



# Ship Happens

**Author:** *Lila Sloane*

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** She's on a mission to expose him. He's determined to change her mind. Neither expects to fall overboard—into love.

Marine biologist Harper Bennett doesn't do luxury. Or billionaires. So when she's forced onto a singles' cruise to document its so-called sustainability efforts, she's ready to suffer through a week of overpriced cocktails and fake eco-friendly buzzwords. But then she crosses paths with Ethan Cole—tech mogul, walking PR disaster, and the man she just threw a drink at... on live TV.

Now, thanks to one viral feud and a meddling cruise director, Harper is stuck fake dating Ethan for the rest of the trip. Between over-the-top couples' challenges, an increasingly invested audience, and a very inconvenient attraction, the lines between real and pretend start to blur.

Because pretending to fall for Ethan was never part of the plan. Actually falling for him? A complete disaster.

As the ship nears its final port, Harper has a choice: walk away like she always planned, or admit that love—like the ocean—is bigger, wilder, and completely unpredictable.

**Total Pages (Source):** 80

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:56 am*

## Chapter One

HARPER

WELCOME ABOARD (OR NOT)

I grip my phone tighter as the cab pulls up to the port, trying to ignore the gnawing in the pit of my stomach. The Rendezvous looms ahead of me like a floating monument to excess—fourteen decks of “luxury singles experience” according to the garish banners flapping in the sea breeze.

“That’ll be thirty-eight fifty,” the driver says, eyeing the massive ship through the windshield. “Headed on vacation?”

“Work,” I correct him, sliding my card through the reader. “Definitely work.”

He eyes my casual outfit dubiously. I don’t blame him. Most people don’t board a luxury cruise ship in ripped jeans and a “Save the Oceans” t-shirt, but I’m not most people, and this isn’t a vacation.

“You a performer?” he asks, handing me the receipt.

I snort. “Marine biologist. Environmental consultant.” I tug at my shirt. “The outfit’s my subtle form of protest.”

“Doesn’t seem that subtle.”

“Wait until you see my PowerPoint presentation.”

I grab my battered duffel bag and step out into the humid Miami air. The truth is, I’m here to document The Rendezvous’ laughable “sustainability initiatives” for my consulting firm’s blog. Spoiler alert: slapping solar panels on a floating city that burns thousands of gallons of fuel daily doesn’t make it eco-friendly. But billionaire cruise line owner Marcus Cole thinks a few green buzzwords will distract from his company’s environmental destruction.

The cruise terminal buzzes with excitement. Everyone looks ready for prom night rather than a seven-day voyage—designer dresses, salon-perfect hair, enough cologne to qualify as an air pollutant. I clutch my backpack—filled with camera equipment, research notes, and exactly zero sparkly evening gowns—and join the check-in line.

“Welcome to The Rendezvous Singles Adventure!” chirps the woman at the counter, her smile so bright I consider checking for batteries. “May I see your boarding pass?”

I hand over my documents, wincing at the hot pink “Love Awaits!” logo stamped across the top.

“Harper Bennett! Perfect.” She taps away at her computer with glittery nails that could probably be seen from the International Space Station. “You’re all set for our Deluxe Romance Package in cabin 842.”

“I didn’t book a romance package,” I say, frowning. “Just a standard cabin.”

“Oh!” Her smile doesn’t falter. “It looks like you received a complimentary upgrade.” She lowers her voice like we’re sharing state secrets. “We have several high-profile guests this voyage. Management wants to ensure everyone has the full luxury experience.”

Translation: The ship isn't fully booked, so they're padding their numbers with upgrades.

"Great," I mutter, accepting my key card.

"Enjoy your journey to love!" she calls after me with the conviction of someone who's watched *The Bachelor* religiously for fifteen seasons.

I suppress a groan as I make my way up the gangway. The Rendezvous is even worse up close—gold accents everywhere, champagne fountains, and an actual red carpet leading into the main atrium. A string quartet plays while staff members hand out flutes of champagne to arriving passengers.

I accept one purely for journalistic research purposes. And because my hotel minibar charged eight dollars for a Snickers, so I'm taking freebies where I can get them.

The atrium rises several decks high, with glass elevators zooming up and down like something from Willy Wonka's factory. Screens everywhere advertise the week's activities: "Tantric Yoga for Two," "Midnight Confessions Under the Stars," and "Lovers' Obstacle Course."

"Are you here alone?" asks a woman with an impressive updo and a name tag reading "Matchmaker Melissa."

"By choice," I respond, raising my champagne in a mock toast.

"Not for long!" she sings, handing me a heart-shaped itinerary. "We have a 98% match rate!"

"Is that scientifically verified?" I ask, but she's already bounced away to her next victim.

I sip my champagne, mentally calculating how many sea turtles could be saved with the money spent on just the crystal chandelier above me. When a staff member points me toward the “Welcome Mixer” on the pool deck, I head in the opposite direction. I need to drop off my bag and get my bearings before diving into this floating Tinder experiment.

The elevators are packed with excited passengers, so I take the stairs. By the time I reach deck eight, I’m regretting my decision to pack my entire marine testing kit. I fumble with my key card at cabin 842, shoving the door open with my hip.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:56 am*

The “Deluxe Romance” room makes me want to gag—king-sized bed covered in rose petals, champagne on ice, and a hot tub on the balcony shaped like a heart. I’m surprised they didn’t include a Barry White soundtrack.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I mutter, brushing rose petals off the bed. They fall to the floor in a sad little pile that screams “future vacuum cleaner clog.”

I drop my bag on a chair and step onto the balcony, taking a deep breath of salty air. The Miami skyline stretches behind us, gleaming in the afternoon sun.

Maybe I can just hide in here for a week. Conduct my research at night like some kind of eco-ninja.

My phone pings with a text from my boss:

Got the inside scoop yet? The internet is buzzing about Cole Tech’s CEO being on board. Perfect timing!

I freeze. Cole Tech. As in Ethan Cole, Marcus Cole’s son and heir to the cruise empire. Also, the founder of Cole Technologies, the company currently developing ocean mining drones while pretending to care about marine conservation.

I didn’t know he was going to be on board. This just got a lot more interesting.

I quickly text back:

On it.

I grab my credentials from my bag. I might as well get this over with.

Back on the main deck, the mixer is in full swing. Beautiful people in designer swimwear lounge around the infinity pool, while bartenders serve drinks so colorful they probably need their own EPA warning. A DJ blasts music from a booth shaped like a giant seashell.

I scan the crowd, looking for the familiar face I've seen in countless tech magazines and environmental violation reports. If Ethan Cole is anything like his company profile, he'll be surrounded by admirers and?—

There he is.

Standing by the bar, drink in hand, looking like he owns the place—which, technically, he does. Tall, with dark hair swept back from a face that's annoyingly handsome. His white linenshirt costs more than my monthly student loan payment, casually unbuttoned at the collar to reveal tanned skin. A woman laughs at whatever he's saying, touching his arm with manicured fingers.

I weave through the crowd, downing the rest of my champagne for courage. The closer I get, the more my blood boils. This man represents everything I fight against—wealth without conscience, tech without ethics, power without responsibility.

“Mr. Cole,” I say, stepping into his line of sight. “Harper Bennett, marine biologist. Care to comment on your company's latest claims about sustainable ocean mining? Because I'm having trouble understanding how drilling into a protected seabed is considered ‘eco-friendly.’”

The woman next to him blinks in surprise. Ethan Cole's expression barely changes except for a slight lift of one eyebrow. His eyes—an unnaturally vivid blue that

makes my scientific mind wonder about genetic anomalies—flick to my credentials, then back to my face.

“Ms. Bennett,” he says, his voice smoother than I expected. “I didn’t realize we were doing interviews on vacation.” He takes a sip of his drink, never breaking eye contact. “Though I suppose some people don’t know how to relax.”

“Some people don’t have the luxury of relaxation when companies like yours are destroying the planet,” I counter. “Your ‘Green Ocean Initiative’ is greenwashing at its finest.”

That gets a reaction. His jaw tightens, just slightly.

“Let me guess,” he says, setting his glass down. “You read one article about our technology and decided you’re an expert.”

“I’ve read every article, patent application, and environmental impact study your company has published,” I fire back. “And I’ve conducted my own research on the effects of seabed disruption on marine ecosystems. I have a PhD in Marine Biology, not a subscription to Twitter.”

His eyes narrow, and I can almost see the mental recalculation happening behind them.

“I assume you’ve read the actual research papers,” he says, “not just the activist outrage? Because our technology actually reduces the environmental impact compared to traditional methods.”

“Reducing damage is still causing damage,” I retort. “Especially when traditional methods shouldn’t be happening either.”

“And your solution is... what?” He steps closer, towering over me. “Because criticism is easy. Innovation is hard.”

“My solution is leaving fragile ecosystems alone!” The conversation around us has died down, passengers watching our exchange like it’s part of the entertainment. “But I wouldn’t expect someone with dollar signs for pupils to understand that concept.”

“Ah, the preservationist approach.” His mouth curves into a half-smile. “Very noble. Not particularly practical in a world that needs resources.”

“The world needs oceans more than it needs another tech mogul’s vanity project,” I snap.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

His eyes narrow. “You clearly have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“And you clearly do not know the damage you’re causing!” My voice rises. “Or maybe you do, and you just don’t care because it doesn’t affect your bottom line.”

Something dangerous flashes across his face as he steps even closer. I can smell his cologne now—something woodsy and frustratingly appealing.

“You don’t know the first thing about me or my priorities, Dr. Bennett,” he says, emphasizing my title with just enough condescension to make my blood boil.

“I know enough.” I grab a fresh glass of champagne from a passing server. “I know you’re just like every other tech CEO who thinks he can buy and sell the planet while pretending to save it.”

