damien. Steve narrows his eyes for a moment. He tries to hide it, but I can see the judgment there, the unspoken implication that I conjured Damien up out of thin air.

Soon, it's time for me to walk onto the stage. I search for Sera in the crowd. She's got her hair tucked up in a bun, a pencil through it, wearing smart business clothes that make her look capable and gorgeous.

"Ladies and gents, thank you for coming," I say. "There are CEOs who would hide in the shadows at a time like this, but as you know, I've always been straight with our customers. Ever since our first self-driving car mistook a golf course for a highway all those years ago, I've been honest."

This gets a laugh from the audience. Sera's smile urges me on.

"In that spirit, I have something I need to share with you all," I continue. "While our other products are completely safe and protected – and I have to stress this – we have gone above and beyond, and, in three years, haven't had a single incident – the prototype I was intending to show tomorrow has encountered issues."

I scan the crowd for signs of Damien. I felt sorry for him when he first came to me with misguided ideas about his place in the company. He has the motive, but how the hell would he gain access to our code?

"Someone has sabotaged the code to the AI we were planning on unveiling," I say. "Prompting it to make distressing and counterproductive statements."

When I use the word 'sabotage', people whisper, exchanging anxious looks with each other. A tense atmosphere descends over the room. Many have already got their phones out, texting frantically. The news spreading, then.

"We are going to sort this out," I say firmly. "I wanted you all to be aware of the truth. We, as a company, do not hide. We don't trick our customers. It's the reason we have built so much trust..."

Thirty minutes later, I'm sitting in the back of a car with Sera at my side. She massages my shoulder gently. "You did really well."

"I'm thinking Steve was right," I mutter, looking down at my phone, at my feeds, at the shitstorm the admission has caused. "Look at this headline 'Sabotage or More? What are they hiding?' People are calling the entire company into question. I should've explained that the prototype code was more accessible than the final products will be. I should've emphasized that our regular product lineup is entirely unaffected."

"You emphasized that," she says.

"I did?"

"Hey..." She touches my hand, lowering my phone from my gaze. "Try not to torture yourself, Luke. You did everything you could do. You did the right thing."

I let my head fall back, groaning. "Maybe it wasn't enough. I just wish I knew who did it... if it was Damien, how did he get access?"

"How many companies provided contractors for the code?"

"Three," I tell her. "That was clearly a mistake, too. It's the first time I've cut corners

on cost, and look where it landed me. From now on, no outsiders... sorry."

"I get it," she says softly. "But for the record, it wasn't us. You fly back in the morning?"

"Yeah." I take her hand, mentally pushing everything else away. "Which means we need to make tonight count. I've rented out the Waldorf Astoria SkyBar. I know how much you loved the view from our first date, so for our last, I wanted to give you another..."

She squeezes my hand tightly. "Our last," she repeats.

"For now."

The driver takes us to her hotel. I wait in the car, texting manically, and then I couldn't focus on texting even if I wanted to. When she returns, she's wearing a green dress that clings to her figure, emphasizing her wide hips and her delicious curves. Her hair is loose around her shoulders, giving her a sexy, tousled look.

She captivates my attention.

I climb from the car, opening the door for her. She brushes her hand across my stomach.

"You look amazing," I tell her, climbing in after her.

"It's funny. When I bought this dress, I honestly didn't think I'd have time to wear it. It was a what-if purchase."

"You look perfect."

She grabs my shirt and pulls herself close, breathing in shakily as she leans in for a kiss. I press my lips against hers, tasting her, savoring her.

For the rest of the ride, I keep my phone in my pocket. We use the back entrance to the top-floor bar. Soon, we're alone together with views of Vegas. Sera walks to the window. I walk up behind her, folding my arms around her, pressing my body against hers.

My desire responds instantly, heat surging through me. She wriggles against me. "I thought we were here to eat..."

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"Maybe that's exactly what I'm thinking..."

I kiss her neck, then turn her around and find her lips. Her breasts press against my chest as my erection strains against my pants like it's trying to break free from my zipper.

Leading her to the table, I gesture at the camera.

"Did you tell the staff to hide until you need them?" she asks.

"I wanted to be alone with you, truly alone," I tell her. "At least until Vegas gets busy and we can lose ourselves in it."

"Lose ourselves?"

"All the times I've visited for the conference, and you know what? I've never actually gambled," I admit.

"Doesn't this feel like taking a chance? Go on—puke. My cheesiness is too much to handle, right?"

I smirk. "This can't be gambling. I've already won the prize. There—I one-upped you."

When the waiter arrives, we order a shared platter and some sparkling water.

"Sparkplug," I say, taking her hand and looking deeply into her eyes. "I am aware you

want to avoid discussing the difficulties of a long-distance relationship, but frankly, I see myself messaging you, at the very least. Let's say I do that. What will you do? Block my number?"

"Are you seriously asking me that?"

"If you did," I say fiercely, "you'd wake up one day to find your entire building shaking as a helicopter landed on the roof."

"Ha, I doubt my building meets helicopter landing codes."

"Then you better give me the right answer."

"We can text," she murmurs. "I was considering long distance. When it has an endpoint, I think people can manage it. When it's for a month, a year even, or longer, they can't tolerate it. But could it work if it was only long distance?"

"Don't forget a billionaire's ability to visit whenever he likes."

"But you'll be busy. I'm aware of how hard you work."

I squeeze her hand comfortingly. "You've given me permission to text you. That's all I need."

She rolls her eyes. "Like you need permission."

"You're right. I meant what I said about the helicopter. But even if every vehicle I own broke down, I'd run across the country if you ghosted me."

"You're so silly," she says, laughing.

"Until you, I wasn't silly at all. You bring it out in me and make the world seem brighter. My problems seem very, very far away when I'm with you."

Chapter Thirteen

Sera

"Red or black?" he asks, seeming in a better mood than earlier when he smirks down at me. We're in the Sky Casino, people talking all around us, the lights so bright it seems like daytime even though it's evening.

"What are we playing for?" I say, touching his arm.

All around us, I notice people watching. They're trying to be subtle about it. We're at a VIP table, and people often pause when they walk by, looking over as if to confirm this really is Luke Cross...and perhaps wondering who the lady on his arm is. I'm filled with a heady sense of power. I want to shout, yes, I'm his woman. You got something to say about that, huh?

He leans down, kissing me under the ear. That special place that sends tingles dancing over my neck and my cheeks. "For your heart, obviously."

"Black, then."

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He makes the bet, then loops his arm around me, kissing the top of my head. "Is that supposed to mean that your heart is black, Sparkplug?"

"Oh, yeah," I say, sarcasm dripping from my voice.

"Which is why your passion project is making AI more empathetic..."

I laugh. "You're too clever for me."

"No," he says seriously. "I'm not. That's the reason I'm here with you."

"As opposed to the countless women tearing me apart with their eyes, wishing they were with you instead."

"I haven't noticed."

The roulette wheel spins, landing on red.

"See?" he says, smiling down at me. "Even the table knows you're lying about the black-hearted thing. Could you take the next bet?"

"Sure, Luke."

He steps away from the table, taking out his phone and texting quickly. He's been doing that all night, ever since our meal at the SkyBar. I can't blame him. It's a CEO's curse, and he's got a lot to deal with. He's already mentioned he has five meetings scheduled for tomorrow. There will be conference calls, product redesign, PR plans.

He returns, squeezing my side. "We should get out of here soon," he whispers.

"Hmm, for what?"

He kisses my cheek. "I've booked us a suite. I have a surprise for you. A show."

"A show?"

"You'll see."

"Do you always have to be so mysterious?"

"Are you complaining?" he counters.

"No freaking way," I admit. "You make everything feel like an adventure."

"That's what you've made this trip for me, Sera. You've turned what could've been a disaster into the greatest adventure of my life..."

Pleasure sizzles across my body as he kneels at the edge of the bed, his hands gripping my thighs as he guides his mouth toward my sex. The first time we got intimate, I was nervous, but those nerves have quickly vanished as he touches me again.

He's shirtless, his chiseled body humming with desire. He strokes his tongue up my folds, focusing on my clit. I gasp at the sensation and slide my hand through his hair.

"Better than your books?" he says, his hot breath teasing over my core as he licks his lip.

"Wuh-way better," I gasp.

He thrusts his finger inside me, licking my sensitive bud at the same time. He quickens his pace with each moan I make, like he's addicted to giving me pleasure, like he can't get enough of me. I feel the same, drunk on him, completely intoxicated and never wanting to be sober again.

He pushes his finger in and out. The friction sends waves of heat through me. He growls and sucks on my clit, driving me wild.

I grind my hips against him, the pleasure swelling, and then he leans back, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his eyes glinting with complete obsession. How could I ever think we'd forget about each other? Just let go?

"You're so beautiful," he says huskily, pulling down his pants.

His manhood springs up, impressive and rock-hard, his tip glistening. He falls atop me, holding himself up with his powerful arms. I grab onto his muscled shoulders, digging my fingernails into their firmness.

He takes the condom wrapper from the bedside table, tears it open with his teeth, and slips it on.

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He guides himself to my entrance. I open my legs wider, then hook them around him, pulling him with my body, guiding him inside. He snarls as he slides his entire length into me, sounding like a beast finally free of its chains, like he's done with the suits and the boardrooms, and all he wants is me.

I hold him close, my nails finger gripping him hard. We move together as if meant to be. Nothing and nobody else will ever affect me this way. Nothing and nobody else will ever make me sparkle like this. No one has ever made me feel this wanted and desired like he does. Just him.

I'm like one of the characters in my books as I bite down on his neck, tasting his sweat, tattooing my man with my teeth, sinking my fingernails into his back. He groans and thrusts even harder, the mattress squeaking as he moves in and out of me.

He pushes deep inside, bringing me closer to the edge, the orgasm approaching like a promise.

"Your body is talking to me," he gasps. "Your pussy is pulsing tight, telling me how fucking close you are."

His firm chest glides against my naked breasts, both of us slick with sweat, the heat making us slide against each other. Both of us are burning up, smoldering.

"Yes," I pant, moving even faster, chasing the release.

Confidently, purposefully, with intent. I can't believe it, but I'm doing it: being the woman I always secretly hoped I could be.

When the orgasm overtakes me, I'm not shy about it. I let out a loud moan of passion. He leans back to look down at me. I stare into his eyes as I moan, rocking my hips fast, grinding up and down his hard length.

My core burning. My soul singing. And then it all somehow gets sweeter when he groans and his eyes widen, his own release coming.

I reach up, holding his face in my hands, our bodies becoming one as we rock together. We stare into each other's eyes. Lose ourselves in each other.

When he explodes, he collapses against me, gasping, kissing my ear. I hold him tightly, saving this moment like a file to a hard drive, determined not to forget every twitch of his body as he shudders inside me.

After, he pulls away, takes off the condom and puts it in the trash. He turns back to me naked, a smile on his face.

"You better get dressed."

Lying on my side, I'm shocked by how sexy I feel, how in control. I've read phrases like, 'He looked at her like she was the only woman he could imagine being with.' I've fantasized about those words, wishing they could apply to me one day. Now, they do.

"You don't like me like this, hmm?"

He glides his hand up my side, caressing my ass. "I love you like this," he groans.

Love. The word fills the room, floods it with meaning. But he wasn't talking about love like that, obviously. I can't go from telling him a relationship will never work to dwelling on the freaking L-word.

"But I don't want you to miss the show."

"When you mentioned a show, I thought it was a euphemism for this."

He grins. "No. I've got a surprise for you. Get dressed. Wait here. And don't come out until I tell you, okay?"

"Okay, Mr. Mysterious."

He quickly gets dressed and leaves the bedroom. As I get dressed, I look around the palatial room, reflecting on the fact I'm sitting on a four-poster bed. Being with Luke for who he is, that's been the highlight of this trip. But I'd be lying to myself if I claimed the helicopter rides, the views, and the sheer majesty of everything hasn't influenced me.

Does a girl have to feel guilty for being spoiled every once in a while? As far as I'm concerned, that's a hell to the no.

Entering the en-suite, I fix my hair, smiling at my reflection. I've never been this confident. There's something about being with Luke that just makes me feel so feminine. I love being his fascination.

He returns to the bedroom, looking giddy. "Okay, it's time."

When he walks up behind me and covers my eyes, I laugh in delight.

"You've already surprised me with a private Grand Canyon trip," I say. "You don't have to?—"

"That's where you're wrong," he cuts in, leading me blind from the room... I trust him to lead. "With you, Sparkplug, I have to. I feel compelled. I feel like there's no

choice. It's a hunger that won't take no for an answer."

He leads me through the suite and out onto the balcony.

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When he lowers his hands, I squint, thinking I'm hallucinating for a second. I rub my eyes.

Delilah Sky, my favorite singer, is looking at me with a smile on her face. The plus-size artist's red hair is tied up, giving her a casual look... and she's holding a microphone.

"DelilahSky?" I gasp.

She approaches me. "Hey, Sera, right?"

"Uh, yeah." My head is spinning. "I didn't know you were in Vegas."

"I was in LA, but when Luke reached out and told me what a big fan you are, I knew I had to come."

This entire experience has felt unreal on some level, but this knocks it up several notches. It seems I'm living inside a dream. Luke wraps his arm around my waist and gives me a supportive squeeze.

"It's..." I lick my lips, feeling like a dork. Finally, I find my voice. "It's so nice to meet you. I've been a fan for years. This is honestly unbelievable."

"What's your all-time favorite song?" she asks.

First, this man makes my book dreams come true. Now, he's making my other dreams come true as well. He's a freaking miracle worker, reshaping my world, making me

feel as if I'm sparkling... and not just in the bedroom.

"Can't Get You Out of My Mind," I say, giving Luke a look.

He smiles, but he can't hide the glint of something else in his eyes. After this trip, I won't be able to get him out of my mind for sure.

Chapter Fourteen

Luke

It's only been two days since I left Vegas, but already, my world seems several shades darker than it was before. The glitz, the lights, and the intimacy of Vegas have drained away, leaving the cold corporate world behind... Except cold implies sterile, unchanging, and my life has been nothing but chaos.

Meetings, meetings, more meetings. PR strategies, social media campaigns, video recordings to demonstrate that our other products are unaffected, manic calls with shareholders to assuage their fears, eighteen-hour days that don't leave me any time to reach out to Sera.

I text her good morning... and good night, and that's all I can manage. I haven't worked this hard since the company first launched. Plus, there's a three hour time difference, which means she's normally asleep when she gets my good night text.

Toward the end of the second day, Andy buzzes through on the intercom. My assistant and go-to man has seemed depressed since leaving Vegas, too, or maybe that's just me projecting how I feel onto everyone else. "Steve is here to see you. And sir, he looks..."

"Speak your mind."

"Unhappy."

I stand. "Send him in."

Steve marches into my office, opening and closing his hands into fists. "I just got some news from the AI team," he says. "They finally found the rogue code. It was well hidden... but they found it. You're not going to like this."

"Lay it on me," I demand.

He grinds his teeth, suddenly reluctant.

"Steve, don't tiptoe around this."

"It was TechGuard," he says.

I drop into my seat, shaking my head. "TechGuard..." The company that Sera works for. "She..." She promised me they weren't involved, I almost say, but I don't want to show how vulnerable I feel in front of Steve.

After the surprise performance with Delilah Sky, we shared a bottle of champagne and then fell asleep together... well, she fell asleep. I held her for a long time, savoring the moments, knowing I'd never experience happiness like that again.

In the morning, saying goodbye was the hardest thing I've ever done. But I had to do it. For the company. And now Steve is telling me she was involved. Her department was, at least.

What if she knows nothing about it?

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"I'll get to the bottom of this," I say firmly.

Steve flinches. "We need to sue them into the dirt."

I will not tear her world to pieces before I have all the information. But that's not the excuse I'm going to give to Steve. Plus, there are other concerns.

"We don't want it to look like we're not taking responsibility for this. So far, we've won some PR points by being open and honest. If we try to pin it all on some smaller company, a contractor, we look weak. If a small department in TechGuard can derail us, what are we worth?"

He sighs. "After this, no more contractors."

"You're getting no argument from me there. It's my fault for caving to the shareholders and their greed. They've learned their lesson now."

Steve gives me a rare smile. "I know. I heard you on the call with them. I've never heard somebody flayed over the phone before."

I laugh. He's not wrong. I unleashed fury on them, so they'd understand a few million extra in profit isn't worth a fuck up of this magnitude.

"I'll make enquiries," I say. "In the meantime, fix the code. Fix the AI. Fix the car."

"We will," Steve replies. "But please..."

“Go on,” I say tersely, when he looks down and stops pauses.

He swallows. “I’m sorry, but please don’t tell her anything.”

“We’re done here,” I say, my voice devoid of emotion.

He turns and quickly leaves the room. The thought that he thinks he has any right to speak about her makes me sick. Who does he think he is? He doesn’t know her.

Sure, I don’t know her, not as much as I’d like, but those days in Vegas were meaningful. I formed a connection with her I’ve never experienced with anyone else. Ever. I have to believe that counts for something.

After another conference call, I take out my cell and text Sera. It will be around seven PM on the East Coast right now. I’ve moved one of my meetings... using the excuse I’m digging into the TechGuard mess. But a precious few minutes to talk with Sera? That’s worth more than even a billionaire could pay.

Luke: How’ve you been, Sparkplug?

I smile when she replies almost instantly.