Ethan steps even closer, invading my personal space in a way that makes my heart race for reasons I refuse to acknowledge.

“You know, Dr. Bennett, for someone so educated, you seem remarkably uninterested in facts.”

That does it. The utter arrogance in his voice, the way he’s looking down at me like I’m some naïve activist not worth his time—it’s too much.

“Here’s a fact for you,” I say, lifting my champagne flute.

And then I throw my drink into his perfect, exasperating face.

Gasps erupt around us. Champagne drips from his chin onto his pristine shirt. For a split second, shock registers in those blue eyes.

Then countless phones rise around us, camera flashes going off like strobe lights.

“Welcome aboard, Mr. Cole,” I say sweetly, setting my empty glass on the bar. “I look forward to our sustainability discussions.”

As I turn and walk away, I hear the unmistakable sound of social media notifications beginning to ping throughout the crowd.

So much for keeping a low profile.

And so much for not making a scene on day one.

But the look on Ethan Cole’s face?Worth it. Completely worth it.

Now I just have to survive a week on this floating monument to excess with the billionaire whose face I just baptized in champagne.

What could possibly go wrong?

## Chapter Two

ETHAN

### DAMAGE CONTROL (AND PETTY REVENGE)

I wipe champagne from my eyes and plaster on a smile as cameras flash. Thirty-four years of Cole family etiquette training kicks in: Never let them see you sweat. Even when you’re dripping wet.

“Just discussing sustainable initiatives,” I tell the woman beside me, whose face vacillates between horror and delight at witnessing a viral moment in the making. “Passionate environmentalists, you know how it is.”

The crowd returns to their drinks, though the damage is done. I can hear the social media captions being written:

“Billionaire Gets Champagne Facial from Eco-Warrior.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket. No doubt my PR team already has alerts set up for my name. I ignore it and grab a napkin from the bar, dabbing at my ruined shirt as I watch Harper Bennett storm off, auburn hair swinging with every confident step.

Well. That didn’t go according to plan.

I finish wiping my face, nodding at the bartender, who offers me another drink. “Bourbon. Neat. And keep the ice for later.”

I’d known Harper would be difficult. Her reputation in environmental circles preceded her—brilliant marine biologist with a take-no-prisoners approach to corporate accountability. What I hadn’t expected was the raw intensity of her dislike. Or how much I’d enjoy watching her lose her cool.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

I check my phone and wince. Fifty-seven notifications already. A text from Marcus:

What the hell is happening out there?

I tap out a quick response:

Minor PR issue. Handling it.

The “minor PR issue” is trending on three platforms. A security officer approaches, tablet in hand. “Mr. Cole, we’ve had several complaints about the... incident.”

“From whom?” I ask, sipping my bourbon.

“The cruise director and events manager. They’re concerned about negative publicity.” He shifts uncomfortably. “They’d like you to meet them in the executive lounge.”

Of course they would. Nothing like having your family name on the side of the ship to ensure every staff member treats a PR embarrassment like a national security threat.

“Tell them I’ll be there in ten,” I say, finishing my drink. “After I change.”

In my suite, I swap my champagne-soaked shirt for a fresh one, examining my reflection in the mirror. At least she didn’t throw red wine. Small mercies.

My phone rings—Alexis, my chief of staff, calling from New York.

“Please tell me you didn’t antagonize Dr. Bennett,” she says before I can even say hello.

I press speaker and set the phone down while I button my shirt. “Good afternoon to you too, Alexis.”

“Your face is all over Twitter, Ethan. #ChampagneShower is trending.”

“Sounds festive.”

“This isn’t funny. We specifically invited her to evaluate our environmental initiatives, not to publicly humiliate you.”

“I’d hardly call it humiliation.” I adjust my cuffs. “More like an enthusiastic baptism.”

“You know her research on coral reef preservation is respected worldwide. We need her endorsement for the Green Ocean Initiative, not photos of her throwing drinks at you.”

“She was never going to endorse us. She came looking for a fight.”

“And you gave her one,” Alexis sighs. “What did you say to her?”

I pause, replaying the interaction. “Nothing that warranted a beverage to the face.”

“With you, that could be anything.” The exasperation in her voice is well-earned after five years of managing my public relations disasters. “Fix this, Ethan. Whatever it takes. We need positive press on the environmental front, especially with the Mako Tech acquisition coming up.”

“I’m aware of the stakes.”

“Are you? Because Mako’s board is already nervous about ethical issues. If they see Cole Tech at odds with leading environmental scientists?—”

“I said I’ll handle it.” I check my watch. “Look, I’m late for a meeting with the cruise director. I’ll call you back.”

I hang up before she can list more ways. I’ve screwed up today’s objectives. She’s right, of course. The Mako Tech acquisition is crucial for our ocean drone project, and Harper Bennett’s approval would silence critics. I just didn’t expect her to be so... inflammatory.

Or quite so attractive when she’s angry.

That last thought is unhelpful. I push it away as I head to the executive lounge, where two nervous-looking staff members await.

“Mr. Cole,” the cruise director begins, “we want to assure you that this type of behavior is not tolerated on The Rendezvous. We’re prepared to escort Dr. Bennett off at our next port?—”

“That won’t be necessary,” I interrupt, taking a seat. “In fact, I don’t want any action taken.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

They exchange confused glances. “But sir, she threw a drink at you. It’s all-over social media.”

“I’m aware.” I lean forward. “Here’s what we’re going to do instead: nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Well, not quite nothing.” I smile. “I want Dr. Bennett moved to the Seabreeze Suite on Deck 10.”

The cruise director consults his tablet. “That’s... next door to your presidential suite.”

“Is it? What a coincidence.” I reach for a bottle of water. “I also want her added to every couples’ event this week.”

“Couples’ events?” The events manager looks bewildered. “But she’s here alone.”

“Not anymore. I’ll be her partner.”

Their expressions range from confusion to dawning horror as they realize what I’m suggesting.

“Mr. Cole,” the cruise director says, “are you asking us to... punish her by making her take part in couples’ activities with you?”

“I prefer to think of it as ‘enhancing her cruise experience.’” I take a sip of water. “Plus, the press will love it. Imagine the headlines: ‘Eco-Warrior and Tech CEO Bury

the Hatchet.’ Much better than ‘Billionaire Kicks Scientist Off Cruise.’”

The events manager looks skeptical. “Sir, with all due respect, she threw champagne in your face. I don’t think she’ll participate in anything with you.”

“She will if it’s required to complete her environmental assessment.” I stand. “Tell her she needs to experience all aspects of the cruise to evaluate its sustainability. Including the social events.”

“And if she refuses?”

“She won’t. She’s too committed to her cause.” I head for the door, then pause. “Oh, and have the ship’s social media team ready to capture everything. I want our ‘journey to friendship’ documented.”

Their faces suggest they think I’ve lost my mind. Maybe I have.

Back in my suite, I fire off a text to Alexis:

Crisis averted. Working on a PR plan that will have Dr. Bennett singing our praises by week’s end.

Her response is immediate:

Should I be worried?

Definitely.

I step onto my balcony and glance at the suite next door. The Seabreeze is smaller than mine but just as luxurious—and perfectly positioned for my plans. Through the glass door, I catch a glimpse of auburn hair. Harper is already there, unpacking her

bags.

As if sensing my gaze, she looks up. Our eyes meet across the dividing wall. For a moment, I think she might throw something else at me, but instead, she marches to the glass door and yanks the curtain shut.

I can't help but laugh. This is going to be an interesting week.

My phone pings with an alert. The social media team has already started their campaign: a photo of me, champagne-drenched but smiling, captioned 'Sometimes sustainability discussions get heated! Looking forward to finding common ground with @DrHarperBennett this week on #TheRendezvous #LoveAndOceans.'

I pour myself another bourbon and settle into a deck chair. By tomorrow morning, Harper will discover what I've arranged. Her outrage will be magnificent. And public. And exactly what I need to turn this PR disaster into an opportunity.

The champagne attack may have won her the first round, but I've been playing this game a lot longer. And I never lose.

A knock at my door interrupts my plotting. I open it to find a crew member holding an envelope.

"From the cruise director, sir," he says. "The updated event schedule you requested."

I scan the list and can't hold back a grin. "Love's Obstacle Course" tomorrow morning. "Tantric Yoga for Two" in the afternoon. And the evening's "Midnight Love Confessions" broadcast live from the main deck.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

I leave the schedule on the coffee table and return to the balcony, bourbon in hand. The sun is setting over the ocean, painting the water in golds and pinks. In the distance, a pod of dolphins breaks the surface, reminding me why I started the Green Ocean Initiative in the first place.

Harper Bennett doesn't know it yet, but we actually want the same thing. She just assumes the worst about me because of my last name and bank balance.

Well, by the end of this cruise, Dr. Bennett will either endorse my environmental initiatives or create such a spectacular public meltdown that no one will take her criticisms seriously.

Either way, I win.

And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to watching her reaction to our new "couple status" tomorrow morning.

Sometimes business and pleasure can mix. Especially when pleasure means driving your most vocal critic completely insane.

I raise my glass in a silent toast to the closed curtains next door.

Game on, Dr. Bennett.

Chapter Three

HARPER

## FAKE DATING IS A CRIME

I wake to sunlight streaming through the balcony door and the distant sound of waves slapping against the hull. For one blissful moment, I forget where I am.

Then reality crashes back: I'm on a floating romance factory, I threw champagne at a billionaire, and I have approximately seven research papers to draft on The Rendezvous' "eco-initiatives" (or lack thereof).

All in a day's work.

I roll out of bed, shuffling to the bathroom. The suite they moved me to last night is admittedly gorgeous—spacious, elegantly appointed, with panoramic ocean views. Why they suddenly needed to "upgrade" me remains suspicious, but I wasn't about to argue with the apologetic staff member who claimed my original cabin had "maintenance issues."

My phone buzzes as I'm brushing my teeth. Three missed calls from my boss, five texts, and—I nearly choke on toothpaste—thirteen media requests.

"What the..."

I open Twitter and almost drop my phone. There I am, arm extended, mid-champagne throw, with Ethan Cole's surprised face immortalized in high definition. The photo's been shared over 40,000 times.

"Oh no."

But it gets worse. The Rendezvous' official account has posted a different

photo—Ethan, champagne-soaked but smiling charmingly, with a caption about “heated sustainability discussions” and “finding common ground with @DrHarperBennett.”

My finger hovers over the screen. I should be outraged. I am outraged. But there’s something annoyingly impressive about his damage control spin.

A knock at the door interrupts my social media spiral. I throw on a robe and peek through the peephole. A uniformed crew member stands holding a garment bag and an envelope.

“Dr. Bennett? I have your itinerary and attire for today’s activities.”

“I didn’t sign up for any activities,” I call through the door.

“It’s part of your environmental assessment package,” he replies, sounding rehearsed.

“The cruise director added a note explaining everything.”

Reluctantly, I open the door and accept the items. “What activities?”

“The Lover’s Obstacle Course starts at ten, ma’am. Breakfast is being served on the Sunrise Deck.”

“Lover’s what now?” But he’s already walking away.

I tear open the envelope and scan the letter inside, my horror growing with each line:

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Dr. Bennett,

To complete a thorough assessment of The Rendezvous' sustainability practices, we require your participation in our full range of activities. This includes our signature couples' experiences, which consume significant resources we're working to optimize.

Your partner for these evaluations will be Mr. Ethan Cole, who has graciously volunteered to assist with your research.

Today's schedule is enclosed. Appropriate attire provided.

Warmly, The Rendezvous Management Team

I read it three times, convinced it's a joke. Couple's experiences? With Ethan Cole? After I doused him in Dom Perignon?

This has to be his doing.

I unzip the garment bag to find matching athletic wear—eco-friendly, according to the attached tags, made from recycledocean plastic. In my size. Which means someone looked up my measurements.

I'm going to kill him.

I grab my phone and search for the cruise director's contact information. While it rings, I open the full itinerary and nearly have an aneurysm:

10:00 AM - Lover's Obstacle Course (Main Deck) 2:00 PM - Tantric Yoga for Two (Wellness Center) 8:00 PM - Midnight Love Confessions (Live Broadcast, Starlight Deck)

"This is a joke, right?" I demand when the cruise director answers.

"Good morning, Dr. Bennett. I assume you've received your schedule?"

"I'm not taking part in couples' activities with Ethan Cole. That's absurd."

"I understand your hesitation," he says smoothly, "but Mr. Cole insisted this would be the best way to mend fences after yesterday's... incident. The footage of your disagreement has gone quite viral."

"Of course it has," I mutter.

"He suggested this would be a more positive narrative. And frankly, the alternative was to ask you to disembark at our next port."

"He can't kick me off!"

"The Coles own the ship, Dr. Bennett."

I pace the room, fuming. "This is coercion."

"We prefer to call it 'collaborative reputation management.' Mr. Cole has assured us you'll have full access to all environmental data after participating."

I bite back several unprofessional responses. I need that data for my report. Without it, this entire trip is wasted.

“Fine,” I finally say. “But this is extortion.”

“The Lover’s Obstacle Course begins in ninety minutes. Breakfast is served until?—”

I hang up and throw my phone onto the bed. Then I notice something through the balcony door—Ethan Cole, lounging on the adjacent balcony in a bathrobe, coffee in hand, watching me with undisguised amusement.

We’re neighbors. Of course we are.

I storm onto my balcony. “You did this.”

“Good morning to you too, sunshine.” He sips his coffee, maddeningly calm. “Sleep well?”

“Explain this.” I wave the itinerary at him. “Lover’s Obstacle Course? Tantric Yoga? Are you serious?”

“Deadly.” His gaze sparkles with mischief. “I thought it would be more productive than having you thrown overboard for assault.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“It was champagne, not acid.”

“My Brioni shirt begs to differ.” He gestures to the chair opposite him. “Join me for coffee? We should discuss our strategy.”

“Our what?”

“Strategy. For convincing people we don’t hate each other.”

I cross my arms. “But I do despise you.”

“That’s the spirit.” He grins. “Very convincing.”

“I won’t do this.”

“You will if you want access to our emission reports, waste management data, and the engineering specs for our new desalination system.” He takes another sip of coffee. “Which I’m guessing you do, given your publisher’s deadline.”

My jaw drops. “How do you know about my deadline?”

“I make it my business to know about people who throw drinks at me.” He stands and moves closer to the dividing wall between our balconies. “Look, we can help each other. You need data for your report. I need to avoid looking like a villain in the environmental press. One week of playing nice, and we both get what we want.”

“Playing nice doesn’t include Tantric Yoga.”

“The yoga is negotiable. The obstacle course isn’t.” His expression turns serious. “The cameras will be there, Harper. This is our chance to reframe yesterday’s disaster.”

I hate that he’s right. I also hate that he uses my first name like we’re friends. But mostly, I hate that I’m actually considering his proposal.

“No funny business,” I finally say. “We pretend to get along, I get my data, then we never speak again.”

“Deal. Though you might change your mind about the ‘never speaking again’ part. I grow on people.”

“Like a persistent rash, I’m sure.”

His laugh is genuine. “Breakfast? The pastry chef here is incredible.”

“I’d rather eat on my own, thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” He turns to go back inside, then pauses. “Wear the gear they sent. It’s actually made from recycled fishing nets. Part of a new sustainable clothing line we’re launching.”

I narrow my eyes. “Was throwing that plastic back into the ocean really your goal?”

“Reducing waste was. But keep making assumptions about me.” He winks. “It’s cute when you’re wrong.”

Before I can respond, he disappears into his suite, leaving me seething on the balcony.

Forty-five minutes later, I'm dressed in the irritatingly comfortable recycled-plastic athletic wear, making my way to the main deck. The Lover's Obstacle Course is already drawing a crowd. Heart-shaped flags mark the course, and staff members bustle around making last-minute adjustments to what appears to be a series of physical challenges.

"Dr. Bennett!" A perky event coordinator spots me. "You're just in time. Your partner is already warming up."

Sure enough, Ethan stands near the starting line, stretching in matching athletic gear that hugs his unfairly well-defined muscles. He waves when he sees me, the picture of enthusiasm.

I paste on the fakest smile in human history and approach.

"Don't you look sporty," he says, eyes traveling from my ponytail to my sneakers. "The eco-warrior goes athletic."

"Let's get this over with."

"That's the spirit." He lowers his voice. "The cameras are by the pool deck. Try to look like you don't want to murder me."

"I make no promises."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

A whistle blows, and the event coordinator calls all couples to the starting line. I count twelve pairs, all gazing adoringly at each other. Then there's us.

"Welcome to the Lover's Obstacle Course!" the coordinator announces into a microphone. "You and your partner will tackle eight challenges designed to test your communication, trust, and physical connection."

Physical connection?

"First up, the Tunnel of Love—you'll be tied together as you crawl through. Then the Trust Fall, followed by the Heart-to-Heart Balance Beam..."

I stop listening, calculating how many environmental sins I can document to make this humiliation worthwhile.

"Remember," the coordinator continues, "the winning couple gets a romantic sunset dinner on our private island tomorrow!"

"We're going to win that," Ethan whispers.

"Why would I want a romantic dinner with you?"

"Because the private island has the only nesting ground for endangered sea turtles in this part of the Caribbean." He smiles at my surprised expression. "Did your research miss that?"

Before I can answer, staff members approach with silk scarves, tying us together at

the wrist.

“Is this really necessary?” I ask as a twenty-something crew member secures my left wrist to Ethan’s right.

“Absolutely!” he chirps. “It symbolizes the bonds of love!”

“More like the bonds of a hostage situation,” I mutter.

Ethan chuckles. “Think of it as research. Extensive, humiliating research.”

The whistle blows again, and we’re off. The Tunnel of Love turns out to be a long, fabric-covered crawl space. Being tied to Ethan means our coordination is nonexistent—every time I move forward, he yanks me in a different direction.

“Could you—ow!—stop pulling?”

“I’m not pulling, you’re pushing.”

“We need to move together,” I hiss, acutely aware of how that sounds.

“That’s what I’ve been saying.” His grin is insufferable. “On three. One, two...”

We synchronize our movements and make it through the tunnel, stumbling into daylight to applause from the audience. Cameras flash. Ethan waves to the crowd with our bound hands, forcing me to wave too. I contemplate breaking his fingers.

The Trust Fall is next. I’m supposed to close my eyes and fall backward, trusting Ethan to catch me. Not happening.

“I’ll fall first,” he offers, sensing my hesitation.

“Fine.”

He turns his back to me and falls without warning. I catch him—barely—staggering under his weight.

“A little warning next time!”

“I trusted you,” he says innocently. “Your turn.”

I turn around, my back to his chest, and stand rigid.

“Relax,” he murmurs close to my ear. “I won’t drop you.”

“You’d better not.”

I close my eyes and let myself fall backward. His arms catch me securely, strong and steady. The contact is brief but unsettling—I haven’t been this close to anyone in months, and it has to be him?

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

The Heart-to-Heart Balance Beam is even worse. We have to face each other on a narrow beam, holding hands, and sidestep from one end to the other. Our bound wrists make it extra challenging.

“Eyes on me,” Ethan instructs as we step onto the beam. “Don’t look down.”

I meet his gaze reluctantly. His eyes are an impossible shade that makes the Caribbean Sea look dull by comparison.

“Small steps,” he continues. “I’ve got you.”