Sera: Woah, is this something more than ‘good morning’?

Luke: I’m sorry, beautiful. I’ve been so busy.

Sera: I’ve seen online. But it looks like you’re doing a good job. You’ve kept the share price steady apart from an initial blip.

That’s true, but trust in the AI feature is at an all-time low. If I can’t make it work – and get answers – the share price situation will change drastically. People expect

results... not bucketfuls of cash sunk into research and development to receive no real gain.

Luke: How have you been keeping yourself busy? Apart from fantasizing over a certain CEO, of course...

Sera: LOL. I wish I could shoot you down, but I can't. If I was a cool, calm, and collected sort of chick, I'd tell you I haven't thought about you once. But the truth? I've been thinking about you a lot. Furthermore, the last couple of days have proved how difficult long distance can be.

She's right. I want to tell her it's just because I'm going through a busy period, but huge portions of my life – weeks and months at a time – are busy periods.

Luke: I've been thinking about you a lot, too. You're always on my mind.

Sera: Other than that. I've been spending time with Ellie.

Luke: How is she doing?

Sera: She's happy to be getting some treatment. Graham is staying stoic, but I can see how worried he is underneath it all.

I swallow, not wanting to lead the conversation where I know it has to go.

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Luke: Is it affecting the other people in your department? How many are there in your department, by the way?

Sera: It's a small subsection of TechGuard. There are only seven of us.

Dammit. I was hoping she would say it was more than that.

Luke: Are you still working on your AI project?

Sera: I've been tinkering with it. I'm more concerned with intent – if we can call an algorithm that for ease of conversation – rather than it sounding friendly at this stage. I'm training it to recognize empathy without going the whole 'sacrifice one to save a million' route. It's a fascinating series of problems.

I can feel her passion through the phone, my memory going back to when she gave the speech, her enthusiasm imbuing each sentence with excited energy.

Sera: How is the hunt for the saboteur going?

I almost don't want to tell her, but I can't lie.

Luke: We've narrowed it down to TechGuard, as a matter of fact.

Sera: WHAT!?

Luke: My co-lead just told me. He wanted to go nuclear, but I told him I'd try to get more information. I need to know, Sera, that you had nothing to do with this.

Sera: Are you fucking kidding me?

Luke: You didn't know me before the conference. You had no reason to be loyal to me.

Sera: Newsflash, Luke. I would never sabotage any product we were working on, not because you rocked my world and shattered my heart, but because I'm a PROFESSIONAL. I care about my work. I care about the future of AI. I care about this department. Graham has worked so hard trying to make it mean something to corporate. It's his pride and joy.

Luke: I'm sorry, Sera. I had to ask. I had to be sure.

Sera: It's fine.

She says she's fine, but I doubt it after what I just told her.

Luke: It's not. It's messed up. But thanks.

Sera: I'm going to find out what's going on.

Luke: What? How?

Sera: I don't know yet, but if somebody thinks they can ruin everything you and Graham have worked for, they're about to get a rude awakening. Who the hell do they think they are? I care about you. I care about Graham. I'm not just going to sit here and let them get away with it.

I smile, my pride for her expanding even more, something I wouldn't have thought conceivable until it slams right into me.

Luke: You don't have to.

I type out the message, but she sends another message before I click send it.

Sera: Don't tell me not to do this, Luke, because it isn't your choice. If somebody has been sneaking around behind our backs, sabotaging not only you, but us too, I'm going to get to the bottom of it. I'm going to help you with this whether you like it or not.

My smile grows wider.

Luke: Be careful, angel. I don't want you to get in trouble.

Sera: It's not me you need to worry about.

Luke:

I send a series of flexing emojis, then get back to work. I'd prefer to spend the rest of my day talking with her, preferably not via text, but she was right when she said long distance would be difficult for us. There's too much work, an endless ocean of it, going on and on and on...

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After several hours, I grab a quick break to check my phone. She hasn't texted me again, but I've got a missed call from Victor. I walk out onto the balcony adjoined to my office, giving me a view of the LA cityscape and a healthy lungful of fresh air.

"You called?" I say, skipping a greeting.

Victor chuckles. "It's that bad, is it? I was going to ask if you want to go for dinner one night this week, but from the way you answered the phone, clearly you think there's a big, important business deal about to go down."

I laugh darkly. "It's been nonstop," I admit.

"Any update on the sabotage?"

Why did he have to ask me this? If he didn't, I would've remained quiet about it. But I can't lie to Victor, the closest person to a father figure I've ever had.

"It was TechGuard," I say with a tired sigh. "But before you offer any theories, I've spoken to Sera. She had nothing to do with it."

"You told her," he says flatly.

"I trust her," I snap. "Go on, tell me I'm being an idiot."

"Oh, Luke." He sighs. "I don't think you're being an idiot. I just want you to think about this. I know you're smitten, but?—"

“It’s more than smitten,” I interrupt. “She’s a good person. If you told me I had to bet my fortune one way or the other, I’d bet on her not being involved. I know how that sounds, but it’s the truth. She’s got a good heart.”

“And you know all this after a few days in Vegas.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not my place to tell you how to live your life, but please, Luke, for your own sake, be careful.”

Chapter Fifteen

Sera

The next morning, I arrange a meeting with Graham. He’s been difficult to work with since we came home, locking himself in his office, refusing to talk to the rest of the team. He had a lot riding on NeuroDrive’s showcase. Our part in the AI was going to be significant for the department. After the cancellation – and considering what Ellie is going through – I don’t blame him for being depressed. But this can’t wait.

He grunts when I knock on his office door. He looks tired, bags under his eyes. Above his desk there’s a photo of me, him, and Ellie at an amusement park.

He stands, trying to plaster an effortful smile on his face. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes, I...”

In the reflection of the recently cleaned photo frame, I can see Graham’s three large computer screens. Two of them show news articles about NeuroDrive, and the third shows an email... with the heading: We Need To Do MORE!!!!!!!!!!!!

“I wanted to talk about...” I murmur, sitting opposite him, my head spinning as I put pieces together.

Graham was adamantly against me spending time with Luke, showing an interest in my love life he had never shown before. Of course, I didn't have much of a love life before Luke, so maybe that's notsoodd. But now that I think about it, he seemed awkward leading up to the trip to CES too. I thought he was anxious for it to go well, but what if I'm wrong? That email is sending off alarm bells.

“Sera?” he says, with that familiar impatient look, seeming as if he's burying a lot.

“The Peterson report,” I say, referencing another piece of work that has nothing to do with Luke. “Do you still need it by the end of the day?”

He frowns. “Yes, of course.”

“Okay, that was all.”

“That wasall?” He says pointedly.

“Yes, sorry. I just wanted to be sure.”

I return to my desk, taking out my phone and texting Luke.

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Sera: So, it seems I will need to break into my boss's office to learn the truth.

I return to my work but keep my phone nearby. About an hour later, it lights up.

Luke: Sparkplug, what are you talking about?

Sera: Something has... well, sparked my suspicion, you could say. I hope I'm wrong, but I won't be able to leave this alone until I know for sure.

Luke: You're like a dog with a bone.

Sera: Is that a compliment?

There's a smile on face as I reply, wishing he were here, wishing those few magical days in Vegas could have lasted forever, relive them like Groundhog Day so that we'd never have to face any of this.

Luke: I'm worried for your future kids ha ha.

Sera: Is that why Mr. Mysterious, the oh-so-busy CEO, found time to respond to me? To talk about kids?

Even with the world falling apart, flirting with him feels good. It's like a soothing spell that somehow makes all of this better.

Luke: I never talk about having a family.

Sera: Is that because you don't want one?

Luke: It's because I've never found a woman I'd want to have one with... but I've always wanted a family. How about you?

Sera: I'm the same. I've always wanted one in a vague sense... in a 'what if' way, but I never let myself fantasize about it TOO much. Before Vegas, the idea I could have chemistry with a man seemed unbelievable.

Luke: We had more than chemistry, Sparkplug. We had the whole lab.

I smile again, wishing he were here so badly. We shouldn't be talking about kids or anything like that. Nothing good can come of it.

Luke: Why are you sneaking into your boss's office?

I ignore his message, chaining the topic instead,

Sera: Aren't you scared to have kids considering you had a crappy childhood? I remember you said you grew up in foster care.

Luke: I'd make it my mission to never repeat the mistakes of the past. I'd give them the childhood I never had.

Sera: That's how I've always thought about it, too.

My cheeks glowing warmly as I reread my message, my heart pounding. To say that I miss this man would be a gross understatement. It goes beyond missing. It's a physical ache.

Luke: Then we have more in common than I already knew. But I won't torture us by

stating the obvious.

Sera: Please, don't. Don't talk about how neither of us ever thought we'd have a family, but now we've found somebody who wants the exact thing we do.

Luke: I wouldn't dream of doing that. No more than I'd dream of flying to Tampa tonight and making it a reality.

Sera: And then your business would implode while everybody wonders where the CEO is.

Luke: Maybe I should sell the damn thing.

Sera: You don't mean that.

I almost want him to tell me I'm wrong. He means it. He wants to forget about business and simply make a life with me. But it's not like I want to let my work aspirations go, either.

Luke: I've got another meeting. But I'll talk soon. Be careful, Sparkplug.

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I work for another fifteen minutes until Graham finally leaves his office. He's holding his empty coffee cup, which means I've got a few minutes. Picking up a folder from my desk, I carry it into his office to make it seem like I'm delivering something.

I quickly hop onto his computer. Thankfully, he hasn't locked it.

But I'm not thankful for long, not when I see the email. It's the same one he had opened earlier. In fact, all the screens are the same. It's like he's been sitting in here, staring at them, trying to process what he did.

The email is from a man named Damien Whitaker. When I read the name, a shudder moves through me. Damien—that's the name of the man who was watching Luke at the conference.

From: Damien Whitaker

To: Graham Rourke

Subject: We Need To Do MORE!!!!!!!!!!

We've taught him a lesson, but we haven't done enough, old boy. We've got more work to do. We're going to turn his world to SHRAPNEL, get it? We're going to turn it to NOTHING.

DW

I jump to my feet, my heart threatening to break out of my chest, and almost run from

the office. My eyes grow blurry, like they're filled with tears.

I rush to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. I can't believe it, can't accept it. Graham is working with Damien. Graham, who cares about this department and its future more than anything, has risked it all...

Why would he do that? I want to ask him, but I can't. It would be like asking a stranger. I don't know who he truly is under the mask he's obviously been showing me all this time.

I take out my phone and text Luke.

Sera: Can we talk later? Maybe we can do a video call? I want to have a real conversation with you.

Back at my desk, I see that Graham's door is closed again. No one has raised the alarm. I finish my report and drop it into his office. Graham doesn't meet my eye. He just stares at his computer screen like it's hypnotized him, as if he's struggling to deal with what he's done, the risk he's taken.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I murmur.

"Uh, sure," he replies. "See you then."

I go home and open my laptop, searching for Damien Whitaker. His LinkedIn profile appears on the first page: black hair tied up in a bun, a thin smile... a thin smile... Wait a second, he looks just like the guy who spilled coffee all over my laptop. Am I going nuts, or is it the same guy? Is it possible there was something on that laptop they didn't want me to see? That seems a little far fetched, but then again, I never, not in a million years, would have believed Graham capable of sabotaging his own work.

My phone vibrates.

Luke: It will be late, probably one or two AM for you.

Sera: That's okay. I'll wait.

But moments after sending the text, doubt curls through me. If I tell Luke, will he make it public? It will ruin Graham and Ellie's lives: corrupt what little time they have left together.

Hell, Graham, why did you have to do this? You were like a father to me.

Chapter Sixteen

Luke

The prospect of seeing Sera keeps my fire burning all day and well into the evening. As a man responsible for thousands of jobs, I focus on my work, do my duty as CEO and majority shareholder. But in the back of my mind, I'm with Sera, looking into her gorgeous green eyes, reliving every moment we shared together a thousand times.

I'm not sure she's still going to be awake when I finally get home at eleven PM.

Luke: I'm finally free from work.

She replies straight away.

Sera: Good, I've got my laptop set up for a video call. I've been waiting.

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I sense that something has happened, her text letting me imagine her voice terse with nerves. Entering my study, I boot up my computer, drumming my fingers impatiently against the desk... and my PC is fast. I don't know what I'd do if I had to wait longer than a few minutes.

Sera: I added your private account on my social media account.

Luke: I can't believe we haven't done that yet.

Sera: Maybe you wanted to keep that separate.

Luke: Don't be silly. I've been busy.

I boot up my socials and accept her friend request. My body responding just from the sight of her profile picture. Sera is standing in front of a bookshelf with goddess like energy shimmering around her.

A thought occurs to me, and I shoot her a text.

Luke: I need you to download a program quickly. It's a secure video-call service I use with clients. I'm certain no one is watching us... but it's better to be safe than sorry.

Sera: Good idea. At least I'm your friend on socials now. My plan worked. Though, honestly, I don't use them much or ever, if I can help it.

I smirk and send her the link to the program.

Luke: Ha ha, me neither. But we can make an exception this time. When you make an account, send me the invitation link. I'll invite you to a call.

It doesn't take long. She sends the link through. When I click it, my screen fills with her image. A smile spreads inevitably across my face. It's been days, but it feels like much longer. She sits cross-legged on her bed, wearing a baggy T-shirt, her hair in a messy bun. She looks gorgeous, her nipples poking through her shirt, her eyes shining with her essence.

"It's so good to see you," I say.

"You too," she murmurs. "You have no idea..." She draws in a shaky breath.

"Has something happened?" I ask.

She turns away to compose herself, letting out another trembling breath. Turning back to the camera, she says, "I wasn't able to get into his office. I'm sorry. I'll try again."

Did she just lie to me? I'm inclined to challenge her on it, but simultaneously, I don't want to upset her. I don't think she'd lie to me, but in the back of my head, I can hear Victor's judgmental voice telling me he warned me against this.

"That's okay, Sera. I don't want you to risk your job, anyway. I think you should let me handle this."

"Are you mad?" she asks.

"Mad that you waited up so we could talk? Hell no."

"Are you sure?" she asks, then she bites her lip. In the preview of my camera on the

bottom right, I watch my eyes snap open wide. I see a man instantly and completely captivated. She lets her lip go, then says in a flirty voice, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You know why,” I tell her. “Don’t act all innocent with me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

She bites her again, and this time moans, causing the base of my pole to jerk. I feel more alive than I have been in days.

“You drive me crazy, Sparkplug, even with an entire country separating us.”

“Me?” she says, smoothing her hand over her luscious breast, hard nipples poking through the fabric of her shirt. “Are you kidding?”

“Not even a little,” I growl. “When you do that, you make me so hard.”

“Have you ever done anything on video before?” she asks with a note of adventure in her voice, the same boldness that captivated me in Vegas.

Suddenly, it’s easy to forget about the sabotage, about TechGuard’s involvement, at least for now. Is that what she wants? Is this a trick? It’s awful that I would think like this. Then she moans again, and she consumes my thoughts.

“Are you going to leave a girl hanging?” she purrs.

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“No, I’ve never done this,” I admit.

“Done what, hmm? What are we doing?”

I push my chair back, grab my shirt, and tear it over my head. “We’re doing this.”

She stares at me with that starry-eyed expression that triggers a fresh wave of obsession. “Is it my turn now?”

“Fuck. Yes.”

My manhood stiffens as she pulls her T-shirt over her head. When I finally catch a glimpse of her breasts, I go momentarily insane, reaching for the computer screen like I’m going to penetrate the screen and touch her.

“I’m so hard for you,” I groan.

She arches her back, emphasizing her large, perfect tits. “What do you want me to do?” she whispers.

“That’s funny... I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“I want to please you,” she says. “I want to...”

“Say it, Sparkplug,” I snarl.

“Drive you wild.”

“You’re already doing that. But if you’re truly curious...”

She nods, moaning, her tits swaying for me. She smooths her hand over one of her breasts, squeezing gently. Nothing could make me look away.

“Stand up and show me that sexy ass of yours... I had a dream about your plump, juicy ass last night. I miss caressing it so damn badly. I fucking love squeezing your thickness Sparkplug.”

“You like the plus-size thing, huh?” she says with an air of confidence that causes hot precome to leak from my throbbing dick.

“I like you,” I snarl. “Just you. I’ll show you how badly I need you.”

I stand up and tear down my pants. She leans forward, gasping, her breasts shaking hypnotically again. My dick springs up, the tip glistening with precome. As she stares, I stroke, caught up in the moment, beyond absorbed at this point.

“Oh my God,” she moans. She positions her laptop where I can see her completely. When I register, she’s only wearing her underwear, my dick pulses with the need to explode.

“Bend over. Show me that ass. Reach between your legs and rub your perfect, wet pussy,” I demand. “Do what your book master commands. Now.”

She grins and moans. “Book master?” Wriggling out of her underwear, she turns her around and, like our first time together, I almost blow my load right there. “I freaking love that.”

“Good, because that’s what I am. A man straight out of one of your books. My sole purpose in life is to take pleasure from you – and give it in return. Now, rub your

pussy. Pay special attention to your clit. I know how needy you get. I remember tasting the need not that long ago.”

She reaches between her legs, looking at me over her shoulder. Her lamplight catches the curve of her ass gorgeously, bouncing off her fullness. Her hand rubs busily between her legs.

I stroke my dick from root to tip, groaning loudly, egged on by her ragged breaths, the sight of her thick ass, and the enthusiasm way in which she pleasures herself.