We inch along the beam, his grip firm on my free hand. I’m intensely aware of every point of contact between us—our clasped hands, our bound wrists, the occasional brush of knees. I focus on keeping my balance, not on how solid he feels or how his attention never wavers from my face.

We’re midway across when someone in the crowd shouts Ethan’s name. Startled, I wobble, losing my footing. Ethan reacts instantly, pulling me toward him. I crash against his chest as we both lose balance, tumbling off the beam.

We land with a thud on the safety mat below, me sprawled on top of him, our faces inches apart. His arm instinctively wraps around my waist.

“Are you okay?” he asks, sounding genuinely concerned.

I’m pinned against him, acutely aware of his body beneath mine, his heartbeat against my palm where it’s splayed across his chest.

“I’m fine,” I manage. “Just my dignity that’s bruised.”

The crowd whoops and cheers. Someone wolf-whistles. I scramble to get up, but our bound wrists make it awkward.

“Hold still,” Ethan murmurs, shifting to help me untangle. His proximity is dizzying. “Let’s try this again.”

He gets to his feet first, then pulls me up with surprising gentleness. The cameras are going crazy, and I realize what this must look like—me falling into the arms of the man I supposedly hate, our bodies pressed together.

“You did that on purpose,” I accuse under my breath.

“Believe me, if I’d planned it, our landing would have been more graceful.” He brushes imaginary dust from my shoulder. “Ready to continue kicking everyone else’s ass?”

Despite everything, I almost smile at his competitive tone.

We tackle the remaining obstacles with increasing coordination—the Three-Legged Race (we come in second), the LoveLift (where Ethan had to hold me overhead, which he did with exasperating ease), the Whisper Challenge (we fail spectacularly), and finally, the Heart Puzzle (which we complete first, thanks to my pattern recognition skills).

By the last challenge, I’m sweating, laughing despite myself, and forgetting to look like I can’t stand him. The crowd loves it, shouting encouragement as we sprint toward the finish line, still awkwardly bound together.

We cross in first place. The crowd erupts in cheers. Ethan throws our bound hands up

in victory, pulling me into a half-hug that catches me off guard. Cameras flash from every angle.

“Congratulations to our winners!” the coordinator announces. “Mr. Cole and Dr. Bennett have earned themselves a romantic sunset dinner!”

Ethan beams at the crowd, then at me, his arm still around my shoulders.

“Get your arm off me,” I mutter through a fixed smile.

“The cameras, sweetheart,” he whispers back. “We’re giving them a show, remember?”

“You’re impossible.”

“The passengers are loving our enemies-to-lovers energy. Look.” He nods toward the crowd, where people are recording us on their phones, whispering excitedly.

“This is insane,” I hiss as we pose for official photos, still bound at the wrist. “I’m a scientist, not a reality TV contestant.”

Ethan leans close, his lips near my ear. “Admit it, that was fun.”

I shove him with my free hand, but there’s less venom in it than there should be. “The only thing I’ll admit is that you’re the most aggravating human I’ve ever met.”

He grins, completely unmoved by my hostility. “Just wait until Tantric Yoga this afternoon.”

“I am not doing yoga with you.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“We’ll see.” His smile is pure confidence. “You want that turtle data, don’t you?”

As we’re finally untied, I flex my wrist and study him. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Immensely.”

“This is pure manipulation.”

“I prefer to call it ‘creative problem-solving.’” He accepts two bottles of water from a crew member, handing one to me. “You threw champagne in my face, Harper. Consider us even.”

“We’re not even close to even.” I unscrew the water bottle. “And don’t call me Harper.”

“What should I call you, then? Sweetheart? Darling? Love muffin?”

I choke on my water. “Do that and I’ll throw something much worse than champagne at you.”

He laughs, the sound genuine and warm. “There she is. I was worried you were starting to like me after our victorious performance.”

“In your dreams, Cole.”

His eyes meet mine, teasing and altogether too knowing. “We’ll talk after yoga, Dr. Bennett.”

As he walks away, nodding to admirers and posing for selfies, I stand frozen, water bottle half-raised to my lips.

What have I gotten myself into?

More importantly, how am I going to survive two hours of Tantric Yoga with a man I want to throttle but just spent an hour pressed against in various compromising positions?

I need a battle plan. And a very cold shower.

Because one thing is becoming dangerously clear. Ethan Cole might be obnoxious, arrogant, and manipulative, but he's also charming, quick-witted, and disturbingly attractive when he laughs.

And that makes him far more dangerous than I anticipated.

## Chapter Four

ETHAN

TANTRIC WHAT NOW?

I should probably feel guilty about forcing Harper into couples' activities. The yoga especially might be pushing it. But after watching her stomp away from the obstacle course, still flushed from exertion and irritation, guilt is not what I'm feeling.

I'm in my suite, showered and changed into board shorts and a t-shirt, when my phone rings. Alex is, right on schedule.

"Please tell me that video of you two falling on top of each other is strategic and not

an actual workplace harassment lawsuit waiting to happen,” she says by way of greeting.

“Good afternoon to you too.” I stretch out on the sofa, still pleasantly tired from the obstacle course. “And yes, it’s strategic. Dr. Bennett and I have an understanding.”

“An understanding where she looks like she wants to push you overboard?”

“That’s just her natural expression around me.” I grin, remembering Harper’s furious whispers during the Trust Fall. “The important thing is we won the competition. Social media is eating it up.”

“I’ve noticed.” Keys click in the background as Alexis presumably checks the latest metrics. “Your approval rating among environmentally conscious demographics is up twelve points since yesterday.”

“See? The champagne incident was the best thing that could have happened.”

“Great thesis. Terrible methodology.” She sighs. “Just tell me you’re not torturing this woman.”

I hesitate a beat too long.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Ethan.”

“We’re taking part in ship activities that highlight our sustainable programs. It’s a win-win.”

“What’s the next ‘win-win’ activity?”

“Tantric yoga.”

Alexis makes a choking sound. “You’re doing tantric yoga with Dr. Harper Bennett? The woman who called your Green Ocean Initiative ‘a pathetic attempt to greenwash industrial-scale destruction’?”

“That’s the one.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“It’s just yoga,” I protest, though we both know it’s not just yoga. “Besides, she needs access to our environmental data, and I need positive press. This arrangement works for everyone.”

“Until she murders you in your sleep.”

“She’s warming up to me.”

Alexis snorts. “Is that what you call it when someone looks at you like they’re mentally calculating how long it would take your body to sink to the ocean floor?”

“She’s passionate about her work. I respect that.”

“Uh-huh.” Her tone drips skepticism. “Just remember, we need her endorsement for the initiative, not another viral video of her attempting bodily harm.”

“Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

“Famous last words.” She pauses. “The Mako board is watching this situation closely. Don’t screw it up.”

“When have I ever screwed up?”

“Do you want that alphabetically or chronologically?”

I laugh. “I’ll handle it. Harper Bennett will be singing our praises by the time this cruise ends.”

“Just make sure she doesn’t end up singing your eulogy instead.”

After hanging up, I check social media. The obstacle course video is trending, with most comments speculating about the “obvious chemistry” between Harper and me. A few environmental accounts are accusing her of selling out, which I should probably warn her about before she checks her phone.

A knock at the door interrupts my scrolling. I open it to find the ship’s yoga instructor, a serene-looking woman in flowing linen.

“Mr. Cole? I’m Devi, your tantric instructor for this afternoon.” She hands me a folded set of white cotton clothes. “These are traditional for the practice. I wanted to discuss some modifications to the standard routine, given the... unique nature of your partnership with Dr. Bennett.”

“Modifications?”

“The standard couple’s tantric yoga includes significant physical contact and breathwork designed to enhance intimacy.” She smiles diplomatically. “I observed your obstacle course performance earlier. Perhaps a less... provocative approach would be appropriate?”

I consider this. On one hand, toning down the session might prevent Harper from murdering me. On the other hand...

“Devi, I think the traditional approach will be perfect.” I accept the clothes with a smile. “Dr. Bennett is committed to experiencing the full range of the ship’s activities for her assessment.”

“If you’re certain.” She looks dubious. “The full program includes partner massage, shared breathing exercises, and several poses that require extensive contact.”

“Sounds educational.”

“Very well.” She hands me a brochure. “The session begins at 2 PM in the Crystal Pavilion. Please arrive fifteen minutes early for centering meditation.”

After she leaves, I examine the white cotton outfit—loose pants and a sleeveless top. Simple, comfortable, and definitely not what Harper is expecting.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

I grab my phone to text her a heads-up, then reconsider. The element of surprise seems more entertaining.

At 1:45, I make my way to the Crystal Pavilion, a glass-enclosed space on the top deck with panoramic ocean views. The room has been transformed into a yoga sanctuary—dim lighting, incense burning, soft instrumental music playing. Purple yoga mats are arranged in pairs throughout the space, each with white candles and rose petals scattered around them.

It's ridiculous, but also oddly peaceful. I find a mat near the windows and sit cross-legged, watching the door.

Harper arrives on time, wearing a standard tank top and yoga pants, looking around with undisguised suspicion. When she spots me, her eyes narrow.

"What is all this?" she demands, approaching my mat. "It looks like a Valentine's Day explosion."

"Tantric yoga." I gesture to the white clothes folded beside me. "Those are for you. The bathrooms through that door if you want to change."

She picks up the outfit, examining it skeptically. "I'm not wearing this."

"It's traditional. Breathable cotton, ethically sourced. Very sustainable."

She rolls her eyes but takes the clothes and disappears into the bathroom. When she returns, I have to work to keep my expression neutral. The simple white outfit

shouldn't be sexy—it's essentially loose-fitting pajamas—but something about Harper in flowing white fabric, her hair pulled into a messy bun, has my pulse quickening.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she mutters, dropping onto the mat beside mine.

“Like what?”

“Like you're enjoying this.”