“You’re close,” I groan.

“How can you... tell... from there?”

“Your body is shaking for me. Fuck. I’m close too. We’re going to come at the same time. Rub your pussy even faster.”

“Like... this?”

I stroke my throbbing dick, matching her pace. Both of us are moving fast. As we race toward our release, her hips shift back and forth, almost like she’s imagining grinding against my cock.

I stock my erection, the hot friction of my touch becoming her pussy. I remember vividly what it felt like to slip inside of her, to fill her tight core, the way her tunnel gripped me and massaged my length the closer she got to her release.

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Come explodes out of my end. At the same time, she whimpers and juices flow down her leg.

When it's over, she turns to me. Her eyes flit to the corner of the screen and she frowns.

“Don’t you dare do that,” I growl.

“What?”

“What did I tell you about acting innocent? Don’t look at yourself and think about anything but the truth. You’re gorgeous and the sexiest woman alive. That doesn’t change if I’m horny or not... and for the record, even after exploding, I’m still horny for you.”

She smiles while tapping the side of her head. “Seriously, you and your mind-reading chip need to chill...”

I grin. “I’ll get cleaned up, then we can talk for a while. I don’t want you thinking I only want you for one thing.”

I step into the en-suite to wipe myself down and pull on some fresh underwear. But when I return, my screen is blank. I’ve got a text from Sera.

Sera: I’m sorry to ditch you like that. I’m super tired and need to get some sleep. I know I took the coward’s way out by not telling you to your face. But that was freaking great, worth waiting up for.

I frown, attempting to believe her, trying not to let Victor's voice invade my mind. If Victor knew about this, he'd say there's a chance she called me so she could record what we just did.

If she did that, I'd be screwed. But when I told him I trusted her, I was telling the truth.

Sera: Are you mad?

I imagine her looking at me with those gorgeous eyes. That expression on her face that makes me feel like I know her, like I've been waiting for her on some level I don't even understand.

Luke: No. I should get some sleep too.

I put my phone on the bedside table and lie on the bed. Staring up at the ceiling, I try not to let suspicions twist through me and corrupt what we have. But Victor's voice is there, my mentor, the man who's given me so much guidance over the years.

"How can you trust someone you barely know..."

I don't want to think like that, don't want to doubt her.

But if she wasn't my obsession, I've got to admit. I'd find what happened suspicious.

Chapter Seventeen

Sera

The next morning, I visit Ellie at the hospital. She's been an in-patient since she began her treatment before we left for Vegas. Her condition is in the relatively early

stages, but it still breaks my heart when I see the spaced-out look in her eyes as she struggles to focus. For a moment, it's like she's forgotten who I am.

But when she smiles, the woman I remember flashes through her features. She becomes the IT teacher again, full of life, passion, protectiveness. She has her own room in the private hospital... Graham said that insurance is covering it, but our insurance isn't that good. Is it really covering all this?

"Sit, dear, sir," she says, gesturing to two chairs with views of the hospital's spacious grounds.

Guilt attempts to stop me from doing what I have to do, from acting on the plan I developed last night after the video-call sex thing. Okay, so that was a distraction. I didn't plan on it, though. I was going to tell him about Damien's email to Graham, but then I started panicking, my mind spinning into how ugly the future could get, and I realized I couldn't do it.

So I went the sexy route, capitalizing on the hunger in his eyes. The second he saw me, it was there, a fierce desire to claim me. I wanted to make him feel good, too.

"How have you been?" I ask.

"Nevermind that," she says with a smile. "How was..." She pauses. "Vegas?"

Minor lapses, pauses, moments of forgetfulness are how it starts, which will expand until there's no Ellie left.

"It was great, actually," I say. "I've got some pictures. Do you want to see?"

"Sure," she replies with a smile.

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I take out my phone, showing her some snaps of the conference.

“Sorry, do you mind if I use your bathroom?” I ask, handing her the phone. “You can choose your favorite. I might print it out for you, so you can hang it up. Just a thought.”

Ellie smiles... a little strangely? If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was nervous. I bury that thought. Instead, the little observational gremlin inside my head notes her slow decay.

I walk away from both thoughts and step into the en-suite – noting how expensive this place must be with its waterfall shower – and use the bathroom. My stomach has been a mess since I found that email yesterday. It’s like my body is rebelling against any idea that Graham could be in on the sabotage.

My mind whirs, though. I can’t stop it. It gets like this when I sink into a meaty tech idea and it’s doing the same now.

Ellie hands me the phone when I return. “I love the one of you before your speech.”

“I grabbed that from social media,” I say. “An audience member took it.”

Her eyes grow misty. “I love you, Sera. I’m so proud of you. I want—I need you to know that.”

“I know it... and right back at you,” I say with a soft smile.

We sit in comfortable silence for a while. At least, this should be a comfortable silence. But the question I have to ask is staining the experience. I don't want to do it, but I need to sort this out.

"Ellie, have you ever heard of Damien Whitaker?" I ask. "Has Graham ever mentioned him?"

She laughs shakily. "My memory isn't what it used to be..."

"I know," I murmur, looking closely at her. Is this her condition, or she is hiding something? I hate feeling like this. But I can't ignore the puzzle pieces. "I thought you might remember something. I don't want to put any pressure on you."

"I don't know," she murmurs. "Damien, you said?"

"Yeah, I've got a picture," I tell her, flicking to the photo I saved and showing her my phone. The more I look at him, the more certain I become he was the man who spilled the coffee on my laptop, the douche who started this whole thing.

She looks at it for a few moments, then shakes her head. "I've never seen him before."

"Okay, that's fine." I put the phone away. "This place looks great... well, as great as a place like this can, anyway."

"Yes, it's wonderful. I'm so thankful to Graham. But I know he'd do anything for me. I know he'd..." She cuts off with a sob, covering her mouth, her eyes becoming misty again. One sob follows another, and soon she's full on crying.

"It's okay," I say, rubbing her arm. "I'm right here. Everything is going to be okay."

“I’m so sorry,” she says between sobs.

“Sorry? You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Unless she knows something. Unless she’s hiding the truth from me.

“I don’t want you worrying about me,” she says. “I want you to take care of yourself. You’ve been through so much. I still remember the computer-crazy shy girl you were, scared to ask to stay late. I remember how shocked you were when I gave you a little attention. You appeared starved for it.”

“That’s because I was.”

“Can we just sit here for a bit?” she asks quietly.

“Sure.”

We hold hands, looking out at the grounds. Soon, Ellie falls asleep. I hold her hand a while longer, then drape a blanket over her and head to work. I go straight to Graham’s office, nerves threatening to stop me, but I can’t, won’t, let them.

Graham looks up at me, huge bags under his eyes, his hair in disarray, like he’s frustratingly run his hands through it. He’s a mess.

“You haven’t been sleeping,” I say.

“No,” he mutters.

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“Why?” I grit out a little too forcefully.

“Is everything okay?”

“Why haven’t you been sleeping, Graham?”

“Sit down, Sera. Has something happened?”

“I visited Ellie on my way to work. She’s doing well, thank God. But something stuck out to me. That place she’s staying at, the place she had to move into – the place our insurance apparently covers... It’s like a palace. It’s?—”

“Don’t,” Graham cuts in, baring his teeth like a freaking animal. I’ve never seen him like this before.

I take a step back. “Excuse me?”

He plants his fist on the table. Is he trying to intimidate me? Is it working? “I’m saying this for your own good, Sera. Ellie and I care about you, but you need to stop this right now. You can’t go any further. Go back to your desk and forget about this. This line of thinking ends. Here. Got it?”

“Or what? Are you going to hit me, Graham?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Am I free to leave?”

“I’m saying this for your sake,” he says, sounding exasperated. Well, too bad, so am I.

“You’ve just admitted you were involved.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure, you don’t,” I say, running from the room and right past my desk, tears sliding down my cheeks as I rush into the stairwell.

I could keep it together when I was in there with him, but this is too much. Mom and Dad betrayed me by being... well, Mom and Dad. I never thought that Graham would do the same. I always believed they were different. But if he did it for money – for Ellie – maybe I can get my head around that.

When I call Luke, he rejects it with a text.

Luke: I’m in a meeting.

Sera: I lied to you yesterday. I’m sorry. I need your help. I think Graham was involved in the sabotage. When are you free to talk?

Luke: Woah, slow down. You think he was involved?

Sera: I just confronted him, and he basically confirmed it. I’ve never seen him so angry. Yesterday, I found an email from Damien on his computer.

I type quickly.

Sera: I planned on telling you, but I was scared of getting him into trouble. But I can’t do this alone.

Luke: It's lucky I'll be in Tampa tomorrow.

I gasp.

Sera: What, really?

Luke: That's what this meeting is about: East Coast business. I'll be with you soon. I have a little spot where we can meet. It'll be perfect. Do nothing until then. We'll work this out together.

Sera: Am I supposed to just go on like everything is normal?

Luke: Yes. Until we can meet. When we're together, I'll lead the way for my little vulnerable princess.

That last line is... weird.

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Sera: I'm not little or vulnerable, Luke. I just need help.

Luke: Yep. Gotcha. Sorry about that. My head is in a million places. I'll text you the time and the location. We'll do this together.

Sera: Okay, Luke, thank you. That means a lot.

I take a moment to gather myself, drying my cheeks and breathing slowly for a minute, trying to diffuse some of the panic. Luke will be here tomorrow. Together, we'll fix this.

Chapter Eighteen

Luke

Not Delivered

I stare down at my phone, my hand trembling like any second I'm going to curl it into a fist and crush the thing. I've tried to text Sera several times, and it keeps giving me that same message. Whenever I call, it cuts out without even ringing. Is her cell turned off? Or is she ghosting me?

My day is a busy one. Those suspicions won't let up, whispering in my ear, telling me she lied to me, that this has all been a game. My heart, my instincts, and my soul – something I never thought about before Sera – tell me she would never do that. But my head can't ignore the possibility.

Andy approaches me backstage. He seems on-edge, shifting from foot to foot. When he opens and closes his hands nervously, my assistant's Michael Faraday tattoo shifts around.

"Relax," I tell him. "You're not the one who has to charm her. I do."

"Cynthia Linx?" he says, raising his eyebrows. "Sorry, boss, but if I had to charm her, I wouldn't be complaining."

"Is something wrong?"

He averts his gaze, shaking his head slowly. It's like he can't bear to look at me. I wonder if the stuff with Sera is making me suspicious about everyone and everything.

"The company," he says. "We need this to go well. It's not just your job on the line."

I look at him, but he still doesn't face me. He's acting weird. I don't buy the company angle, either. It's like he's saying what he thinks I want to hear.

But life is too busy to give me time to ponder this. I check the message I sent to her socials, but I remember she said she doesn't use them often. She hasn't seen that message, either... or she has, but she simply didn't open it. Perhaps she's already got what she wanted; perhaps now she and her team are working out how to get away with the sabotage.

"You're up, boss," Andy says. "Break a leg."

I walk into the studio. Cynthia is renowned for flirting with guests, a woman of around thirty with a bob of blonde hair and a healthy – or the opposite, depending on a man's perspective – layer of plastic surgery. She crosses her legs, raising a stenciled eyebrow suggestively at me.

Behind the camera, my PR manager is giving me a serious evil eye. Her suggestion was that I flirt with Cynthia because it will make me seem more human, approachable, and that's what we need right now. But the thought of flirting with her feels like a betrayal to Sera: a betrayal to the woman who refuses to text me back.

"Are you ready?" Cynthia asks.

I adjust my tie. "Sure."

"You can take that off if you'd be more comfortable."

"I'm fine," I say stiffly.

"Have it your way." She flutters her eyelashes. I'm sure she's used to men fawning over her... and she is. "Ready for the countdown? It's not live, but I like my guests to be comfortable."

It's not live, meaning she can cut it any way she wants, meaning I have to be on my A-game.

After the countdown, she becomes even more animated, gesticulating so that her shiny bracelets catch the light. I wonder if this is a purposeful tactic to blind and disorient her guests. Because it's working.

"Luke Cross, I have to say, this is an absolute pleasure." She beams. "For a long time, you've been the enigmatic playboy of the tech world."

"I've never been a playboy," I say, and my PR manager glares at me like she wants my head to explode.

"Forgive me," Cynthia goes on. "A turn of phrase I'm too accustomed to. You've

certainly been enigmatic, though, releasing a series of wildly successful self-driving cars, rarely giving interviews or seeking the spotlight.”

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“Being a CEO is about hard work,” I tell her. “With billionaires seeking the limelight and clambering of their fifteen minutes, obsessed with politics and social media clout, it’s easy to forget that. But real work happens in the dark; genuine work happens during long stints in the mine?—”

“Yes, well,” she cuts me off. “You’ve got your fifteen minutes now... with me. A more polite man might say thank you.”

It’s only when she leans forward that I realize how close the chairs are. A waft of perfume attacks me. Nothing compared to Seraphina’s natural scent. I try to get my Sparkplug out of my head, but it’s impossible.

When Cynthia tries to touch my arm, I lean away as much as my chair will allow. It must make for a strange sight. I appear as if I’m trying to run from her. She frowns.

“Do I stink?”

“No,” I say stiffly.

“So I smell nice, then?”

More glaring from my PR manager. “Yes, you... uh, you smell nice.” What the hell am I even saying? I regret it instantly, especially when she grins as though she’s won a victory.

“How has this recent disaster affected your dating life?”

“I’ve never had much of a dating life.”

“If you play your cards right, that could change...”

“Doing the right thing,” I go on, side stepping her comment entirely, “is what I attempted. I knew I had to be honest. The truth had to be revealed by me. I still believe this AI model has the potential to improve people’s lives drastically.”

Bored, she sighs. Almost reluctantly, she says, “Okay, so how could AI make your cars even better?”

“AI has the potential to adapt to a person’s personal driving preferences. Instead of relying on decision trees, it will learn traffic patterns, sense the best courses of action, prevent accidents...”

“Or go rogue,” she says. “How can you be sure something like this won’t happen again?” She laughs. “See... isn’t it much more fun when we talk about dating instead?”

“Someone tampered with the AI’s speech patterns—its personality, if you will. We are working to ensure this never happens again.”

“Yes, yes, yes.” She yawns melodramatically. “But what about taking steps to ensure that a certain interviewer doesn’t go to bed alone tonight, hmm?”

“That interview was a disaster,” I groan an hour later, pushing the weight bar as Victor – strong as an ox for his age – spots me. “When she finally tired of speaking about the AI, which didn’t take long, she just wanted to flirt with me.”

Victor helps me rack the bar. “Isn’t that a good thing? That’s what your team wanted, isn’t it? That’s Cynthia Linx’s *modus operandi*.”

“But...” I walk to the edge of the private gym, grab my towel, and wipe the sweat from my face. I can feel Victor staring at me. We haven’t got long until it’s shower time, then more interviews.

“You’re thinking about the girl.”

“Her name is Sera,” I snap. “She’s not just a girl. She’s...”

Victor approaches, the solid, tall, muscular man I remember from when I was a kid, with those same kind eyes. “Listen, son, you’ve been on your own for a long time. Then you finally found somebody who turned your head. Who made you feel alive? I can’t blame you for throwing yourself into it?—”

“You’re making it sound like it was just some fling,” I growl. “But it was so much more than that. I can’t even fully explain what it was. It was...” Magic. “It meant a lot.” I sigh.

“I’d never tell you how to live your life.”

“But?”

“Who said there’s a bu?—”

“Cut the crap, Victor.”

He shrugs. “But she works for TechGuard and she’s not responding to your calls or texts.”

When my phone vibrates, I quickly snatch it up. It’s a text from my assistant.

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Andy: Cynthia has uploaded the interview already.

I click the link, then watch with my mouth hanging open. She's edited out almost everything I said about the company, cutting it together to make it seem like we just flirted, and that's it.

"She asked me what I want in a woman," I growl, showing Victor the screen. I was thinking about Sera when I said, "I want somebody I truly connect with. Somebody I can imagine spending a life with. And yes, I've already met her."

"Are you talking about me, per chance?" Cynthia asks.

"Maybe I am..."

I pause the video. "That part, when I said maybe I am, I wasn't even answering that question. They've spliced it up to make it seem like we flirted more than we did. Those bastards."

"Relax," Victor says. "Isn't this what you wanted?"

"No," I snarl. "If Sera sees this... Don't look at me like that, Victor. I get it. I'm a gullible asshole. I should know better. But what if she's just having phone problems? That could be why she's not responding. And she said herself that she rarely uses social media."

"Lot of ifs in that scenario," Victor murmurs. "I just don't want to see you get hurt."

I text her again, but again, I get the message undelivered notification. “This would only happen if she blocked my number or if my cell phone was off.”

Victor hands me his phone. “Try calling her from my cell.”

I take it, type her number in. This time, the phone rings... but she doesn’t answer.

Darkness grips me.

“She blocked my number.”

“I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. “I need to talk with her. In person.”

“In person? When?”

“Now,” I snap.

I storm out of the gym before Victor can ask what I mean. Perhaps I’m being a fool. Maybe she’s secretly laughing at me behind my back. But I need to look her in the eye so she can tell me, to my face, that those life-changing days in Vegas meant nothing to her.

Chapter Nineteen

Sera

I sit outside a rundown bar. It looks abandoned. The sun has stained the exterior a blood-red color. Broken glass litters the surrounding street. The nearest building also looks abandoned as well. It’s like a little corner of the apocalypse.

Sera: Are you sure this is the place?

I text Luke, sending him a photo of the bar.

Sera: You said it was your 'special little place'.

He replies right away.

Luke: Yes, that's it. I'm in here now.

I grind my teeth, thinking about the interview that was uploaded to Cynthia Linx's online channel an hour ago.

Sera: Why did you say that stuff in the interview, and how did she upload it so fast?

Luke: We recorded it two days ago, sweet pea. I had to say what I had to say because it was what I had to say.

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I read the text a few times, trying to make sense of it. It just doesn't feel like Luke. It feels strange, even his wording sounds off. I try to call him, but he rejects it.

Luke: We'll be talking in person any second now.

Sera: Why won't you answer the phone? Are you mad I didn't tell you the truth about TechGuard right away?

Luke: A little, but that's not why I won't answer. I want to talk with you in person.

Sera: Then come out here.

Luke: If you're certain, that's what you want.

I stare at the bar, keeping my engine running, ready to drive away at the first sign of trouble. This situation is giving me seriously bad vibes, and I'm not sure what's happening. I grew up in a dangerous neighborhood, around desperate people, and there's something about Luke's messages that are giving me similar feelings.

As crazy as it seems, I'm thinking that somehow, somebody switched Luke's number in my phone. This person doesn't text like Luke?—

I scream when my passenger-side window is smashed, turning away and covering my face. Before I can think about driving away, somebody has leaned into the shattered window and reached all the way across, poking something cold and metal against my head.

“Get out of the car. Slowly.”

“Please,” I whisper. “Damien?”

“You’re even cleverer than I thought. Come on now, sweet pea. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Trembling, I opened the car door and climbed out. I remember what Luke said about Damien being desperate and manic. I need to act fast in case he does something he might come to regret... but it’ll be too late for me.

He walks around the car, keeping the gun trained on me. He’s definitely the guy who spilled coffee all over my laptop. His hand trembles as he gestures with the firearm. “To the bar. Now.”

Nothing good will happen if I do what he says. I need to stall. This may be a quiet neighborhood, but I saw a car go by a few minutes ago. If I get lucky, maybe another car will notice us. Damien isn’t exactly being subtle with the gun he’s waving around.

“How did you switch the number?” I say, trying to get him talking.

He smiles thinly. “This goes deeper than you can imagine. This goes to the root of your entire existence, girl.”

“Did you break into my...” No, that’s not it. Oh, fuck. “You threatened Ellie, didn’t you? When I visited her, I went to the bathroom. I left my phone with her. Right before I left, she looked... terrified. You threatened an innocent woman who has cancer.”

He walks right up to me, prodding me with the gun, causing a fresh wave of terror to drench my entire being. “I’d change your tone if I were you.”

“But I’m right.”

“Luke owes me. His entire company owes me. I’m the man behind it all. I’m the kingpin. I’m the big dog.” He barks in my freaking face. It’d be funny if it wasn’t so terrifying. “Now –walk.”

With no other choice, I move slowly across the street, holding my hands high above my head, praying someone will notice me. I take small, slow steps, then stop, panting as if I’m on the verge of a panic attack. It’s easy to fake it... or I’m not totally faking it.

“Walk, bitch, or I’ll shoot you right here.”

“Puh-please,” I say, almost choking on the word. “Please, just let me?—”

“Walk. Oh, fuck...”

That’s when I hear it, the sound of tires approaching. I want to cry out in relief, but I can’t claim victory. I need them to stop, I need them to care enough to save a life. Thankfully, I still have my hands up in the air.

All I’m hoping for is a distraction to run away, but when I turn to look, I’m pleasantly surprised by what I see. A man with a big, bushy mustache pokes his head out of his pickup, holding none other than a shotgun. He looks like can handle the gun well. It is Florida, after all.

“What do we have here?” the man yells.

“Mind your business, old man,” Damien yells. “Or I shoot the bitch.”

“You shoot her, I shoot you, mister.”

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“You can shoot me; I’m already dead.”

“But there are things you want to do,” I say. “Think, Damien. If it all ends here, how will you get what’s owed to you? How will you take control of NeuroDrive? You need to stay alive long enough to take what’s rightfully yours, don’t you? You need to be smart about this.”

Damien groans. “I’m accurate with this gun, mister.”

“That makes two of us,” the man says, racking his rifle. Damien must not know a lot about guns because a shotgun isn’t a firearm known for its precision. A buckshot could take us both out. So, either the big man is bluffing, or he’s as crazy as Damien.

“Now get!”

Damien doesn’t say anything for a minute, but my potential savior isn’t too patient.

“Move it now! This is your last warning.”

“Okay, okay. I’m going to back up, but I’m keeping the gun aimed on her. If you make a move I don’t like, I’m going to blow her fucking brains all over the road. Got it?”

“And if you make a move I don’t like, I’m going to explode your head like a watermelon dropped off a skyscraper. Just so we’re clear.”

The next several seconds are tense as pure terror pulses through me. Damien backs

away. I can't see him, since he's behind me, but I know where he is because the driver never takes the barrel of his gun from him. Damien climbs into a car and screeches away, but the man never lowers his weapon.

When he's gone, I slump to the ground, pulling my knees to my chest and shivering. I can't stop. The man climbs from his truck and drapes a blanket over my shoulders. Soon, there are sirens in the air. Despite that, I can't stop shivering.

For the next two hours, I go from the hospital to the police station. I give them my statement about Damien, starting in Vegas and ending with the switched phone numbers. He's still at large, so they put a police escort on me. They try to comfort me by saying they've informed all their officers to be on the lookout for him. His travel is also going to be restricted.

I feel raw after what happened. As the police give me a ride, I take out my phone, open my socials, then mentally kick myself. I've got several messages from Luke.

Luke: Sparkplug, is everything okay?

Luke: Whatever this is, we can talk about it. I know our time in Vegas meant something to you. I know you felt the magic too. Whatever's happening, we can fix it – together.

I try to call him via socials, but he must not have any signal. Navigating my phone, I go to my blocked numbers... and there it is, his real number. I unblock it and then try to call him, but it goes to voicemail.

The police cruiser stops outside the medical center. Perhaps I'm stupid for coming here, but I need to hear Ellie say it. She's ill. Fine, I get that. But she still fucking betrayed me. I walk to the reception desk and ask to see her. The receptionist looks at me weirdly, and I realize I've got dried tears streaking my cheeks.

Before I head to her room, I go to the ladies and clean myself up. Cold water on my face, a few deep breaths, and I'm ready I go to Ellie, mostly.

She's on her feet, standing at the window, her eyes raw and red, her hands clasped in front of her like she's praying. She bursts into tears when she sees me.

I resist the almost overpowering urge to rush toward her. "Are you surprised to see me?"

"I saw you arrive in a police car," she murmurs. "I was in the activities room."

"You saw me in a police car, and you burst into tears, Ellie," I say, struggling not to cry. It keeps coming in waves: no, tsunamis. "Why would that be? Why would you see me in a cop car and start crying, unless you knew Damien was out to get me?"

"Eh-Ellie..." She drops into her seat, crumpling like the life is draining out of her.

I walk up behind her, reach out... then stop myself. Instead, I sit on the chair next to her, but keep my hands in my lap. "What happened?" I snap.

"I don't know," she whispers.

"You're going to need to do better than that."

She stares at me with a heartbreaking expression. "All I know is, Graham told me I had to do what Damien said. I had to. He said he'd thought of everything. He claimed to have rehearsed every scenario a thousand times in his mind."

"Batshit crazy," I mutter, not sure what else to say.

"But he was right. He said if you came to me, I had to get your phone. I had to block

Luke's number and change the contact to his number. He said if I didn't, he would hurt me, and he would hurt Graham. Damien didn't give us any choice."

"So before, when I visited, you were playing up your condition, pretending it was worse than it is so you could get my defenses down. You were playing me," I nearly screech.

“I’m so sorry.”

“He tried to kill me,” I yell, jumping to my feet. “Ellie, I loved you. How could you do this? I’d die before I did something like this to you. Do you understand?”

“That’s enough.”

I turn at the sound of Graham’s voice. He stands at the door... and of course, he’s got tears in his eyes too. It seems the pair of them believe that having the tiniest shred of remorse makes this all A-freaking-okay.

“So, it’s fine for your shit to almost get me killed, but I can’t be mad about it?”

“I told you I could handle this alone,” Ellie says to Graham.

He sighs, his hands on his hips. His lips tremble as he tries not to cry. It’s making me want to weep with them, like some warped version of the life we should live, all in this together, handling this mess as a cohesive unit instead of them conspiring against me.

“We needed the money,” he whispers.

“I know. Damien got a payout. He has the funds to help Ellie. Our department is the ass of TechGuard. They don’t give us the benefits we deserve. I get all that. But how could you do this to me?”

“How was I supposed to know that you were going to get involved with Luke

Cross?” Graham snaps. “How could I possibly see that happening? Seriously. Explain that to me. Make it make sense. Was I supposed to know that he’d be waiting to fix your laptop? That you’d end up dating?”

“You sent Damien after me before I met Luke,” I hiss. “He was the one who spilled coffee all over the laptop. Why, Graham? Was there something on there you didn’t want me to see?”

“He said he wouldn’t hurt you, and he didn’t,” Graham mutters.

“But after? You must’ve known he was going to do something rash when I dug deeper.”

Graham buries his face in his hands and sobs violently. Ellie cries too. I storm past Graham, completely sick of them.

“Sera, wait?—”

But I ignore him. I’m tired of it. Waiting. I’ve done enough. I waited for Mom and Dad to prioritize me over their addiction, waited for Graham and Ellie to be the role models they seemed to be when we first met. Waited for life to stop being so chaotic.

The cops give me a ride home once I exit the medical center. I rush upstairs, full of manic energy, pacing around, not sure what to do. I end up cleaning the apartment. Seriously, it’s the only way to keep myself busy, mindlessly scrubbing and vacuuming, losing myself in the simplicity of it.

Hours pass with me in this trance. My phone goes off several times: Graham first calling, then texting me.

Graham: We’re so sorry. Let’s talk about this.

There's nothing to talk about. Perhaps he had a good reason, wanting to care for Ellie. Maybe that was enough of a reason to sabotage Luke's keynote speech, considering nobody would get hurt. But the rest of it? Switching the numbers? Helping Damien set up a trap for me?

He calls me several more times. I ignore my phone, but then it becomes too much. I can't stand the noise of the ringtone. Reaching for my phone, I answered without looking at the screen.

"Don't you get it?" I yell. "I don't want anything to do with you. I never have – got it?" I'm ranting, saying things I don't mean, but it comes tumbling out in a flurry of pure hatred and betrayal. "You took pity on me, good for you. Should I be grateful? Should I spend the rest of my life on my knees, singing your praises? You're nothing to me."

I hang up the phone, then toss it onto the couch. Screw them. I don't want anything to do with them. Ever. I don't need anybody...

Except Luke.

Chapter Twenty

Luke

I sit outside her apartment building, staring at my phone. When the private jet landed and all my texts went through to her, I thought maybe things were going to be different. She unblocked my number... that must mean something, right?

But her rant on the phone, telling me she wants nothing to do with me and I'm nothing to her... Why am I even still sitting here? What's wrong with me? I called her to tell her I'm outside. I flew all this way for her, ignoring countless NeuroDrive

responsibilities, so I could be here for her.

And that's how she treats me. I sigh, running my hand through my hair. If I had any sense, I'd get the hell out of here.

My phone rings. It's her again. I think about not answering it. She probably wants to yell at me again, but I came all this way. I might as well see this through.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

“Sera,” I say, answering. “Are you going to let me speak?”

“I’m sorry,” she replies. “I’ve got a lot to explain. Are you busy?”

I laugh dryly. “Why the sudden change in tone? Are you trying to mess with my head? Is that it?”

“I didn’t mean to block your number. You’re not going to believe my story.”

What twisted game is she playing? “Forget about the number. Are we going to talk about your rant or just pretend it never happened?”

“My... rant.” A pause. “Wait, did you just call me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh God,” she grunts. “I didn’t know it was you! Graham’s been calling me nonstop. I thought it was him. Luke, hell, I would never speak to you like that. I want nothing to do with you. Are you kidding me? I want everything to do with you.”

“So, why did you block my number?”

“Like I said, it’s a lot to explain.”

“Then it’s lucky I’m outside your apartment.”

When she gasps, a smile spreads across my face. It’s the most sincere smile I’ve had

in days – since leaving Vegas. “Are you freaking serious?”

“Yes. I took my private jet. My team is pissed, but I’ve worked myself raw for the company for over a decade. I’m taking this time for me, for us.”

She snuffles, then lets out a sob. “I’m—so—happy...”

“What’s wrong? No, wait. I’m coming up. Apartment number seven, right?”

“Yes.”

I rush from the car, running across the street. She buzzes me up and I take the stairs two at a time, sprinting down the hallway when I reach the first floor. She throws her door open. When I see her – messy hair, oversized hoodie, her eyes red from crying – the world suddenly makes sense again.

She throws herself into my arms, gasping like she’s finally able to breathe after too long without oxygen. I rub my hands over her back, holding her tenderly.

“It’s okay, angel,” I whisper when she sobs against my chest. “Whatever happened, I’m here for you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“It all... fell... apart...”

“And I’m here to help put it together. Come on. Let’s sit you down. You can tell me everything.”

I lead her into her apartment, which is stunningly clean and airy. A smile touches my lips when I see her stack of techy books. I gently sit her down on the couch, then hold her hands, looking into her eyes.

“Start at the beginning,” I say.

“The night we got steamy on camera, I was supposed to tell you what I found in Graham’s office,” she murmurs, sniffing.

She grips my hands desperately. I hold hers with the same reassuring pressure.

“It was an email from Damien. He was bragging about what he did, saying they should do more. Graham was behind the sabotage. Damien hired him to do it.”

“Okay,” I say, keeping my fury in check. Sera is innocent in all this.

“Aren’t you mad?”

“You didn’t want to get Graham in trouble. I understand.”

“Only after I had time to process it. I wanted to tell you. I texted you... but it wasn’t you.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Damien threatened Ellie. I went to see her, and Ellie changed the contact number in my phone. She blocked your real number too. I was texting you, I thought, but it wasn’t you. It was Damien.”

“Why?” I growl, trying and failing to contain my anger.

“He lured me to a buh-bar...”

I take a deep breath, rein in my anger, and bring her hands to my lips, kissing them gently. “What did he do?” I ask in a trembling voice, either in fear or anger. I’m not sure anymore.

“He had me meet in at this abandoned bar. Once he had me there, he pulled a gun on me. This next part is the craziest of it all. I stalled him, praying somebody would stop him when a man with a shotgun drove by. There was a standoff. Damien got away. Now the cops are looking for him.”

“And that’s why there’s a cop car on your street.”

She nods. “Yeah. Graham did it to pay for Ellie’s treatment.”

I grind my teeth, picturing Damien, his thin smile, his entitlement.

“He’s not well,” Sera mutters.

“I know,” I growl. “But that doesn’t make it okay. The fucking lowlife. Who does he think he is? I’ll kill him if he ever tries to hurt you again, Sera.”

“I just want you to hold me,” she whispers, pulling herself in for another hug.

I embrace her tenderly, struggling to stay calm as I think about what she's told me.

“This all started with one idea,” I mutter. “Damien suggested a tweak to a decision tree, a small suggestion. I was grateful for it. I jokingly said, ‘At this rate, you’ll be running the company.’ It was a joke, Sera, and then he built it into this whole separate world.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I should’ve been there for you. I don’t want to hear any arguments now.”

“About what?” she whispers.

"You're coming home with me. I'm not leaving you here alone. Damien is still out there. I refuse to let him hurt you. Ever."

She clutches my arm. "Are you sure?"

"You're coming. That's the end of the discussion. Get your bag ready. Actually, pack two or three. I've got plenty of space. But first, don't for a second think I'd come all this way and not kiss my Sparkplug..."

I lean down, kissing the tears from her cheek, and then tenderly press my lips against hers.

She holds my hand as the plane takes off, gazing out the window.

"Are you going to miss Tampa?" I ask.

"Ellie was the only thing keeping me here. But she isn't the woman I thought she was."

I kiss her gently on the cheek. "Are you scared of flying?" I ask.

She turns to me with the most beautiful, shaky smile. Her pale green eyes still hold that sense of adventure despite everything that's happened to her. "Am I squeezing too hard?"

I smirk. "Break my hand if you need to, Sparkplug. It's good to feel needed by you."

"That's the perfect word: needed. It's only the takeoff that messes with me."

"I'm here for you."

She grips me tightly as the plane rises from the runway and pierces the clouds. Once we level off, she releases her hold with a soft sigh. "See? I can be a big girl now."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

I brush her gorgeously messy hair from her face, then lean in for a kiss. After, we stay close, staring into each other's eyes.

"Not even a week since Vegas, but it feels like an eternity."

"You've got no idea how happy I am you're here," she murmurs. "That we're together... I thought I was going to have to stay in that apartment alone, waiting for Damien to show up, waiting for everything to go wrong again."

"He won't hurt you ever again," I say firmly. "Nobody will. I'm proud of you."

"Proud?"

"You were threatened. Your life was in danger. You're handling it all remarkably well."

"Except for all the crying and the manic cleaning breakdown, you mean?"