I am enjoying this, but not for the reasons she assumes. “The white looks nice with your hair.”

She glares, but there's a hint of pink in her cheeks. “Let's get one thing straight, Cole. I'm here for the environmental data. That's it.”

“Of course.”

“So, whatever this tantric nonsense is, keep it professional.”

I raise my hands in mock surrender. “I'm just following the instructor's guidance like everyone else.”

She glances around the room, where five other couples are settling onto mats, all in matching white outfits. “Where is the instructor, anyway?”

On cue, Devi enters, floating to the center of the room in flowing white linen. “Welcome, beautiful souls. Today we embark on a journey of connection, trust, and shared energy through the ancient practice of tantric yoga.”

Harper shoots me a murderous look. I smile innocently.

“Tantric yoga,” Devi continues, “is about recognizing the divine masculine and feminine energies within each partner, and learning to channel that energy between you. Please sit facing your partner, knees touching.”

The other couples immediately adjust. Harper stays frozen.

“Dr. Bennett,” Devi calls. “Please face your partner.”

With visible reluctance, Harper turns to face me, our knees almost but not quite touching.

“Closer,” Devi instructs. “Energy cannot flow through space.”

Harper inches forward until our knees brush. Even this minimal contact seems to agitate her.

“Now,” Devi says, “place your right hand over your partner’s heart, and your left hand over their right hand on your heart.”

“Absolutely not,” Harper whispers.

“Problem, Dr. Bennett?” Devi asks.

“I’m not comfortable with this level of physical contact.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Devi approaches our mat. “The purpose is to align your breathing and heartbeats. It’s quite scientific, actually. Studies show that partners who synchronize their physiological rhythms experience enhanced communication and problem-solving abilities.”

I bite back a smile as Harper processes this—Devi’s played the science card. After a moment of internal struggle visible on her face, Harper places her right hand against my chest. I mirror the action, my palm resting lightly over her heart. Her pulse races beneath my touch.

“Now the left hand,” Devi reminds us.

Harper places her left hand over mine, and I do the same. We’re holding each other’s hands against our chests. Her skin is warm, her fingers slightly calloused—the hands of someone who does fieldwork, not just lab research.

“Close your eyes,” Devi instructs. “Breathe together. Inhale for four counts, hold for four, exhale for six. Feel your partner’s heartbeat. Allow your rhythms to synchronize.”

I close my eyes, focusing on Harper’s pulse beneath my palm. It’s rapid at first, but gradually slows as we breathe together. Despite her obvious discomfort with the situation, she’s following the instructions—inhaling when I do, holding, exhaling slowly.

“The breath is our most intimate connection to life,” Devi says, her voice soft as she moves around the room. “When we share our breath with another, we share our

essence.”

I open one eye to find Harper watching me. She closes her eyes when she realizes I’ve caught her.

“Now, maintain that connection as you move into your first pose,” Devi continues. “Partners, please sit with your backs against each other, legs extended in front of you.”

This position is easier—no eye contact, just the press of Harper’s back against mine as we sit up straight. Her posture is impeccable.

“Reach your arms up and back, holding your partner’s hands above your heads.”

We follow the instruction, my hands finding hers in the air above us. Her fingers link with mine.

“Now slowly bend forward, allowing your partner to bend backward, stretching their spine over yours. Then reverse.”

I wait for Harper to resist, but she leans forward, pulling me into a gentle backbend over her. The stretch feels incredible after the obstacle course this morning. When we reverse positions, I support her weight easily as she arches back.

“Great work, everyone,” Devi praises. “Now let’s transition to a more challenging pose. Face your partner again, sitting cross-legged, knees touching. Extend your arms and grasp your partner’s forearms.”

We adjust positions, Harper’s grip firm on my forearms as we create a closed circle with our arms.

“Now, maintaining this connection, both partners stand up.”

It takes coordination, but we rise to our feet without breaking contact, or a hip. We’re standing close, arms linked, faces less than a foot apart.

“Beautiful. Now for Flying Lotus. The heavier partner will ground themselves while the lighter partner leans back, creating counter-tension.”

“Ready?”

Harper nods, then slowly leans back, her weight pulling against our linked arms. I counterbalance, keeping her suspended at a 45-degree angle to the floor.

“Trust your partner,” Devi encourages. “Let go of resistance.”

To my surprise, Harper does exactly that—she relaxes into the pose, her body forming a graceful arc, supported entirely by our connection.

“Switch,” Devi calls.

Now it’s my turn to lean back, trusting Harper to support my weight. She’s stronger than she looks, holding me steady despite our size difference. For a moment, we’re balanced, each supporting the other.

“Wonderful,” Devi says. “Now release slowly and return to your mats for the next sequence.”

The “next sequence” turns out to be even more intimate—seated poses with Harper in my lap, then me in hers, followed by synchronized movements that have us flowing around each other like water, always maintaining some point of contact.

To my surprise, Harper takes part. She's obviously does yoga, her movements fluid and precise. When Devi corrects our form, Harper adjusts without complaint. It's the longest we've spent in each other's presence without arguing.

"Our final pose," Devi announces after forty-five minutes of increasingly complex positions, "is Lotus Blossom. Partners, sit facing each other, legs crossed but overlapping so your knees rest in the spaces between your partner's knees. Take each other's wrists and lean back."

We assume the position, our legs interlocked, hands gripping each other's wrists. It's the most physically intertwined we've been, and I can sense Harper's tension.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Now, lean forward until your foreheads touch. Close your eyes and breathe together.”

Harper hesitates, then leans in. Our foreheads meet, and I can feel her breath against my lips. Her skin is warm against mine, a few strands of her auburn hair tickling my cheek. We breathe in unison, and for a moment, everything else fades away—the room, the other couples, the absurdity of how we got here.

“Feel the energy flowing between you,” Devi murmurs, somewhere in the distance. “Acknowledge what your partner brings to your life—the challenges, the growth, the balance.”

Harper’s grip on my wrists tightens. I wonder what she’s thinking, what she sees in me beyond the arrogant CEO she believes I am.

“Slowly release, keeping your eyes closed. Place your palms together between you in gratitude for what you’ve shared.”

We separate, and I immediately miss the contact. Harper’s eyes remain closed as she brings her palms to meet mine, our hands pressed together in the traditional prayer position. Her face is serene, the perpetual furrow between her brows temporarily smoothed away.

“Open your eyes and bow to the divine in your partner. Namaste.”

Harper’s eyes flutter open, meeting mine. “Namaste,” she whispers, inclining her head slightly.

“Namaste,” I reply, mirroring her.

For a suspended moment, we remain connected by our pressed palms and locked gaze. Then Devi instructs everyone to lie down for final relaxation, and the spell breaks.

We lie side by side on our mats, not touching but close enough that I can hear Harper’s breathing. Devi guides us through a meditation, but my mind refuses to settle. I’m hyper-aware of Harper beside me, of how different she looks with her guard down.

“Thank you for sharing your energy today,” Devi says after several minutes of silence. “Please take a moment to appreciate your experience before rejoining the world outside.”

Harper sits up first, reaching for her water bottle. I follow, watching her. She looks... different. Relaxed.

“That was unexpected,” I say quietly.

She takes a sip of water. “You mean you didn’t plan for me to end up in your lap for an hour?”

“I planned for you to argue more.”

A hint of a smile touches her lips. “Don’t get used to it.”

“You’re good at yoga.”

“I practice every morning.” She recaps her water bottle. “It helps me think.”

We sit in comfortable silence as the other couples gather their things and drift out. Devi approaches with two cups of tea.

“You have wonderful energy together,” she says, handing us each a steaming cup. “Very balanced despite the surface tension.”

Harper accepts the tea with a polite smile. “It was... educational.”

“Many couples find tantric practices transformative for their communication.” Devi beams at us. “I hope you’ll join my sunrise session tomorrow.”

After she moves away, Harper turns to me. “That’s not happening.”

“No? I thought we made an excellent tantric team.”

She rolls her eyes, but there’s less hostility than usual. “Does your shamelessness know no limits?”

“Not that I’ve discovered so far.” I sip my tea, which tastes of ginger and something floral. “Admit it, though—that was not so bad.”

She glares me over her cup. “It was less horrific than the obstacle course.”

Coming from Harper, this is a rave review.

“So,” I say, “are we still on for Midnight Confessions tonight?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

The relaxed expression vanishes. “Absolutely not. I’ve humiliated myself enough for one day.”

“It’s not humiliating. Just a casual conversation about relationships broadcast to the entire ship and livestreamed on the cruise’s social media.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re joking.”

“About the livestream? No, that’s very real. But we can control the conversation.” I put down my cup. “Think of it as an opportunity to promote environmental awareness to a captive audience.”

“By pretending to be in a relationship with you?”

“By showcasing how different perspectives can find common ground.” I lean closer, lowering my voice. “Isn’t that exactly what environmental advocacy needs? To reach people who wouldn’t normally listen?”

She narrows her eyes, sensing my manipulation but also considering my point.

“Besides,” I add, “you still want that data, right?”

“You’re holding my research hostage.”

“I prefer to think of it as incentivizing cooperation.”

Harper stands, gathering up her regular clothes. “I’ll do the interview. But I’m picking

the topics.”

“Deal.” It’s a couple chat, but I will wait for her to realize that on her own.

“And I want access to that turtle nesting databefore dinner.”

I stand, amused by her negotiation tactics. “Half before dinner, half after you complete the interview.”

“Fine.” She heads toward the changing room, then pauses. “One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“If you so much as hint at anything physical between us during this interview, I will scientifically identify the most painful pressure point on the male body and demonstrate it on you in front of the livestream audience.”

I can’t help grinning. “Your terms are accepted, Dr. Bennett.”

She disappears into the changing room, but not before I catch the slight curve of her lips—not quite a smile, but definitely not her usual scowl.