I kiss her again. "Nobody could blame you for that. You've been through a lot. All things considered, you're a hero."

She rolls her eyes with a scoff. "I wouldn't go that far."

For a while, we sit in comfortable silence, looking out the window together. Then she whispers, "It seems silly under the circumstances..."

"Nothing you could say to me would seem silly."

Another eye roll.

"But if you roll your eyes like that again, your book master might have to teach you a lesson."

She bites her lip, her wide eyes igniting a rush of hunger within me. I've tried to keep my instincts at bay considering everything she's been through, but when she looks at me like that, it's Vegas all over again.

"I saw the interview," she murmurs.

"That was a hatchet job," I grunt. "They spliced it up to make it seem like I was flirting with her, taking quotes from one part and inserting them into another. The only true thing was when I said she smelled nice... which was a damn lie, and I only said it because my PR manager looked ready to slap me. I regretted it instantly. Everything else was editing."

"Really? So I smell nicer than her?"

Her voice grows breathy, her tone becoming suggestive. I place my hand on her leg. She's dressed in sweats and a casual T-shirt, but she might as well be wearing her Vegas lingerie; the effect she has on me is the same. My desire strains against my pants, intense and immediate.

"As much as I'd love to join the mile-high club with you," I say fiercely, sliding my hand higher. "I know you've been through a lot..."

She glances around the empty private plane, then bites her lip and moans. "That isn't an answer to my question."

"You and that interviewer aren't even in the same category. You're my obsession,

Sparkplug. My everything. You're the only woman I want."

"Maybe your woman needs to forget..."

She grabs my face and pulls me in for a kiss. The moment our lips touch, hunger spikes through me. I can't hold back when I sense the desire radiating from her. I grab her hips and pull her into my lap.

She sits facing me, her body pressed against mine, gasping and moaning between our hungry kisses. We're like starving people who have finally found sustenance.

I wrap my arms around her, shifting my hips, pressing against her through our clothes. She sinks her fingernails into my neck.

"I want you," she whimpers. "I want to..."

"Join the mile-high club with me?"

She laughs, a sweet sound after so many tears, flooding me with warmth beyond mere desire. "Seriously, you're a mind reader..."

"I'm just good at putting ideas into your head."

"Nope. I had the idea the second we got on this plane."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

I grab her hips and lift her up. She gasps as I grab her shirt and pull it over her head. She lifts her arms, revealing her bra. Her curves accentuated beautifully.

"They won't come back here, will they?" she asks hesitantly.

I smirk. "I may have told them not to when we boarded..."

She nudges me playfully. "So, you had this planned, huh?"

"I prepared for all outcomes."

Her laughter transforms into moans when I unclip her bra and press my face against her skin, caressing her, worshipping her. She runs her hand along the outside of my pants, intensifying my need.

I slide my hands down her body, grabbing her sweatpants and underwear in one eager motion, then pulling them down quickly. Nudging her onto the chair, I kneel, sinking my hands into her legs, kissing up her thigh toward her glistening center.

"You smell far better," I growl.

She laughs, stroking her fingers through my hair. "Are you serious?"

"You smell like a feast –my feast."

Her moans take on that tempting, urgent tone when I press my face against her. I taste her, completely entranced by her. Her taste is addictive, intoxicating.

I lavish attention on her most sensitive spot, acutely aware of her moans, her euphoria, her breathy pants as she rushes toward release. I increase my pace and pressure until her hips move against me.

She digs her nails into my head as she finishes, shuddering all over, lost in pleasure.

I stand, freeing myself from my pants, fully aroused. Out the window, clouds drift by.

"We're on top of the world again," I groan.

She reaches for me. "This is better than the restaurant."

I gasp when she glides her hand up and down, her touch electric. I almost let her continue, but I can't resist the allure of her.

Leaning down, I press the button that lets the chair recline completely. She laughs in delight, wriggling up the seat and spreading her legs.

"Fuck," I groan, taking in the sight of her.

I lie atop her, kissing her neck, then her breasts, then guide myself to her. She sinks her nails into me, tugging me closer.

"Fuck me like you mean it," she whimpers.

Her confidence makes her even sexier. The confidence that awakened in Vegas is soaring on this plane.

"Be careful what you wish for," I groan. "It'll mean taking you hard. Taking you so fast that your gorgeous body shakes for me."

"Do it," she whimpers. "Do it, Luke. Do it."

"If you're going to tempt your book master to take what's his, you can't expect me to resist..."

She moans loudly when I push deep inside of her. Her body embraces me completely, heightening every sensation.

I withdraw, then drive in even harder, causing her to gasp and clutch me tighter. "Yes, yes," she moans, shifting her hips.

I keep my body close to hers, her breath whispering over my neck, her breasts pressed against me, our bodies moving as one. This is lovemaking. This is what claiming my woman feels like. This is connection. It is everything I never dreamed would be mine. This is meaning.

We move faster together, frantically, our hips rolling in perfect harmony. The plane rumbles beneath us, turbulence adding to the pleasure, intensifying every sensation.

The pressure builds within me, a crescendo approaching its peak.

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Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

"You—need—to—come—again," I snarl.

"Fuck, fuck," she gasps.

"Come for me," I demand.

"Fuck, Luke. Fuck."

I take it as a command, moving with pure abandon. Soon, I feel her muscles tense as her climax ripples through her body, her inner walls pulsing around me. I sink my face into her neck, breathing in her scent, as my release overtakes me.

We hold each other as I soften inside her. I slip out, but I don't let her go, keeping her in my arms. She kisses my cheek, then hugs me tightly.

"Seriously, call me a broken record. But I'm so happy you came to me."

"Me too," I say. "The only thing I regret is letting you go. Never again."

"Luke—"

"Never. Again. Something magical happened to us in Vegas. You changed me, Sparkplug."

"You changed me too."

"No... I just helped you find out who you always were."

"An aspiring member of the mile-high club?"

I chuckle, kissing her neck again. "If we stay like this, with your naked body pressed against mine, there's a chance we'll bedoublemembers."

"So soon?"

"You have no idea how desirable you are, Sera. No idea."

Chapter Twenty-One

Sera

"Are they mad at you?" I ask once Luke has come in from his balcony. We're in his luxurious Los Angeles apartment. This would've felt surreal before we met, but after the helicopter, the restaurant, and the mile-high club induction, I almost feel like I belong.

The sun is setting, the city lights twinkling beyond his tall windows.

"I explained it had something to do with the sabotage, but I didn't elaborate," he says.

I smooth my arms around his shoulders, standing on my tiptoes so that I can look at him eye to eye... oralmosteye to eye, anyway, considering he's so much taller. "You're going to kick this PR stuff in the butt, Luke. You're the best CEO I know."

He smiles at me with a cocked brow. "Aren't I the only CEO you know?"

"Don't get hung up on technicalities."

He laughs and reaches down, scooping his hands behind my legs, lifting me off my

feet. I hold onto him tight as he carries me to his leather corner couch. He sits down with me in his lap. I look up at him, feeling intoxicated by his proximity.

"You must be tired," he says, gliding his hand over my hair.

"I am," I admit. "But I don't want to sleep yet. I want to stay here with you. It feels like a miracle, us being together. And if I sleep..."

"You'll have to think about what happened."

Sometimes, I'm relieved he seems to read my thoughts.

"I don't know which would be worse," I say. "Dreaming about Damien or dreaming about Ellie and Graham."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

"I can't imagine the pain you're in," he says huskily, his hand caressing my head, comforting me on a level I hardly even understand. It goes beyond just physical.

"I'm better now that I'm with you," I say gently. "I can't believe how good this feels, Luke, just lying here with you. There's a whole country separating me from Damien, from them." I squeeze my eyes tight when tears brim, fighting them back.

"It's okay," he whispers.

"I don't want to cry again," I say glumly.

"I'm here if you need to."

"I've been alone for so long," I mutter. "When I was a kid, I was always alone. I never felt like Mom and Dad loved or cared about me... then I found Ellie, and later, Graham. Am I an idiot for thinking they were going to be my perfect parental figures?"

"No," he says fiercely. "But people are complex. Graham thought he was doing the right thing by helping Damien... and it got out of hand."

"You sound like you're on their side."

"That's not it. I just don't want you to think you can't forgive them if you're ever ready for that. The money for her treatment won't be an issue if you decide you want my help."

“Thank you for the offer,” I murmur. “But I can’t even think about forgiveness tonight.”

“Of course,” he replies.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” I ask, changing the subject if only slightly. I’m tired of feeling hurt and betrayed.

“The same thing I’ve been doing every day,” he says with a sigh. “I’m sorry, Sera. I wish I could stay with you. I’d like nothing better than to spend all day holding you in my arms, forgetting about everything that’s happened, but I have to work. We’re just about keeping our heads above water... I’ve got more interviews to give.”

“How is the AI stuff going? Have you extricated the code?”

“We’re getting there,” he says. “We need to see how far the damage goes.”

“Do you need help?”

“You’ve been through so much...”

I stare up at him. “Is that really why you don’t want my to help, or is there something else? It’s okay if you’re worried. I work, worked for TechGuard – for Graham.” I probably don’t have a job anymore, not that I want it.

“Hey, listen to me. I believe everything you’ve told me. I haven’t doubted you – and I don’t doubt you – for a single moment. I just don’t want you taking on more than you can handle.”

“Honestly? I think I’d prefer to do something productive rather than sitting around an empty apartment. But I don’t want to put you in an awkward position. Your team

might get angry if a TechGuard employee arrives, considering who's responsible for all this."

"But you're not responsible," he points out. "Forget what the team thinks."

"You could find me a small office, out of the way. I'd rather lose myself in code... rather help to fix the problem, than sit around feeling useless."

"You could never be useless," he says passionately. "Even if it's just to make a grumpy like me smile."

"Is that a yes?"

He leans down, kissing me. "It's a hell yes."

The next day, I sit in a small office on the third floor, out of the way of everyone else. Luke told me I could work with the main team if I wanted, but I'd rather be alone.

I smile when my cellphone goes off.

Luke: Codebreaker sixty-nine.

That's the safe word we came up with last night to prove it's really us. We landed on 'codebreaker' first, but then we couldn't think of a follow-up. When he suggested sixty-nine, I told him we'd have to try it if we were going to use it as a code.

It was amazing, grinding against his face, bent over him with his length in my mouth as I worked my hand up and down his shaft. The hottest part was feeling his need in the movements of his mouth and tongue against my core. The faster I sucked and stroked my hand, the more erratic his movements became as he struggled to contain himself.

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Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

Luke: How's it going?.

Sera: I think I've rewritten a decent portion of it, but you'll have to check how it integrates into the whole. How is your day?

Luke: Boring, but I feel better knowing you're in the same building with me, safe and sound. Have the police contacted you yet?

Sera: No. I think they're just happy I'm not in any danger. Damien hasn't tried to catch a plane. I think they'd call me if he had... or they'd just arrest him. I guess his only other option would be to drive across the country. Before you ask, yes, I have thought about that. I may have even researched it.

Luke: Go on.

Sera: He could conceivably be here by this evening. Or tomorrow morning. It would take a truly determined, obsessed man to do that. But I met him. He seemed deluded and obsessed.

Luke: I know it's easier said than done. But try not to worry about that. This building has security. My apartment has security. If we go somewhere in public, we'll be together. I won't let anything happen to you, I promise.

Sera: Thank you, Luke.

Luke: Speaking of public, actually...

Sera: You know, in a text, you don't have to leave dramatic pauses, right?

Luke: Maybe I need to maintain my status as your mystery man...

Sera: Ha ha, well, you're doing it. Now, put me out of my misery, please.

Luke: I told Victor we'd have breakfast with him tomorrow. He mentioned it, and I got excited and said yes before I asked you. I can find a way out of it, though.

Luke's told me a little bit about the Victor and how much he means to him, the man he sees as a father figure. I just hope he doesn't hold my association with TechGuard against me.

Sera: No, I want to go. I know how much Victor means to you. It'd be nice to meet him. What time do you think you'll be done tonight?

Luke: Pfft. No idea. Nine if I'm lucky. I can give you a ride to the apartment sooner than that, though.

Sera: I'll stay here. We can leave together. I might get some empathetic AI work done, too. It's good to be busy. It reminds me of why I fell in love with coding.

Luke: There's nothing simpler and yet more complex than a sea of code. is there Sparkplug?

Sera: I can think of a couple things.

Luke: Wait a second. Are you saying I'm simple?

Sera: I'm saying that our connection is simple because it's clear. It's obvious. It's unquestionable. But it's so freaking complex, too. There are so many layers to my

desire and devotion toward you.

I almost don't send my last message, my finger hovering over the send button. Am I going too far? But I figure, screw it. If I can't be honest with him after everything we've been through, who can I be honest with?

Luke: I'll never tire of obsessing over you, Sparkplug.

I clutch my phone to my chest. If someone were watching me, they'd probably think I'd lost my mind. But I don't care. The past two days have been the craziest roller coaster of my life.

Luke: Are you sure you don't mind about breakfast?

Sera: I'm certain. I just hope Victor likes me.

Luke: He will. You're exactly the kind of person he respects: driven, intelligent, curious. He was just worried about me. He didn't want me to get my heart broken. Little did he know, if you really were ghosting me, my heart would've already shattered. This is coming from someone who didn't even feel like he had a heart before he met you.

Sera: If you've given me your heart, Luke, I'm going to be so careful with it.

Luke: If you've given me yours, Sparkplug, I'm going to defend it with my life. I'm going to spend every single day proving I'm worthy of it. I'm going to cherish it, cherish you, for as long as you'll have me.

Sera: That will be a LONG time.

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Soon, it's time for him to go back to work. I focus on my computer again, losing myself in the monotonous lines of code, thinking about breakfast tomorrow... and the future, our future. After all, this is over.

Is it too soon to be dreaming about wedding bells and a happy family and a time in which all these stresses seem extremely far away?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Luke

“Waking up next to you feels like a dream,” I say, looking down at Sera as she opens her eyes. The smile that spreads across her face is magnetic, like she's pushing aside her fear and trauma and existing solely in the moment.

We've got more time, but we're still enjoying every second like we did in Vegas... as if it could run out.

She sits up, kissing me. It starts as a soft, tentative kiss that soon becomes hungry. I slide my hand up her leg, toward her center, but then I stop. It takes everything I have not to press my hand against her, to feel how wet she gets for me, to feel her body shift and shiver.

“We've got breakfast,” she says in a low and husky voice.

“Yeah,” I reply with a nod as I watch her lips, entranced. “But trust me, there's something else I'd rather be doing...”

She tsks and leans away. “You don’t expect me to miss out on all the embarrassing stories from when you were a kid? Because there’s no way that’s happening.”

I laugh. Together, we climb out of bed and get ready for the day. Brushing our teeth as we stand side by side at the sink feels oddly meaningful. She grins at me in the reflection, her mouth full of toothpaste, and I laugh again. I think she knows what I’m thinking without me needing to say it... so much formebeing the mind reader.

“We should probably shower separately,” she says after.

I smirk. “Good idea.”

She bites her lip. “Unless...”

I move toward her, and she giggles and shuts the en-suite door in my face.

“Your book master is going to make you pay for that,” I groan, my manhood throbbing.

Soon, we’re dressed and riding the elevator down to the parking garage. I wrap my arm around her hip and hug her to my body.

“I’m proud of you,” I tell her. “You’re a trooper. And you look especially beautiful today.”

“Do you like it? I thought I’d make an effort.”

She’s let her hair down, and she’s wearing an elegant pink shirt with black pants.

“You look intelligent and attractive.”

“Thanks,” she murmurs.

Before getting into the car, I get a text from my assistant.

Andy: Hey, boss. Are you coming into the office early today?

Luke: No, why?

Praying there isn't another fuck-up. I set my alarm early just to make this breakfast.

Andy: You're online on the work app, that's all. I was just wondering if you wanted me to get anything ready.

Luke: I'm heading out for an early breakfast.

Andy Breakfast? Anywhere nice?

Luke: La Razón. Want me to pick you up anything?

Andy: I'm good. Thanks.

"Are you okay?" Sera asks as I drive out of the parking garage.

"It's my assistant, Andy. Ever since Vegas, he's been acting weird. I think he might be considering leaving us. He's always been reliable, the best fixer in town. I might need to talk to him."

"That sounds like a good idea," Sera says.

"My problems are tiny compared to what you've been through. Ignore me."

"Doesn't being in a relationship mean we confront our problems together, no matter how big or small? Or are we not?—"

I take her hand, squeezing it. "Don't question that, Sparkplug. If we're not in a relationship, then I don't even know what it would mean to be in one."

When I arrive at the restaurant, I spot Victor leaning against the wall, sucking on a vape pen. I chuckle, shaking my head. "He used to smoke a pack a day. Now look at him, sucking on that child's toy."

"Maybe it's better?"

I wink at my woman. "I think he's nervous to meet you."

She brushes down her shirt. "Not as nervous as I am. It's like meeting your parents."

“It’s the closest thing there is to meeting my parents, that’s for sure.”

I climb out of the car, meaning to walk around to Sera’s side to help her with the door. But then Victor quickly walks over, opening it before I get the chance.

“Thank you for giving me the chance to be a gentleman for once in my life,” he says, offering her his hand. “Victor Langley.”

“Seraphina Vale... well, Sera. Nobody calls me Seraphina, really.” She giggles nervously. “Nice to meet you.”