Progress.

My phone buzzes with a text from Alexis:

Update on the yoga situation?

I type back:

No bloodshed. Possible breakthrough. She’s agreed to the evening interview.

Miracle worker or masochist? Hard to tell with you.

I glance toward the changing room door, thinking of Harper's focused expression during our practice, the way she eventually surrendered to the flow of movement between us, the brief moment of connection when our foreheads touched.

Maybe both.

I reply.

The truth is, I'm enjoying this game far more than I should. Harper Bennett is brilliant, principled, and absolutely unwilling to pander to me because of my name or wealth. She's also beautiful, especially when she's furious or—as I just discovered—when she's centered and calm.

None of which changes the fact that she fundamentally disapproves of my company and probably hates me as a person. Or that I need her endorsement for business reasons, not personal ones.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

This is strategic, not romantic. The flutter in my chest when she almost smiled just now. Pure satisfaction at my plan working.

Nothing more.

Harper emerges from the changing room, back in her regular clothes, all business once again. “I’ll see you at eight. Don’t be late.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

She walks away without looking back, but there’s a new bounce in her stride—she less rigid, more fluid. The yoga did its job.

I change back into my regular clothes, I’m looking forward to tonight’s interview with an enthusiasm that has worryingly little to do with public relations.

Chapter Five

HARPER

TRUTH OR DISASTER?

“This is a nightmare,” I mutter, studying my reflection in the bathroom mirror. The makeup artist the cruise provided has disappeared, leaving me alone to contemplate what I’ve become.

My hair falls in soft waves around my shoulders that the wind will wreck the minute I

get out on the deck. My eyes are dramatically lined in a way I'd never manage on my own, if I attempted this look, I'd be able to join an emo band. My lips painted a deep rose color that is way too provocative for a scientific discussion about ocean conservation.

The dress they've given me to wear is worse—a sea-foam green silk that hugs my curves and dips low in the back. It's beautiful, but it's not me. Alos not very ethical or environmentally friendly. I'm a scientist who spends most days in rash guards and wetsuits, not... whatever this flowy fuss-up is.

I snap a selfie and text it to my best friend Zoe with the caption:

SOS. I've been kidnapped by a luxury cruise and forced into formal wear.

She responds:

WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HARPER?

Followed by:

Also, you look HOT. Is this for Billionaire Boy?

I grimace at her nickname for Ethan. After the yoga session this afternoon, I'd made the mistake of calling Zoe to vent about the situation. She'd been way too delighted by the entire saga, particularly the part where I'd been tangled up with Ethan for an hour.

It's for a broadcasted interview, I text back.

About environmental issues.

Sure it is. That's why they glammed you up like a Bond girl.

I put the phone down before her comments make me change my mind about the whole thing. I've spent the hours since yoga trying to forget the unsettling experience—not because it was awful, but because it wasn't.

There'd been a rhythm to our movements, a synchronicity I hadn't expected. And that final pose, our foreheads touching, breathing in unison... it had felt intimate.

Which is precisely why I need to get my head on straight before this interview. Ethan Cole is manipulating me, using my need for environmental data to boost his public image. The fact that he smells good and has gentle hands doesn't change that.

A knock at the cabin door pulls me from my thoughts. I open it to find Ethan standing there in a tailored navy suit that costs more than my years research grant. His eyes widen slightly as they travel from my face down to my dress and back.

"You look..." He pauses, seeming to search for the right word. "Different."

I cross my arms. "Is that your version of a compliment?"

"No, my idea of a compliment would be that you look stunning, but I wasn't sure that would go over well given our current dynamic."

I blink, caught off guard by his honesty. "Oh."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“For the record, though,” he adds, offering his arm, “you look stunning.”

I ignore his outstretched arm. “This isn’t a date.”

“No, it’s a televised interview where we’re supposed to appear as if we don’t want to kill each other.” He keeps his arm extended. “Which might be more convincing if we aren’t standing three feet apart.”

He has a point, however irritating. I reluctantly place my hand on his arm, trying to ignore how solid he feels beneath the expensive fabric of his suit.

“I’ve reviewed the format,” he says as we walk toward the elevator. “Standard love-cruise fare—how we met, what attracted us to each other, most romantic moments. I figured we could redirect most questions toward environmental topics.”

“You think they’ll let us turn a romance segment into a climate change PSA?”

“They will if I insist on it.” He presses the elevator button. “I’ve told the host you’re passionate about marine conservation and that’s what attracted me to you initially.”

“That’s actually... not terrible.”

The elevator arrives, and he gestures for me to enter first. “I do occasionally have good ideas, Dr. Bennett.”

“Occasionally being the operative word.”

Once we're alone in the elevator, Ethan's expression is more serious. "There's something you should know before we go on air."

My stomach tightens. "What?"

"Some environmental accounts are questioning your integrity for joining in these activities with me. Calling it selling out."

I freeze. "What? Show me."

He pulls out his phone and opens Twitter, displaying several posts from prominent environmental activists criticizing me for "cozying up to the enemy" and "betraying the cause." My heart sinks as I scroll through the comments.

"These people used to respect me," I say quietly.

"They still would if they knew the entire story." Ethan takes his phone back. "We could tell them."

"Tell them what? That you're blackmailing me with research data?"

"I prefer to think of it as an exchange of services." The elevator stops, and he places his hand lightly on my lower back as the doors open. "But yes, we could explain that you're investigating our sustainability claims."

The warmth of his palm against my bare skin is distracting. "Which would defeat the purpose of your PR stunt."

"Not necessarily." We walk through the opulent lobby toward the Starlight Deck. "It could show transparency—Cole Tech so confident in our environmental initiatives that we invited a vocal critic to evaluate them from the inside."

I glance at him skeptically. “That’s actually... smart.”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“I’m trying to reconcile the person who orchestrated my public humiliation with the one proposing a reasonable solution.”

He grins. “We all have more than one side to us, Dr. Bennett.”

Before I can respond, we’re intercepted by a woman with an iPad and a headset. “Mr. Cole, Dr. Bennett! Perfect timing. We’re set up on the Starlight Deck. You’ll be on in five minutes.”

She ushers us through glass doors onto a deck transformed into an outdoor broadcasting studio. Plush love seats face a glittering ocean backdrop, with studio lights positioned to catch the moonlight reflecting off the water. A crowd has already gathered in a cordoned-off area to watch the filming.

“This is... elaborate,” I whisper to Ethan.

“The Love Confessions segment is quite popular.” He keeps his hand at my back, steering me toward the host—a polished woman in her forties with a professional smile.

“Mr. Cole, Dr. Bennett! I’m Victoria Wells, your host for tonight.” She shakes our hands. “We’re so excited to have you both. The ship is buzzing about your whirlwind romance.”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“It’s certainly been unexpected,” I manage.

“We have so many questions for you! Your champagne moment has gone viral, and then today’s obstacle course victory—the audience is dying to know your story.”

A makeup artist descends on us for last-minute touch-ups while Victoria reviews her notes. Ethan leans close to my ear.

“Remember, this is your chance to talk about ocean conservation to thousands of viewers.”

“And your chance to look like less of an eco-villain,” I whisper back.

“Win-win.”

The floor director counts down from ten, and suddenly the lights brighten as Victoria beams at the camera.

“Good evening and welcome to Midnight Confessions, coming to you live from The Rendezvous!” Her voice is smooth and practiced. “I’m Victoria Wells, and tonight we have a very special couple joining us—tech billionaire Ethan Cole and renowned marine biologist Dr. Harper Bennett!”

The audience applauds as the camera swings to us. I force a smile, trying to look less like I’m facing a firing squad.

“Now, your romance has captivated everyone on board,” Victoria continues.

“Especially after that dramatic first encounter that went viral! Ethan, tell us, what was going through your mind when Harper threw that champagne in your face?”

Ethan laughs, the sound so natural you’d never guess this entire situation is scripted. “Honestly? My first thought was, ‘I deserved that.’”

Victoria looks delighted. “And did you?”

“Harper and I met under... professional circumstances initially,” he says smoothly. “I’m afraid I was dismissive of her environmental concerns about some of our technology. The champagne was her way of making sure I paid attention.”

“And are you paying attention now?” Victoria asks with a suggestive smile.

“Absolutely.” Ethan turns to me, his expression earnest. “Dr. Bennett is one of the foremost experts on marine ecosystems. Her research on coral reef preservation has influenced environmental policy worldwide. I’d be a fool not to listen to her expertise.”

I stare at him, surprised by the accurate but flattering assessment of my work. He’s done his homework.

“Harper,” Victoria shifts her focus to me, “what attracted you to Ethan after such a... fiery beginning?”

Here we go. I take a deep breath, deciding to follow Ethan’s lead with a version of the truth.

“Initially, nothing,” I say honestly, drawing laughs from the audience. “I viewed Ethan as representing corporate interests that often prioritize profit over planetary health.”

Victoria's smile falters, not expecting this direction.

"But," I continue, "I've been invited to evaluate The Rendezvous' sustainability initiatives, and Ethan has been... open to critical feedback." This much is true—he hasn't once tried to prevent me from documenting the ship's environmental issues.

"So, it's his environmental consciousness that won you over?" Victoria presses, fishing for a more romantic angle.

"That and his willingness to engage with opposing viewpoints," I say. "Too often, environmental discourse becomes an echo chamber. Real progress happens when different perspectives find common ground."

Ethan's hand finds mine on the sofa between us, squeezing gently in approval. The camera zooms in on our clasped hands.

"Well, you two found some common ground during today's obstacle course," Victoria says, as footage from our fall plays on a screen behind her. "That was quite a moment!"

My cheeks heat at the sight of me sprawled across Ethan's chest, his arms wrapped around me protectively. It looks far more intimate on camera than it felt in the moment.