“A pleasure,” Victor replies, giving me a look.

“Excuse Victor, Sera. He’s giving me an ‘I told you so’ look because he promised to be on his best behavior. Shall we?”

The three of us walk into the restaurant, quiet this early in the morning. The manager nods to me from behind the counter, and I lead our small group to my usual table in the corner.

“Do you come here often?” Sera asks.

“Victor used to bring me here when I was a teenager,” I say, sitting.

“He’d put up shop right here, at this table, with some old piece of junk from the thrift store, taking it apart, putting it back together, taking it apart again.”

Sera smiles at me. “I would’ve loved to see that.”

Victor chuckles. “Get him an old computer. You won’t be able to keep his hands off it. I was a mess back then, but...” He raises his hands. “Anyway.”

“A mess?” Sera murmurs.

"Booze. Cigarettes. Women. Believe it or not, I used to be quite the ladies man..." He shrugs. "And then I saw this kid in the library, reading the book I'd reserved. It was about hard drives... A specialist, boring, dry book, but he was devouring it like his life depended on it. After we got to talking and I learned his story, I offered what help I could."

"And then you got your act together, and now you're a very rich man," I say.

"'Got my act together,' he says," Victor mutters. "Has he told you?"

Sera shakes her head, curiosity evident in her expression. "Told me what?"

"When he was old enough and earning a decent wage, he paid for my rehab... not once, not twice, but three times. When it finally stuck, we went into business together."

"Then this old dog sold his shares," I say, chuckling.

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"I spent so long in a haze. It felt good to be finally free. Sorry, Sera, you didn't ask for a history lesson."

"But I wanted one. You just saved me the awkwardness of figuring out how to ask."

"I wanted to share it with you, because, well..." Victor sighs. "I doubted you because of your connection to TechGuard. When Luke told me what happened, I felt like an old ass."

"That's half right," I say.

Victor laughs ruefully. "But look at him. I mean – you've brought something out in him. You haven't smiled like this since you were a kid, Luke."

Sera's cheeks flush as she looks at me. "Did you tell him to say that?"

"Actually, he's being far more talkative than I expected."

"He's right. Let's get some food in me to shut me up."

"No, please," Sera says. "I want to know how miserable he was before he met me."

"You say that as a joke," Victor replies. "But sometimes, I genuinely feared for his happiness. He had all the trappings of a billionaire's life... but none of the indulgences. He didn't take extravagant trips or pursue relationships. He worked, and that was mostly it."

"The fact is, Sera," I say, nodding in agreement, "before Vegas, work was all I wanted to do. I'd often tell myself, well, if I don't get to live, at least my employees do. And they rely on me. Plus, there's joy in the simple act of work itself."

"But now he's found somebody that brings him more joy. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, Victor, my suddenly very sentimental old friend, it is. Let's get some food in you. Breakfast tacos?"

"That sounds perfect," Sera says.

I gesture for the waiter, and we order breakfast tacos, coffee, and some iced tea.

"So, Sera, do you plan on introducing this starry-eyed young man to yourpare... What, why are you looking at me like that?"

In fact, I'm shaking my head at Victor.

"It's fine," Sera tells me, then turns to Victor. "I haven't spoken to my parents in two years. They've been addicts since I can remember. The last time I saw them, I told them that when they got sober, they could reach out. And yeah, that was two years ago, so..." She shrugs. "Since we're sharing... sometimes I think about contacting them. But if they can't make the effort, and they never have, why should I? That's why I want a family."

My heart races, emotion surging through me when she says this.

"You want to do better," Victor says.

"Exactly," Sera replies, her eyes lighting up.

Victor gives me a knowing look. "You've often said the same."

"I would do everything in my power to be the man my children deserve," I say. "I'd be better than my parents were."

"We're not very good at small talk, are we?" Sera grins.

"That's my fault," Victor says, holding his hand up in surrender. "Let me think... um, the weather is pleasant today, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," Sera says, with exaggerated enthusiasm. "Very... West Coast."

They both erupt into laughter. Warmth spreads through me. My father figure and my woman bonding so quickly surely means something. Soon, the waiter brings our food and drinks.

"How long do you plan on staying in this small-talk-worthy climate, Sera?" Victor asks after savoring a bite of his taco.

"I'm not sure."

"As long as she wants," I say, gazing at her meaningfully, hopefully.

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"I suppose it depends on some things back home," she replies. "But I'm happy to be here. I'm happy to be with Luke. Heck, we said long distance wouldn't work... how long did we tolerate it? Not even a week?"

"Tolerate is an understatement," I nearly grumble.

We continue with our breakfast, then Sera excuses herself to use the bathroom. I watch her go, appreciating the sway of her hips, cherishing the simple fact that she's here, in person, and I don't have to anxiously wait for a text.

"You care about her," Victor says.

"More than would make sense to most people. I cared about her the second I saw her. Before the coffee spill on her laptop... I was watching her, admiring her concentration, thinking about how beautiful she is. I didn't know at the time she was beautiful inside and out... Go on, tell me I need to slow down."

Victor shakes his head. "I said all that stuff before I saw you two together. I couldn't say that now. It would be laughable. You're making me reflect on the relationships I ruined when I was younger... No, Luke, I think you ought to seize this chance."

"Do I seem that different?" I ask, surprised by his change in perspective.

Victor smiles. "You're like a different man."

"She brings it?—"

"Luke!"

When I hear her scream, I leap to my feet. Rushing toward the bathroom, my blood roars in my ears. Panic tears through me as I try not to imagine every horrific possibility my mind conjures.

When I crash into the hallway, I notice the fire door swinging shut as somebody darts through it. A man wearing a hoodie... is it Damien? I want to chase after him, but he was alone—what if he's hurt Sera, left her in there to... I can't even finish the thought.

I burst into the ladies' room to find Sera standing with a chunk of greasy black hair in her hand. Tears streaming down her cheeks.

"What happened?" I say, cradling her face.

"It was him," she whispers, taking long, deliberate breaths. She seems to be fighting the urge to hyperventilate. "He rushed in here and said I had to go with him. Thankfully, I saw him coming and fought back." She drops his hair. "He ran when I screamed your name."

"That sickfuck," I growl. "How did he even know we were here?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know. Why is he doing this? Why won't he leave us alone?"

I pull her into my embrace. "He's not well. If his behavior wasn't so disturbing, I'd feel sorry for him. He's deluded. He thinks he's done things he hasn't, thinks he's owed things he's not. We need to call the cops. Then I'm taking you home."

"No," she says. "I don't want that. I want to go into the office with you. I want to

work. I don't want to think." She squeezes me, digging her fingernails in. "Let medosomething."

"Okay, Sparkplug," I say softly. "But first, the cops."

"He looked exhausted, like he'd been driving without sleep, racing across the country to make our lives hell."

"If I get my hands on him, I'll make hell look like a walk in the park."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sera

In my hideaway office, I immerse myself in my computer, the code, the algorithm, the clarity of problem and solution. The sabotage stems from human-AI speech patterns. Someone has regressed the AI's ability to understand people to a much earlier model. Its use of advanced predictive algorithms to respond naturally without consciously reading social cues is a key factor in this new model Luke is developing.

I bite the end of my pencil, ignoring my racing heart. Exaggeration? Yeah, okay, but barely. The aftershocks of my second encounter with Damien have left me on-edge, but I was right when I told Luke that I couldn't return to his apartment.

If I were there, Damien would consume my thoughts. When I told Luke what happened, he looked ready to tear Damien apart with his bare hands.

Luke: Codebreaker sixty-nine. Are you okay, angel?

My phone illuminates beside my keyboard with his text. The time reads three PM. I haven't left my desk in hours. I've received other messages and calls too – from Ellie –

but I've ignored those.

Sera: I think the key lies in rebuilding the human-AI interactive algorithm from scratch. I've been working on a prototype that uses the empathetic approach, meaning you could combine it with NeuroDrive's predictive modeling to not only anticipate what driving style the user would prefer... but what AI personality too. Oh, and remember when I said I rewrote a portion of it? Well, I had to scrap that. This is better.

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Luke: That's incredible. And scrapping is part of the process. But I was asking about you.

Sera: I don't want to think about me. I'd much rather focus on work.

When he doesn't push, switching directly to work questions, I smile. He understands me. He knows exactly what I need. Other men might force the issue, but not my man.

Luke: Is the prototype showing any functionality?

Sera: I've run an early test, and yes, it is. But to make this work, you'd need to write the entire human-AI interaction algorithm in-house to avoid any issues like before. No TechGuard and no other contractors.

Luke: I've already told the shareholders they can try their luck with a coup if they think we're cutting those corners again.

I chew on my lip, contemplating whether to say what needs to be said next.

Sera: It means I'll have to pass this work onto somebody else. I'm not a NeuroDrive employee.

Luke: Sparkplug, even if I didn't need you near me, you're the most qualified person to work on this issue. This is your chance to apply your empathetic model to a multibillion-dollar company.

Excitement bubbles inside me as I read those words, the scope of my future suddenly

expanding.

Sera: I don't want any special treatment.

Luke: I won't use your model if it doesn't work, beautiful. But even through text, I can feel your passion, your dedication. It's time you became an employee of NeuroDrive. It's time you lived here permanently.

Sera: Are you asking me to move in with you?

Luke: Does that seem fast, Sparkplug? Could anything possibly seem fast for us?

I stare at my computer screen. Truthfully, I can envision myself working here, spending weeks and months deeply immersed in this problem. I can imagine spending time with Luke after passionate encounters in the bedroom, dates, quiet moments when it's just us, and we don't even need to speak to make them special.

Luke: What's wrong?

Of course, he senses something's wrong without having to ask... even through text. And he's quick to follow up.

Luke: Is it Eleanor?

Sera: I wish I could flip a switch and stop caring about them after what they did. They betrayed me, and it hurts. They basically sent Damien after me. But when I think about losing her, it aches far more than it should.

Luke: I can't tell you what to do. But I know one thing. I need you, Sera. And I'll never hurt you.

Sera: Maybe I should try to talk with them again.

Luke: That's your decision to make. Have they tried to reach out?

Sera: Yes. Unlike my actual parents, Ellie has texted and called me almost twenty times. Graham has sent me loads of emails saying he wants to talk, that he's sorry. I guess they had a conversation recently, because they all arrived while I was working... giving me a convenient excuse to ignore them.

Luke: But you don't want to ignore them anymore.

He knew me better than I knew myself. I wanted to talk to them, but I felt foolish for wanting that.

Sera: I don't know. Am I being a naïve idiot, Luke? Do I want parental figures so badly, I'm willing to accept more than I should? But you have to understand, Graham and Ellie were GOOD people before all this. They helped me so much. Ellie made my teenage years bearable. Without her, I don't think I would've made it through.

Luke: I don't want to see you taken advantage of. If you want to talk to them, I'm going to be there to hold your hand.

Sera: Are you sure?

Luke: It's about time I spoke with Graham, anyway.

Sera: I could arrange a video call for tonight. If they care as much as they're saying they do, then they shouldn't mind waiting up for us.

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Luke: Do it. And know, Sparkplug, I'm with you every step of the way. I just hate the fact Damien got to you again, and I didn't do a damn thing.

Even though he came running as soon as he heard my scream, he was still beating himself all because that of that crazy psycho.

Sera: How were you supposed to know he'd creep into the restroom?

Luke: I've been thinking about that. How did he get into the ladies room without us spotting him?

Luke: Yes, we were engrossed in our conversation, but I'm sure I would've seen him walking across the restaurant. Not to mention fire doors don't open from the outside. Which means he either snuck in without us spotting him... or he was waiting for us.

Sera: But how would he know we were going to be there?

I had wondered the same thing, too. I hadn't told anyone about our plans for one because I didn't know anyone here and the people, I knew I wasn't talking to at the moment.

Luke: That's the million-dollar question. I've got a theory. In the meantime, lose yourself in your work. You're safe here. You can disappear into the empathetic algorithm project. Save my company, Sparkplug.

Despite everything, warmth flutters through me. He knows exactly the right thing to say.

Sera: Okay, Luke. Should I arrange a call with Graham and Ellie?

Luke: That's your choice, angel. I'll support you no matter what.

I open my phone, looking at the text thread from Ellie. She's asked to talk several times. As I look at the messages, my phone lights up again. A call from Ellie.

I quickly answer it, not giving myself time to come to my senses.

"Yeah?" I say.

"Sera," she whispers, voice trembling.

"Don't break down," I snap. "Don't cry. It's not fair. You know I cared about you."

"C-cared, past tense?" She stutters.

"Just..." I grind my teeth. "Don't break down, okay?"

She sniffles but keeps it together. "Okay, I won't. Are you safe?"

"I had to tear a chunk of Damien's hair out of his head earlier, but other than that, I'm fine and dandy."

"What?" She gasps.

"Yep," I reply dryly, even though it hurts to hear her voice.

"What happened?"

"You and Graham sent a lunatic after me, knowing full well he was dangerous and

would go to terrible lengths to get what he wants. That's what happened."

"I was so scared," she whispers. "My sweet girl, I was terrified. If I could turn back time, I'd do it all different."

"We don't have that luxury."

"But you're safe?"

"I'm with Luke. I'm working with him, trying to undo the mess Graham made of his code, trying to fix the mess he created. You know, if Luke wanted, he could send Graham to prison for a very long time."

Ellie sighs. "Luke will have to decide himself."

"Aren't you going to defend your husband?"

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“There’s no defending what we’ve done... what this has become. When Graham came to me with the idea?—”

“Save it,” I cut in. “Luke and I want to talk with you both later. On video call.”

A pause, then, “Yes, okay, we can do that, Sera.”

I should know better than this, but I can’t stop myself from asking, “How is your treatment going?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

On a warped level, she’s right. I shouldn’t care about this anymore. But I can’t shake the image of her kind face and the memory of her soft voice and the pure warmth of feeling, for the first time in my life, that I’d found somebody who understood me. Now she’s sick. She might not make it.

“It does,” I say, a hot tear sliding down my cheek.

I rub it angrily away. I’ve been crying too much recently. It annoys me. I want to be strong, but so much has happened, and there are so many threats still lurking.

“It makes me tired,” she murmurs. “But I’m feeling positive.”

“Good,” I say. “Tell Graham about the call. It’ll probably be late.”

“We’ll wait until whatever time is best for you. I love?—”

I hang up before she can finish the sentence, terrified to keep going because I still love her too despite the betrayal.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Luke

I approach Andy in the cafeteria. The tall, muscular man looks up at me as I approach. For a moment, I'm sure I see panic in his eyes. My entire body is blazing with the possibility... with rage.

Sitting opposite him, I say, "Is everything okay, Andy?"

He looks down at his sandwich, his cheeks coloring slightly. He's just as tall as I am... younger, and he may even be more muscular. But he looks scared, and he has every reason to be.

"I'm sorry?"

"Why are you sorry?"

"No, boss, I meant... What do you mean? Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"I've just been thinking," I murmur. "Going over what happened in Vegas. I know how Damien knew where to find Spar... Sera when he needed to spill coffee on the laptop. That must've been her boss. But how did he know what conference room we were meeting in? How did he know where to spy on us? And this morning..." I lean forward, my hands balled into fists. "There were only four people who knew which restaurant we were at. Me, Sera, Victor. And you."

I expect Andy to show some remorse. But his scared expression vanishes, replaced by

a look of anger instead. He glares at me.

“Is this the part where I’m intimidated by you, Luke?”

I grit my teeth. “This is the part where you tell me why the fuck you’d agree to something like this.”

“Isn’t it obvious? Damien threw a hissy fit and got a payout.”

“You wanted a chunk, is that it? You would risk Sera’s life for cash.” I slam my fist against the table. He flinches. “Do you have any idea what I’d do to you if I could get away with it, Andy? We’ve treated you well. We’ve paid you in shares. You’re rich because of us.”

“I don’t need to tell you that more is always better.”

I shake my head. “You risked my woman’s life?—”

“Pfft.”

My blood turns cold. “Excuse me?”

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“Your woman, Luke? Please. Don’t forget who you’re talking to. You’re married to your job. This little experience of yours, it’ll pass. This fling will pass.”

I stand up, planting my fists on the table and looming over him. “Pack your shit and leave before I throw you out.”

Andy stands, an insolent smirk on his face. “No offense, Luke, but if you want to go down that road, you’re going to need to call security.”

“I highly doubt that, you ungrateful bastard. If my woman wasn’t so brave, your actions could’ve killed her today. If she hadn’t stood up to Damien?—”

“Your woman? Give me a break.”

“What happened to you?” I growl.

“What happened is, you gave more to a disgruntled employee than your own damn assistant.”

“You could sell your shares for at least a million dollars.”

“Why should I have to?” he yells.

All around us, people stare. My hand trembles as I think about breaking his jaw.

“Leave. Now.”

Andy pushes away from the table, turns and stalks away, then seems to think better of it and walks back over to me. He puffs up his chest. "I'm going, Luke, but drop the tough guy act. Don't threaten me." He lowers his voice to a hiss. "Because if it was like your said, if this turned violent, it wouldn't go well for you."

"You sure about that?"

He squares up to me, staring into my eyes. "Just so happens I am."

"Then take your fucking shot," I growl.

He punches me in the stomach, winding me for a moment, then tries to hit me again. He's lost his damn mind. I grab his arm and twist it up behind his back. He gasps and whines as I twist it again, shoving him up against the table.

"You stupid bastard," I growl.