"The important thing is that we won," Ethan says smoothly, saving me from having to respond. "Which means we'll be visiting the private island tomorrow—home to an endangered sea turtle nesting site that Harper has been eager to document."

"Ah, so your romantic dinner will double as a research opportunity?" Victoria seems amused by this unorthodox date plan.

“The most romantic thing Ethan could offer me is access to environmental data,” I say, only half-joking.

“She’s not kidding,” Ethan adds with a laugh. “Harper’s passion for marine conservation is what I admire most about her.”

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Victoria leans forward. “And what do you admire most about Ethan, Harper?”

I falter, not having prepared for this question. Ethan watches me with badly concealed interest, curious about what I’ll say.

“His... adaptability,” I answer. “When faced with new information, some people double down on their existing beliefs. Ethan is willing to reconsider his position.” I meet his eyes. “It’s a rare quality, especially in someone as successful and stubborn as he is.”

Something changes in his expression—surprise, followed by what almost looks like genuine pleasure at the almost compliment.

“Now, we have a little game we like to play with our couples,” Victoria announces, derailing my thoughts. “It’s called Truth or Confession. I’ll ask a question, and you each write your answer on these cards. Then we reveal them simultaneously.”

She hands us each a small whiteboard and marker. “First question: What was your first impression of your partner? Write it down, no peeking!”

I hesitate, then write: Arrogant but annoyingly smart.

“Reveal!” Victoria commands after a moment.

I turn my board. Next to me, Ethan reveals his: Beautiful and terrifying.

The audience “awws” while I stare at his answer. Beautiful?

“Terrifying?” Victoria repeats, amused.

“Have you seen her take down environmental offenders at scientific conferences?” Ethan asks the audience. “It’s both impressive and absolutely terrifying.”

“Next question,” Victoria continues. “What is your partner’s most endearing habit?”

I draw a blank. What do I know about Ethan’s habits, endearing or otherwise? I write: He actually listens when I talk about marine ecosystems.

Ethan’s board reads: She tugs her hair when she’s thinking deeply about something.

I blink at him. I do tug my hair when I’m concentrating—a habit my mother has been trying to break since childhood. How has he noticed that in the short time we’ve known each other?

Victoria looks thrilled by this exchange. “How romantic that you’ve noticed such specific details about each other! Last question: Where do you see this relationship going?”

My mind races. What’s the right answer here? Too positive seems fake, too negative ruins the charade. I settle on: Taking it one day at a time, focused on our shared environmental goals.

When we reveal our answers, Ethan’s reads: Wherever Harper wants it to go.

The audience swoons. I fight the urge to roll my eyes, though something about his answer makes my stomach flutter traitorously.

“Well, there you have it, folks! The most intriguing couple on The Rendezvous!” Victoria turns to the camera. “We’ll be following Ethan and Harper’s romantic

journey throughout the week, including their private island date tomorrow evening!”

The cameras continue rolling as Victoria asks follow-up questions about our backgrounds and interests. Ethan steers the conversation toward environmental topics whenever possible, highlighting Cole Tech’s sustainability initiatives while acknowledging areas where they’re still “working to improve”—with my consultation, he adds.

By the time the interview concludes, I’ve discussed coral reef preservation, plastic pollution, and sustainable tourism to an audience that tuned in expecting romantic fluff. It’s a win, even if I had to endure Victoria’s knowing smiles every time Ethan’s hand brushed mine.

“Thank you both,” Victoria says as the cameras stop rolling. “That was fantastic! The chemistry between you two is electric. I predict we’ll be covering your wedding within a year!”

I choke on air while Ethan chuckles. “One step at a time, Victoria.”

Once she walks away to speak with her producer, I turn to him. “That was...”

“Not terrible?” he supplies.

“Actually productive,” I admit. “I didn’t expect to get in so many talking points about conservation.”

“That was my plan.” He stands, offering his hand to help me up. “Shall we get a drink? I think we’ve earned one.”

The night air is warm as we make our way to a less crowded section of the deck. The full moon reflects off the water, casting everything in silver light. A server brings us

champagne—"Not for throwing," Ethan jokes—and we find a quiet spot by the railing.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Beautiful night,” Ethan observes, leaning against the rail beside me.

“It is.” I take a sip of champagne, studying the stars. “You know, light pollution makes it impossible to see stars like this in most coastal cities. It disrupts marine life cycles, especially for species that use the moon for navigation.”

“Like sea turtles.”

I glance at him, surprised. “Yes, exactly. Hatchlings follow the brightest horizon, which should be moonlight reflecting off the ocean, but artificial lighting confuses them.”

“I know. That’s why our private island has strict lighting protocols during nesting season.” He sips his champagne. “No exterior lights after sunset, only red wavelength illumination when necessary.”

“That’s impressive.”

“You sound shocked that I might know something about environmental conservation.”

“Not shocked. Just...” I search for the right word. “Recalibrating my assumptions.”

“Such as?”

“Such as you only care about the environment when it generates positive PR, or money.”

He turns to face me, his expression serious in the moonlight. “My motives aren’t that simple, Harper.”

“Then explain them to me.”

He’s quiet for a moment, looking out over the water. “When I was twelve, my grandfather took me diving at a coral reef in the Caribbean. It was the most amazing thing I’d ever seen—like an underwater city, teeming with life and color. We went back every summer.”

His voice softens. “When I was twenty, we returned to find it bleached and dying. My grandfather was devastated. He’d spent his life building ships that contributed to the very pollution destroying what he loved.”

“So, this is about legacy? Atoning for family sins?”

“Partly,” he admits. “But it’s also about innovation. The shipping industry isn’t going away, but it can evolve. My ocean technology initiatives aren’t just PR stunts—they’re attempts to find solutions that balance human needs with environmental protection.”

“Your seabed mining drones?—”

“Are designed to be less destructive than traditional methods,” he interrupts. “Not perfect, I know. But better. And with input from scientists like you, they could be better still.”

I study him in the moonlight, trying to reconcile this thoughtful man with the corporate villain I’ve constructed in my mind. “Why didn’t you lead with this instead of forcing me into ridiculous couples’ activities?”

He smiles. “Would you have listened to me if I had?”

“Probably not,” I admit.

“Besides, the couples’ activities are accomplishing what we both want—you get a platform for environmental advocacy, I get to show that Cole Tech values environmental scientists, even when they’re critical of us.”

“And the fact that it’s embarrassing for me is just a bonus?”

“The benefits of watching you blush every time Victoria mentioned our ‘chemistry’ were incidental.” His grin turns teasing. “Though I must say, ‘arrogant but annoyingly smart’ might be the nicest thing you’ve said about me so far. I should put it on my Tinder bio.”

I roll my eyes, but fight a smile. “Don’t let it go to your head. You don’t have a Tinder bio, rich moguls don’t need Tinder.”

“Too late.” He clinks his glass against mine. “To productive embarrassment.”

I hesitate, then surrender to the toast. “To productive embarrassment.”

We drink in silence, watching the moonlight on the waves. After a moment, Ethan speaks again. “You never answered Victoria’s question, by the way.”

“Which one?”

“What you admire about me.”

“I said your adaptability.”

“That’s a professional assessment. You’re not HR, I’m curious what you really think.”

I consider ignoring the question, but something about the night, the champagne, and our unexpectedly honest conversation makes me answer truthfully.

“Your confidence,” I say finally. “Not the arrogance—though there’s plenty of that—but the genuine self-assurance. You know who you are, and you don’t apologize for it.” I take another sip of champagne. “It’s irritating, but impressive.”

He looks surprised, then pleased by my answer. “Thank you. That’s... not what I expected you to say.”

“What did you expect?”

“Something about my devastating good looks or charm.”

I snort. “Your ego doesn’t need to be fed, it needs a diet.”

He laughs, the sound warm and genuine. “Fair enough.”

Our eyes meet, and for a moment—the antagonism giving way to something less hostile but more dangerous. His gaze drops briefly to my lips before returning to my eyes.

I should step back, and make an excuse to leave. Instead, I find myself frozen in place as Ethan moves closer.

“Harper,” he says softly, “about tomorrow’s dinner?—”

“Mr. Cole!” A crew member approaches, breaking the moment. “Sorry to interrupt, but your uncle is on the phone in the executive office. He says it’s urgent.”

Ethan steps back, the intimate mood evaporating. “Thank you. Tell him I’ll be right there.” He turns to me with a look of regret. “Family business. I should take this.”

“Of course.” I’m grateful for the interruption, but still unsettled by whatever was happening between us. “It’s late, anyway. I should get some sleep before tomorrow.”

“I’ll have someone escort you to your cabin.”

“I’m perfectly capable of finding my cabin. I have a PhD.”

“I know you are. But humor me.”

He signals to a crew member, then turns back to me. “I’ll pick you up at six tomorrow for the island. Wear something you can hike in—the turtle nesting site is a half-mile walk from the dining location.”

“So, it really will be dinner and research?”

“I promised you, didn’t I?” His expression turns serious again. “I keep my promises, Harper.”

Before I can respond, he leans in and brushes his lips against my cheek, so lightly I might have imagined it. “Goodnight, Dr. Bennett.”

Then he's gone, leaving me standing in the moonlight, my skin tingling where his lips touched it, thoroughly confused about what just happened. And even more confused about why I'm disappointed the crew member interrupted us when he did.

## Chapter Six

ETHAN

ISLAND HEAT

The private island comes into view as our speedboat cuts through azure waters. Grand Peak Island—named for the small mountain at its center—is the crown jewel of The Rendezvous' offerings. Most passengers visit for the pristine beaches and luxury amenities, unaware of the ecological research happening on the island's protected eastern shore.

"We're approaching, sir," the captain calls over the engine's purr.