I want to break his arm. I want to hurt him even more. To punish him for endangering my woman. But I have to think about the company, about the fact I won't be around for my Sera if I cross that line.

Letting him go, I take a step back. "Go, Andy."

But the prick won't learn his lesson. He yells and tries to hit me again. This time, I duck out of the way and punch him hard in the face. He stumbles into the table, his tray clattering to the floor, holding his hand to his mouth.

"I should kill you for trying to hurt my woman," I roar, glaring down at him. He stares up at me with fear-filled eyes. "Nobody touches her, not my woman. Ever. Understand me?"

Andy climbs to his feet, looking like he's about to cry, then runs from the cafeteria.

I rush from the room, ignoring my gaping employees.

On the ride home, Sera sits beside me, watching the video on her phone. "Nobody touches her, not my woman. Ever. Understand me?"

She touches my arm, squeezing. "Thank you for standing up for me."

"I didn't know anybody was recording," I mutter. "So much for handling the PR."

"Actually..."

"What? It's not that bad?"

"The comments are positive. People are saying things like, 'It's refreshing to see a CEO act like a human being for once.'"

"That's good," I say. "But I didn't do it for that. I know Andy... at least, I thought I did. I figured he was being threatened by Damien like Ellie, but no, this was about cash. Then it became about something else. Pride. He said some stupid crap about you not really being my woman... Like he knows a damn thing about how dead my heart was before you came along."

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She leans over, kissing me on the cheek.

“People are wondering who the woman you were referring to is.”

“Then we should tell them.”

“Would you tell the world you’re with me?” She asks hesitantly.

“Of course I would. I’m proud to call you my woman, Sera. You’re beautiful, talented, kind, and tough. That’s what’s impressed me most about all this. You’re so tough.”

“I’ve cried a lot for somebody so tough.”

“You’re still human,” I tell her. “That doesn’t change how impressive you are. I’d happily take you on a thousand dates, let the paparazzi take our pictures, let them see the love in my eyes.”

She gasps, squeezing me tighter.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yeah... fine. Are you?”

“I’m great,” I say fiercely. “I’m with you. When we’re together, Sera, everything else is a bonus. Just being with you is enough to make life worth living.”

“We should probably wait until we tell the world who I am.”

“Why? Do you still think there’s a chance you’ll go back to Florida?”

When she doesn’t answer the question, I do my best to hide the pain. Now that I’ve tasted what life with her would be like, waking next to her, and falling asleep with her at my side, I can’t imagine going back to how things were before. We barely survived a few days attempting a long distance relationship.

Soon enough, we’re in the parking garage. She takes my hands, looking up at me. So much has happened that could shake her, but her perfect pale green eyes still shine with hope and affection.

“I just want you to know what you said in the car. I feel it too. With every fiber of my being, Luke. I feel it. I feel us. I want this to work. I need it to work.”

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her in for a hug.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sera

As I make us some hot cocoa, I think about what he said in the car. First, amazingly enough, he seemed open to the idea of sharing our relationship with the world. I’m not sure why – maybe it’s some old self-esteem issues – but I didn’t think he’d be that keen to do it.

He was more than keen. To let the paparazzi see the love in his eyes, he said he would be happy to. His words came out so naturally, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. After yet another bat-shit day, it was like a balm on my soul. I wish I could tell him I’m ready to stay here, ready to begin our lives together, but I

can't shake the feeling I'm being a fool.

We sit together on the couch, in front of his laptop. It's time for the call with Graham and Ellie.

Both of them have red rimmed eyes, but they're not crying when they answer the call. Ellie looks despondent with her hands wrapped across her middle as though protectively.

"Thank you for doing this," Ellie murmurs. "Both of you."

"Yes," Graham mutters. "Thank you, Sera. Mr. Cross."

"So you can sabotage his company, but you can't call him Luke." The vitriol explodes out of me. I almost apologize when Graham flinches, but then his eyes turn calculating, and that causes my rage to return. "Graham, if you think we're recording this, that we're trying to trap you, then we should just end this here. If we can't be honest and open, there's no point to this."

"Sera is right," Luke says, taking my hand. "We've already proven that the code came from TechGuard. There would be no reason to entrap you."

"Perhaps the code malfunction was an error, not sabotage."

"Graham," Ellie says, glaring at him.

Graham sighs. "I'm sorry. You're right, Sera. I fucked up. I ruined what we had. Worse, I ruined what you and Ellie had. Mr... Luke, I sabotaged your product. I sabotaged your keynote speech. If you are recording this, send it to the authorities. It's what I deserve."

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“We’re not recording,” Luke says with a sigh. “But after what you started, Graham, I ought to be. Sera has been through a lot.”

“That’s what I regret most,” Graham replies regretfully.

“Why the sudden change of heart?” I ask.

“I’ve always cared about you, but fear consumed me, Sera. Losing the love of my life has always been my greatest fear, and Damien used that. Soon enough I realized my mistake, but it was too late. I feared what Damien would do if I reneged on the deal. By the time he’d targeted you, I was in too deep.”

“He could’ve killed her, Graham,” Luke snarls, his protectiveness making his voice deep and husky. “You can’t understand the hellfire I’d have rained down on TechGuard, on you, if my woman hadn’t bravely found a way out of the fucked-up situations you put her in.”

“We’re so, so sorry,” Ellie whispers tearfully. “There’s no excuse for any of this.”

Graham groans. “Ellie’s right. I hate myself for what I did. But you have to understand, when he switched the numbers, he was threatening us. We didn’t do that for money. We did that because we were terrified.”

“You could’ve warned me.”

“I wanted to, I almost did at first. He must have been keeping tabs on me somehow. That day, I asked you to look over the code in Vegas. He realized I had saved the

code intact onto your laptop. He came to me after and threatened Ellie. He said it was easy to slip into the hospital, hurt her.” Graham sounds desperate now. “I know there’s nothing I can say to make this right, but I was so scared.”

“You were the closest to family I ever had,” I tell them, my voice hoarse. “You know how much you meant to me.”

“Sera, I don’t want to...” Ellie stops herself, putting her hand over her mouth.

“Say it,” I whisper.

She shakes her head.

“Say it.”

“I don’t want to die with a rift between us,” she says, her voice tight with grief. “We’ve done wrong, but please, tell us how we can make it right. We’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” I ask pointedly.

Graham nods. “Anything, Sera,” he says firmly.

“Are you still in contact with Damien?”

“He hasn’t spoken to us since he threatened me,” Ellie murmurs. “But we have his number. Why?”

“There might be something you can do. Come to LA. Tell him you want more money. Tell him you’re ready to trick me... again,” I say a little too excitedly, exhilarated at the thought of finally turning the tables on the bastard.

Luke looks at me. “You want to set a trap?”

“I’m sick and tired of waiting around for him to do something,” I say fiercely. “First it was the laptop, then it was switching the numbers, the gun, the threats, threatening me this morning... It’s time for us to take the first step. He’s not in charge anymore.”

“What about Ellie’s treatment?” Graham asks hesitantly.

“If Sera is ready to work with you,” Luke says, “I’ll cover her treatment. I’ll cover your flights, your board, everything.”

Graham gasps. “A-after everything I’ve done?”

“I won’t be doing it for you,” Luke snaps. “I’ll be doing it for her.”

“This is the only way,” I mutter. “I’m asking a lot – but you’ve done a lot. And I can’t stand the thought of him out there, waiting for his next chance to pounce.”

Graham and Ellie exchange a look. The moment becomes heavy with how pivotal this moment is. This is where they show if they truly care, if they ever did. Finally, Ellie whispers, “We’ll come. We’ll do the right thing. Thank you for giving us this chance, Sera. You’re like the daughter we never had.”

“Luke, can you arrange the details?” I ask, standing, avoiding her last words.

“Sure,” he replies. When I walk away from the laptop, he throws a ‘I’ll be back’ over his shoulder as he follows me. He gently grips my shoulder when he reaches me and turns me toward him. “Are you sure about this?”

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“We need this to end so we can begin our lives together.”

He gently brushes tears from my cheek, then leans down and kisses me softly. “My life began the moment I laid eyes on you.”

I love you. I almost say the words aloud, but I can’t cross that line, not yet, not until I know we’ve got a serious future together.

“Arrange the details,” I murmur. “I’m going to get some more work done. I feel like I’m close to a breakthrough.”

“Sera, it’s almost midnight.”

“Please.” I press my hand on his chest, my fingernails bending as I claw against his firm muscles through his shirt. “I need to do this. All of this – life – sometimes it gets too much.”

He leans down, kissing me again. “Okay, Sparkplug. Don’t worry. Soon, this will be over. Then we can decide what the rest of our story looks like.”

I step into his office and switch on the computer, then log into my NeuroDrive Cloud account. Recovering my work, I slip on my headphones and play some music to help me drift into that perfect fluid state.

I only realize I’ve been sitting for so long when Luke gently slips his arms around me and massages my shoulders. I let my head fall from side to side, stretching my neck out as he rubs out the kinks in my neck.

“It’s four AM,” he whispers when I take off my headphones.

I spin to him, smiling despite everything. My heart pounds – not with fear, but with excitement. “Luke, I think this is going to work. We need to go to the office now. We need to upload this to the prototype car. I honestly think this is it. The empathetic model fits right into the existing framework. Luke, this is it.”

He wraps his arms around me. “First thing in the?—”

“No, let’s go now. Let’s make it happen. Don’t you get it? This is it.”

He smiles and kisses my cheek. “The office is closed. Even if I opened up, I don’t want to take you there without security. Let’s grab a few hours’ sleep. I promise, as soon as the office opens, we’ll head in and upload your program. Not that we need to.”

“What do you mean?”

He squeezes my hips. I love when he does that. Before Luke, I never would’ve imagined feeling so confident about curves. “Your passion is enough to tell me this is going to work.”

“It is,” I say breathlessly. “This AI, this personality, it wouldn’t dream of saying the things the sabotage caused the other model to say. Listen to me. Dream. I’m not saying it’s sentient, but the algorithm wouldn’t produce those responses.”

“Right, that’s it,” he says, then scoops me off my feet.

I laugh, throwing my arms around him. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed. You need some rest before your big day tomorrow. I love seeing

you like this, but if you had your way, you'd getnosleep, I'm sure."

He carries me to the bedroom and places me down. Together, we walk into the ensuite and brush our teeth. He smiles at me in the mirror.

"I like brushing our teeth together," I tell him after. "It feels very couple-like, doesn't it?"

"That's because we're a couple, Sparkplug. You're mine and I'm yours."

We climb into bed. I lay with my head against his shoulder, my hand on his hard chest. My mind won't stop whirring with anticipation for tomorrow.

"I can hear that," he says.

I chuckle. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to. I can hear your mind spinning around and around."

"I can't help it. I never thought I'd have time to try my ideas on this scale..."

He rolls onto his side, so we're face to face, our noses touching. His smile is magnetic. "You're the most resilient person I've ever met. After everything, to be this passionate, this excited... it means something, Sera. It means you're going to be an incredible wife and mother one day."

"Wife and mother," I whisper.

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“Did I go too far?”

“There’s nothing as too far with us, remember...”

I kiss him with meaning. He groans and pushes against me, his manhood bulging through his briefs.

“I won’t get any sleep anyway,” I whisper between hungry kisses. “Unless you’re not in the mood?”

He laughs savagely, digging his finger into my ass. “Not in the mood? For you? Are you kidding me?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Luke

“Is that how you want it, hmm?” She gasps as she slides her tunnel up and down my hard shaft.

A crazed, obsessive mood has come over my angel. She’s tuned away from me, showing me her thick, round ass. My length blazes with heat as she grinds up and down on me, her walls gripping me tight as she looks over her shoulder at me.

The sexiest part is her expression. She’s got her eyebrows raised confidently, telling me wordlessly she knows how sexy she is. She’s in control. She works her hips, causing her big, juicy ass to shiver and shake.

I grip her breasts, pushing them together, emphasizing her size. She slides her hand through her gorgeously tousled hair, owning this moment, bouncing with abandon.

“I’m—your—obsession, ruh-right?” she moans.

I can barely speak as I smooth my hands to her hips to help with the motion of her unstoppable lust. “You’re... everything,” I groan. “Everything to me.”

I groan at the sight of my hands framing her undulating hips. I can sense my climax approaching, threatening to erupt. I try to hold back. She must be able to sense it in the way I grip her hips. She laughs and moans, a sound of pure power, knowing she never has to be shy again, knowing she’s free to be like the characters from her books.

“Together.” She gasps. “Just... a little... longer.”

“Fuck, fuck.” I breathe raggedly. “Come on, my dick. Come for me. Come for your book master. Fuck.”

She leans forward, propping her hands on my legs to give her the clearance to move her body even faster, causing her ass to bounce captivatingly. I bury my hands in her thickness.

“Spank me,” she moans.

“Is this from one of your books?” I growl, bringing my hand down in a love tap against her thickness.

“Nuh-no.” She gasps. “This is—just—for—us...”

I spank her over and over until she can’t take it anymore and creams all over my

rock-hard cock. The moment I feel the tell-tell pulsing of her tunnel, my lust unleashes, a hot stream of come surging out of me and into her. She keeps grinding, my dick refusing to wilt, an unstoppable flow of release gushing out of me until there's nothing left.

Finally, she slides away and crawls into my arms. I hold her close, kissing her forehead.

"I feel drunk," I say, laughing. "That was amazing. You're amazing."

"You bring it out in me," she pants. "I never would've acted like this before."

"Good," I growl. "No one else gets to see you like this, gets to feel your curvy, naked body. Just me. Forever."

"Forever?" she whispers.

"You heard me," I say. "Whatever happens, even if we were on opposite ends of the world, we'd make this work. I knew that the first moment I saw you, sitting in the café with that cute look of concentration on your face. I knew you were mine."

"Absolutely, Seraphina," Ally says, as a hush falls over the lab. "I'd be delighted to take you there. Would you like me to ask you a series of questions to better tailor your experience, or should I detect your desires as we get to know each other?"

Sera smiles at me from the driver's seat with the window rolled down. All around us, my team watches in complete awe. Steve, my co-lead, makes an okay sign at me. Sera is sparked up, living up to her name, excitement emphasizing her natural beauty.

"Let's hold off on the questions for now, Ally," she says. "Would you mind driving me around the studio? Please, avoid any obstacles."

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“Of course, Seraphina.”

The car takes off, Sera holding her hands up to show she’s not touching the wheel. Steve walks up next to me, breathless. “This is incredible. Ally hasn’t responded like this since before the sabotage.”

“Sera’s been working on it nonstop,” I say, pride whelming in my voice. “She’s one of a kind, Steve. I don’t think she even knows how special she is. She’s a genius. She’s... she’s everything.”

Steve smiles. “I’m happy for you.”

“It’s unusual to see you smiling.”

“It’s unusual to see you in love.”

“Touché.”

When Sera completes the circuit, everyone applaud, me most of all. She climbs from the car, her chest rising and falling hard. She looks so vivacious, so ready for the grand adventure of life. “This is just the prototype, so I don’t want to... Wait...” She laughs, looking at me. “Why am I giving a speech?”

“Don’t stop, Sera!” I exclaim.

She grins. “Okay. As you all know, this is just the prototype. I also want to stress that I could only insert my empathetic model because your high-standard work allowed it.

But I think this is promising?”

“It’s promising for sure,” Steve says. “In fact, if Luke doesn’t offer you a job, I will.”

When she rolls her eyes, I approach her, taking her hands. “He’s right, Sera. You belong here, with us, where you can see this project through to the end. I know you have other considerations, but I truly believe this is the best place?—”

“Yes,” she says, her eyes glistening with emotion. “If I patch things up with Ellie, I can fly and visit her. I won’t let guilt make my decisions for me. Luke, being with you is the only thing I want.”

I pull her into a hug. She holds me tightly.

Steve clears his throat. “The only thing you want... besides expanding upon and implementing your empathetic-AI approach, yes?”

That gets another chuckle from the team.

Sera grins. “Yes, besides that.”

“Phew,” Steve says jokingly, whipping at his forehead.

“We should hold a press conference,” I say after a moment, smoothing my arm over Sera’s shoulder as I turn to the team. “I’m sure our PR people would love some footage of the car driving smoothly... we can hold a press conference and announce our progress. Sera and I?—”

“Woah, wait a sec,” she says. “You want me at the press conference?”

“Of course,” I say, full of conviction. “You’re a member of the NeuroDrive family

now, and you're the one who tamed the rogue AI. You belong at my side."

"Are you sure?" she murmurs. "I don't want any special treatment." She glances at the team.

"Sera, relax," Steve says. "If you'd come in here with an idea that turned out to be crap, then the boss started acting like a love-struck teen..." He winks at me. "Talking about press conferences, that would be one thing. But this is different. You've done what we couldn't and should be very proud of yourself. You deserve this."

"Seriously," I say. "If you can stop Steve from being so grumpy all the time, you're a very special person."

In fact, she seems to have that effect on every grump I know. She had the same effect on Victor, turning him from pessimistic to excited for us.

"Okay," she says, nodding. "Let's do this."

The team breaks off into smaller groups as we prepare for the interview. I guide Sera to a quiet corner. "You meant it, Sparkplug. You want to stay here."

"Yes," she murmurs, clasping my hands. "I want to be your partner: in business, in pleasure, in... in everything else."

"In love," I say fiercely. "In family. In the future."

I kiss her with passion, and she claws onto me.

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She pulls back after a minute and sighs. “We still have to fix the Damien situation.”

“Graham and Eleanor will be here this evening. We’ll handle that then. In the meantime, let’s get this video recorded and prepare for the press conference. I can’t wait to have you at my side.”

“I’m not stepping on any toes, am I? I meant what I said about not wanting special treatment.”

“Steve was telling the truth. You earned this.”

“I feel like I’m in a dream,” she murmurs. “No, that’s not right. A dream and a nightmare. Life keeps throwing me between the two.”

“Soon, it’ll just be a dream, our perfect dream, for the rest of our lives. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She hugs me, pressing her cheek against my chest. “I freaking love you. How does that feel so natural to say?”

“Because we’ve loved each other since the start.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sera

I wait in a small room next to the large function hall where the press conference is being held. My heart beats wildly as I try to convince myself this is real. It started in

Vegas with a spilled coffee... and now I'm about to talk to the entire world, with NeuroDrive's blessing, about an idea that only warranted a tiny speech at CES. I've gone from the Z league to the A league in record breaking time.

Luke walks in, dashing in his black suit and perfectly coiffed hair.

"You look great," he says.

I tug at my pencil skirt. "Is it too tight?"

He smirks. "If it was too tight, I wouldn't let you go out there." He touches his pocket.

"Oh, really? And why's that?"

He grabs my hip, awakening instincts that make me want to forget all about the press conference.

"You know why..."

It takes an effort, but I press my hand against him and gently guide him away. "If we kiss, I won't be able to think of anything else."

"I hear that." He touches his pocket again.

"Why do you keep doing that?" I ask.

"Huh?"

I grin. "What do you mean, huh? You keep touching your pocket."

“Do I?” He seems distracted. “We should get going. Are you ready?”

He takes my hand and leads me toward the door.

Reporters fill the room, cameras aimed at the stage clicking and beeping as we approach it hand in hand. We’re in the main conference room, with floor-to-ceiling windows that show NeuroDrive’s public plaza, the fountain catching the light.

It’s easier to focus on the outside than in here, all these people...

No, screw that. Hello, big leagues. I’m ready for you.

I stand up straighter, looking at like I belong because incredibly I do.

We approach the stage together, and Luke takes the microphone. “Many of you have been following... shall we call it, the saga of NeuroDrive since the suspension of my keynote speech at CES. As you can see from the video uploaded to our social media earlier today, we have made substantial progress in not only fixing the problem, but improving the self-driving AI algorithm...”

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He shoots a smile at me. “I wish I could say it was all due to me, but ladies and gentlemen, there’s no one who deserves more credit than Sera, my woman.”

Several people in the room gasp.

“As in the woman in the video of your altercation with your recently terminated employee, Andy Quinn?” somebody asks.

“Yes,” Luke says, proudly, no shame, showing the universe how much I mean to him.

Pride blossoms inside of me. Love fills my every single pore. He holds my hand. “Sera is my partner in life... and she’s my partner in business. She has been working on a concept called ‘empathetic AI’ and, well...” He squeezes my hand. “I think it’s better if my angel explains this herself.”

I clear my throat, looking at the cameras, the expectant reporters.

It’s when I look out the window for a small reprieve from the press that I see him. So much for using Graham and Ellie to set a trap... He’s turned up all by himself. My heart skips a beat, fear twisting through me.

“Luh-Luke,” I say, hating the stutter. “Look.”

“What’s wron...” He stops when he sees him too, Damien standing outside the window, his black hair falling across his face, smiling at us in the most deranged manner imaginable. “Motherfucker.”

“Luke!”

But it's too late. The cameras swivel as Luke runs for the door, and then it's mayhem as everybody clambers to follow him. I try to catch up, but I get stuck between two reporters. I spin, thinking I can use the other door and leave by the back exit and then loop around.

I end up at the window, staring as Damien turns to look, reaching into his pocket... He didn't have a gun in the restaurant. I've got no clue why – maybe he didn't think he'd need one. I pray he doesn't have one now.

“This is where it ends,” Damien bellows. “This, Luke, here and now, this is where it ends!”

Luke approaches Damien, glaring at him. “You need to turn yourself in, Damien. You're not well. You've gone too goddamn far. You threatened my woman, my soulmate, the only person I care about. You need to?—”

I scream when Damien reaches into his pocket, taking out a knife that glints in the light. The reporters who remain in the room gasp.

“This ends here,” Damien roars, running at Luke, waving the knife like a madman... a madman who could keep it together for some time, fueled by his malformed vision, a madman who could sustain his mission. But now he's sleep-deprived, and clearly, he's out of ideas.

Luke dodges Damien wildly, slashes but loses his footing. A spurt of red flies into the air, seeming to freeze there like a comic book. It can't end like this. Not after we've confessed our love for each other. Not when the future is so bright and promising.

Luke rights himself, lets out what can only be described as a battle cry, and rushes

toward Damien, head butting him. Luke wastes no time grabbing Damien's forearm and twisting it, just like he did to Andy. Damien yelps and drops the knife. Luke kicks it, then swings Damien around like he weighs nothing. Damien hits the ground with a thud. Luke pulls his foot back like he's going to kick him in the face.

He stops at the last second, stumbling away, looking around as blood drips from the gash across his hand. The security guards are jogging toward him. Luke gestures at Damien, and they jump on him, holding him down.

I feel like I've been frozen in place this whole time. Now, I run outside, pushing past the reporters.

"Luke." I sob, tearing off my jacket and taking his hand, applying pressure. "Are you okay? Oh, God."

"I had to kick the knife away," Luke growls. "Sera, I would've used it on him. I would've ended him. I... I almost did." He looks around as if for somebody else to fight. "I'm sorry, my love, my angel."

"It's okay," I whisper, wrapping the jacket around his hand. "Squeeze down. You need to put pressure on the cut."

"This is where it ends," Damien yells as the security guards pin him down.

I glare at him, but he looks so pathetic pinned beneath the two men, a patch of hair missing from his head. I can't even hate him.

"Mr. Cross, who was that?" a reporter yells.

"Mr. Cross, was he involved in the sabotage?"

“I wanted to kill him for what he did to you,” Luke snarls.

“Get out of the way,” I yell, waving a hand at the reporters. “Luke isn’t in any state to answer questions.”

“It’s okay, Sera,” Luke says, clenching his hand into a fist, keeping his other hand on my arm. “Yes, that man had something to do with the sabotage. But he’s done far worse than that. He blackmailed people, threatened a woman with a terminal illness. Worst of all, he threatened and intimidated, and tried to kidnap the love of my life: the only woman I’ve ever cared about.”

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The reporters stare, rapt.

"I call Sera my Sparkplug because when she gets passionate, that's what she's like..." He looks at me with emotion-filled eyes. "But there's another reason. She's sparked something in me, something I never knew was there. I didn't plan on this piece of filth crashing this press release, but it's a good thing he did, because now there's nothing stopping us from being together."

The world goes blurry as my eyes fill with tears. He lets go of me, reaching into his pocket, taking out a jewelry box.

"Luke." I gasp, covering my mouth, everything else fading away until it's just us. Damien and the guards and the sea of reporters might as well be the emptiness of the Grand Canyon as Luke, with his injured hand, opens the ring box to reveal a glistening, exquisite diamond. "Oh my God, Luke!"

"You asked if I wanted to show the world my love for you, Sera," he says. "There's nothing I want more. You're the only woman I ever want. My partner. My rock. You're my everything. From the first moment I saw you, Sparkplug, I knew I loved you."

When he kneels down, emotion overwhelms me. Tears stream down my cheeks, love and belonging making my heart pound.

"Seraphina Vale, will you marry me?"

"Say yes," somebody calls from the crowd, sounding equally tearful.

I laugh, wiping my cheek. "Iknewyou were touching your pocket for a reason... yes, Luke. Yes!Yes, yes!"

The reporters cheer as he takes the ring and slides it onto my finger. He springs to his feet and pulls me into his arms. When we kiss, it's like I can feel the helicopter rumbling beneath us, see the Vegas lights glittering from Top of the World, hear theclick-click-clickof the roulette wheel.

"I planned on doing it after the press conference," he says when he pulls back from the kiss, his hand resting possessively on my hip.

When sirens pierce the air, I say, "This was perfect. Except your hand. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I would've taken much worse to make sure he could never hurt you again."

"I love you, Luke. I can't wait for our life together. I can't wait to wake up to you every single day. To work with you. To be with you."

The reporters soon call for a photo. We turn away gladly from Damien – from the past – and toward the cameras.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Luke

On the private jet, the four of us sit around the table. Me, my woman, Eleanor, and Graham. Upon arriving in LA, Eleanor and Graham were shocked to find a video on their phones of me taking down Damien. Hell, I was shocked too. I didn't plan on rushing out there. But when I saw him, I lost it. I thought about him cornering my woman in the bathroom, what would've happened if she hadn't been so brave and

fought him off.

That was three days ago. Graham and Eleanor thought they would have to leave. There was no use for them now. But, surprisingly, Sera asked them to stay. Since then, they've stayed at my place in the spare room, and things are...

Not healed. Not fixed. But my Sera has a good heart. I can tell she's seriously considering forgiving them. I can see the toll that harboring resentment has taken on her.

"Thank you for inviting us," Eleanor says. "It means a lot, Sera, truthfully, wholly. It means more than you could ever know."

"It's fine," Sera replies, looking stunning in her sleek business jacket and black pants, her hair tied up, pencil slotted through her bun. "I mean – it's not fine. But I know how sorry you are. I know you were prepared to help us catch Damien."

"We can never make it up to you," Graham says with genuine sincerity. "But thank you for giving us the chance to try... and thank you for inviting us on this trip. It was very kind."

Sera smiles tightly. "I know how much you love Vegas, Ellie. I figure, if Luke and I have a business meeting, why don't you tag along?"

"It's very thoughtful," Graham says. "More thoughtful than we deserve, perhaps."

"You said you would do whatever it took to prove how sorry you are," Sera says.

"We are, sweetness," Eleanor says, her voice tired... but she's pushing past her exhaustion. "Anything."

"Then I'm willing to give you the chance to do that. I love you, Ellie. Your fear was clear. I know you had your reasons. It won't be easy, but if meeting my Luke has taught me anything, it's that even the craziest, most impossible-seeming things have a way of coming true."

When she smiles at me, my heart swells with love.

"What's the meeting about?" Graham asks. "I've been hesitant to ask..."

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"In case we think you're planning more sabotage?" I say with a laugh. When Graham frowns, I say, "Graham, I'm willing to put this behind us. You did this for your wife. There's nothing I wouldn't do for my future wife. Let's try to move on." He nods, and I continue, "The meeting is about reorganizing my keynotespeech, with the same CES branding... Only this time, I'll have my Sparkplug at my side."

"I'm proud of you," I tell Sera that night, holding her in my arms.

"It's their last chance," Sera whispers. "If they show me even a single sign that they're not truly, deeply sorry, then it's over. But I have to admit, so far, I'm impressed. Do you think Ellie seemed tired?"

"Yeah," I say. "But she didn't want to show it."

"Thank you for arranging travel care for her."

"I did it for you."

She moves closer, kissing my bare chest. "It feels good being back in Vegas... where it all began."

"It does," I agree. "And even better, knowing Damien is going to be locked up for a long time. I still can't believe I proposed in front of all those people. I didn't plan it. I was just so full of adrenaline, of purpose."

"It was beautiful," she whispers. "I spent so long dreaming about what it would be like to be wanted, and you showed me. The whole world is jealous of us, of what we

have."

"Being here almost gives a man crazy ideas..."

"Crazier than the first time we were here?" she says, laughing.

"We could get married," I say. "I could make it happen like that." I snap my fingers.

"Victor could fly in. We could be husband and wife tomorrow."

"Yes," she says excitedly, peppering me with kisses. "I don't need a big, fancy wedding. I just want you."

"We'll have a party later, don't you worry."

"I mean it. If you were dirt-poor, I'd still want you. Still need you."

I call Victor, then hold Sera until she falls asleep, remembering what it was like the first time, knowing we were on a ticking clock, wondering if I would ever get to see her again.

Not even twenty-four hours later, I'm standing at the altar of a Vegas chapel, Victor and Eleanor in the crowd, watching us, as I wait for my woman to walk down the aisle. To others, this might seem rushed... but there's no such thing for us. To others, it might seem cheesy, but we embrace cheesy.

Vegas is where we fell in love. It's fitting that we solidify our love here.

Graham walks her down the aisle, a look of profound humanity on his face. Regret, gratitude, pride, love. It's all there in his expression, in the furrowing of his eyebrows.

Seraphina wears a beautiful pale green dress, her hair flowing to her shoulders,

naturally gorgeous. I meant it when I told her we were going to have another party, a bigger one, where we may even renew our vows.

But deep down, I know this is the one I'll always remember. In a world of helicopter rides, private jets, and hiring out entire restaurants, it feels special to do something normal, something humbler, something that lets our love shine rather than having it outshone by the grandiosity of my position.

When she arrives at the altar, she's got tears in her eyes. Graham gives her away to me, saying, "I've cared for this young woman for almost a decade, Luke. I've made mistakes, but I mean this sincerely. Take care of her. Nurture her. Give her the life she deserves."

I take my woman's arms. "I will, I promise."

We stand at the altar together, in the city where it all started, ready to give our lives to each other.

When it comes time to give our vows, we make our own. I speak huskily, my eyes stinging as I look into my woman's captivating eyes.

"Sera, this is all just a formality. We gave our lives to each other when we met. In my heart, in my soul, we were married the moment I offered to fix your laptop..."

She throws herself into my arms, kissing me passionately.

Victor laughs. "Nobody said you may now kiss the bride yet."

Sera laughs between hungry kisses. "I don't freaking care."

We kiss again.

Epilogue

Sera

Six Weeks Later

So, what's it like being married to the man of my dreams?

It's absolutely perfect. Life has gotten so much better since that magical day in Vegas. Luke and I are partners: in love, in code, and in business. I joined the design team for the AI self-driving car, and together, we're forging a new future for the company.

But today isn't about that. I bite my lip as I lean over my laptop, love bubbling up inside me. That's not a surprise. Every second of every day, I'm filled with love, more than I can even comprehend sometimes.

It's even better because A) Damien looks like he's going to get along sentence and B) Graham and Ellie have shown me they meant what they promised. Graham has resigned from TechGuard, and he and Ellie are staying on the West Coast. It's been a long road – and there's still ground to cover – but they've proven they still care.

But today isn't about them either.

When the door opens, I turn. I'm standing next to the car, doing the lip-biting thing that drives my husband wild. I quickly let go before we get distracted.

He walks confidently toward me, my tall, dashing, straight-out-of-a-fantasy silver

fox. He kisses me, then says, "You said there was a problem with Ally?"

"Yeah, she's gone rogue again. She won't stop talking about one very specific thing."

"What?"

I gesture at the car. "Climb in. See for yourself."

He climbs into the car, touching the button that wakes Ally up. "Ally, how are we doing?"

"Very excited for the future," Ally replies, not the AI's usual response.

"Okay... and why might that be?"

"Haven't you heard, Mr. Cross? You're going to be a father. Sera is pregnant."

He leaps from the car, a radiant grin spreading across his face.

"Are you happy?" I ask.

He laughs in delight, pulling me in for a hug. "I'm over the moon. A family, Sparkplug. This is our chance. To do better. To be better. I love you."

Yes, this is our chance to have it all.

"I love you, too, daddy-to-be."

Epilogue

Luke

Three Months Later

"This is a testament to your hard work," I tell her as Ally guides us around the track, the stars shining down, the full moon making the nighttime setting even more romantic.

She strokes her hand over her belly. "The fact I'm willing to let Ally drive us around at night while pregnant?"

I nod, smoothing my hand over hers. We often stay like this, with her touching her growing bump, me pressing against the back of her hand. She says she likes it: she's got love on either side of her. She smiles as Ally smoothly takes a corner we can't even see.

"All those late nights," I say. "All that hard work, it's paid off. But there's one last test to see how confident we really are..."

She moans when I move my hand from her belly toward her legs. "You've been obsessed ever since I told you how crazy the pregnancy hormones make me."

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"Newsflash, Sparkplug. I've been obsessed since day one. Ally – stop monitoring but keep driving."

"Are you going to rehearse making another baby, Luke?" Ally says.

I laugh. Of course, Sera has used her individual tuning to make her version of Ally sassy and hilarious. "That's none of your business."

"Turning off monitoring," Ally says. "And have fun."

"Luh-Luke," Sera moans as I stroke my hand between her legs, pressing down on the apex between her thighs through her pants. "Oh, Luke."

I groan as I lean forward, pressing my lips against her neck, the car moving effortlessly around the track like a symbol of how far we've come. She makes the sweetest whimpering noise when I slip my hand inside her pants, over her folds.

She squeezes her thighs around my hand.

"Touch... my... clit..."

I love when she gets demanding. I love how much we've grown together. She's gone from never believing her bookish fantasies could come true... to experiencing those fantasies every chance we get. I massage her clit, addicted to the sound of her whimpers and moans.

With my free hand, I pull up her shirt, kissing her breasts, tearing her bra aside with

my teeth so I can suck her pert nipples.

I rub her softly at first, but then her moans intensify, growing more urgent. I can't hold back. Her orgasm sends tremor through her entire body as we glide through the darkness, toward the future, together.

THE END