Next to me, Harper leans forward, her attention fixed on the lush coastline. She's dressed practically today—khaki shorts, a light blue button-down tied at the waist, sturdy hiking boots. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and her face is free of the heavy makeup from last night's interview. She looks more like herself, and I prefer her this way.

"How much of the island is developed?" she asks, still scanning the shoreline.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“About thirty percent. The western beaches and cove area have the restaurants, spa, and beach facilities. The eastern half is a protected conservation zone.”

She turns to me, skeptical. “A genuine conservation zone or a ‘we put up a sign and call it conservation’ zone?”

“See for yourself.” I nod toward the dock. “We’ll visit the research station first.”

I’ve been looking forward to this moment—showing Harper that my environmental commitments aren’t just PR stunts. After our conversation last night, something shifted between us. She seemed to consider that my intentions might be more complex than she’d assumed.

Then there was that moment under the moonlight, when I’d almost?—

“Why are there so many boats docked already?” Harper interrupts my thoughts, pointing to the marina where at least a dozen vessels are moored.

“Staff boats, research vessels, supply deliveries.” I check my watch. “Most day visitors have left by now. The island closes to regular passengers at sunset, except for special events.”

“Like our ‘romantic dinner,’” she says, making air quotes around the words.

“Exactly. Though I seem to recall we won the dinner fairly.”

“Through coerced participation.”

“Still bitter about that?”

She tries to maintain her stern expression, but I catch the slight quirk of her lips.

“Yes.”

The boat slows as we approach the dock. I stand and offer my hand to help her up, half-expecting her to ignore it. To my surprise, she accepts, her fingers warm against mine as she rises.

“Thanks,” she says, then releases my hand.

A small progress, but I’ll take it.

We disembark onto a wooden dock extending from a pristine white sand beach. Unlike the main tourist area on the other side of the island, this beach is undeveloped except for the small marina and a path leading into the forest.

“This way,” I say, gesturing toward the path. “The research station is about a quarter mile in.”

Harper falls into step beside me, her eyes constantly moving, assessing our surroundings. “The vegetation looks healthy. Native species?”

“Mostly. There was an invasive plant removal program five years ago.”

“Your doing?”

“My funding, local experts’ doing.” I duck under a low-hanging branch. “I know my limitations.”

She studies me for a moment. “That’s very self-aware.”

“I have many talents, remember? Pulling weeds is not one of them.”

The path winds through dense forest until we reach a clearing where several connected structures form the research compound. Solar panels glint on the rooftops, and collection tanks gather rainwater at each corner.

A woman in her fifties emerges from the main building, her weathered face breaking into a grin when she spots us. “Ethan Cole, as I live and breathe! About time you visited again.”

“Dr. Marquez.” I return her smile. “Sorry it’s been so long.”

She waves off my apology and turns her attention to Harper. “And you must be Dr. Bennett. I’ve read your work on coral reef rehabilitation. Brilliant.”

Harper looks pleased at the recognition. “Thank you. And you’re Dr. Isabella Marquez? Your research on sea turtle navigation is groundbreaking.”

“I’m surprised you’ve heard of me. I’m not exactly a household name.”

“Your paper on magnetic imprinting in loggerheads changed how we understand migration patterns.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

The two women beam at each other in mutual academic appreciation, and I feel an irrational twinge of jealousy that Dr. Marquez has earned Harper's respect so easily.

"Come in, come in." Dr. Marquez gestures toward the main building. "I've prepared everything you asked for, Ethan."

Inside, the research station is a blend of rustic and high-tech. Simple wooden furniture and exposed beams contrast with state-of-the-art monitoring equipment and computer stations. Maps and charts cover the walls, along with underwater photographs of marine life.

"This is... impressive," Harper admits, examining a 3D model of the island's underwater topography.

"Mr. Cole has been very generous with his funding," Dr. Marquez says. "We've been able to expand our research over the past five years."

Harper glances at me, her expression changing from surprise to thoughtful reassessment.

Dr. Marquez pulls out a tablet and brings up a series of charts. "Here's the data you requested for Dr. Bennett—five years of monitoring reports for the nesting sites, water quality analyses, population statistics for local marine species."

Harper takes the tablet almost reverently. "This is comprehensive."

"I told you I keep my promises," I say quietly.

She looks up, meeting my eyes. “Yes, you did.”

“The nesting sites are active right now,” Dr. Marquez continues, mercifully unaware of whatever just transpired. “If you’d like to visit, I can take you there before your dinner.”

“We’d love to,” I say, not looking away from Harper.

“Perfect. Let me grab some equipment.”

Dr. Marquez disappears into a side room, leaving us alone. Harper scrolls through the data, she looks impressed.

“This is better than I expected,” she admits.

“I’m sensing a trend in your expectations of me.”

“if I set the bar low, I can’t be disappointed.” She glances up. “Maybe I’ve been unfair.”

“Maybe I haven’t given you much reason to be fair.”

Before she can respond, Dr. Marquez returns with a backpack and two pairs of night-vision goggles. “These will let us observe without disturbing the turtles. We need to be quiet at the nesting site.”

We follow her through a rough section of forest, the path narrower and less maintained than the main trail. The sun has set, casting golden light through the canopy. Beside me, Harper moves with the confidence of someone accustomed to fieldwork, navigating the uneven terrain.

“You seem at home in the wild,” I observe.

“More than in evening gowns and makeup, that’s for sure.” She steps over a fallen log. “I spent most of my PhD research on remote islands much less hospitable than this one.”

“And now you mostly write and lecture?”

She nods. “The platform lets me reach more people. But I miss the fieldwork.”

“Hence your enthusiasm for checking turtle nesting sites on what’s supposed to be a romantic dinner date.”

She shoots me a look. “This is far more appealing than champagne and sweet talk.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Dr. Marquez signals for us to stop and lowers her voice to a whisper. “We’re approaching the beach. From here, absolute silence. Follow my lead.”

We creep forward, emerging from the forest onto a sheltered cove. The beach here is different from the resort side—darker sand, untouched by landscaping or development. In the fading light, I can just make out several dark shapes moving slowly across the sand.

Dr. Marquez hands us each a pair of night-vision goggles. Once I adjust mine, the scene transforms. At least a dozen sea turtles lumber across the beach, some digging nests in the sand, others already laying eggs.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Beside me, Harper's breath catches. Even through the green tint of the goggles, I can see the wonder on her face as she watches the ancient ritual unfolding before us.

Dr. Marquez gestures toward three flat rocks positioned a safe distance from the nearest turtles. We sit quietly, observing as more turtles emerge from the surf. Harper is transfixed, her earlier skepticism replaced by undisguised awe.

For an hour, we sit in silence, watching the endangered creatures. Occasionally, Dr. Marquez makes notes on a waterproof tablet. As the sky darkens, the first mother finishes laying her eggs and begins the laborious process of covering her nest.

Dr. Marquez gestures that it's time to go. We follow her back along the path, not speaking until we're well away from the nesting site.

"That was incredible," Harper says, her voice hushed with lingering reverence. "How many nesting females are you tracking?"

"Forty-two this season," Dr. Marquez replies. "Up from twenty-nine last year."

"The conservation efforts are working," I add.

Harper nods, impressed. "Clearly. What measures have been most effective?"

As we walk back to the research station, Dr. Marquez and Harper fall into intense scientific discussion about conservation strategies, hatchling survival rates, and habitat protection. I listen, content to let Harper get the information she needs, enjoying her enthusiasm.

Back at the station, Dr. Marquez transfers the complete dataset to Harper's phone. "This includes everything we've collected over five years. Feel free to use it in your assessment."

"Thank you." Harper's gratitude is sincere. "This will strengthen my report."

"Speaking of which," I interject, checking the time, "we should head to dinner if we want to make our reservation."

Harper looks reluctant to leave the research station, which I find endearing. "Dr. Bennett, I promise you can return to talk science another day. But I've arranged a rather special meal that's time sensitive."

"Fine," she sighs, then turns to Dr. Marquez. "Thank you for everything. Your work here is remarkable."

"Come back anytime," Dr. Marquez replies, then gives me a knowing look. "Enjoy your dinner."

We follow a different path from the research station, this one heading toward the island's southern tip. The forest gives way to coastal vegetation as we approach a small, secluded bay.

"Where are we going?" Harper asks.

"You'll see."

The path opens onto a small, crescent-shaped beach, private and sheltered from view. At the center of the beach stands a single table set for two, surrounded by lanterns that give off a soft, amber glow. Behind it, a temporary pavilion houses a private chef station.

Harper stops. “This is... excessive.”

“It’s dinner.”

“On a private beach with mood lighting and a personal chef. That’s not just dinner, Ethan.”

I shrug, feeling defensive. “I won that obstacle course fair and square. This is the prize.”

“This feels like?—”

“A date?” I finish for her. “Maybe it is. Would that be so terrible?”

She stares at me, clearly caught off guard. “We’re not actually dating.”

“No, but we did just spend an hour watching sea turtles together, which you appeared to enjoy more than most actual dates I’ve been on.”

That gets a reluctant smile from her. “The turtles were amazing.”

“And now we eat.” I gesture toward the table. “Unless you’d prefer to swim back to the ship? We can call it shark research.”

“You’re impossible.” But she walks toward the table, the tension in her shoulders easing.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

The chef greets us as we approach, outlining a menu focusing on sustainable local seafood and island-grown produce. Harper listens as he explains the sourcing for each ingredient.

“Everything within fifty miles of the island,” he concludes. “Mr. Cole insisted on zero carbon footprint for tonight’s meal.”

Harper looks at me with raised eyebrows. “You arranged this?”

“I know what matters to you.”

“Sustainable food matters to everyone. The planet?—”

“Harper,” I interrupt, “can we just enjoy dinner without turning it into a debate? You’ve confirmed I’m not evil, I’ve provided the research data I promised. Let’s call it a win for both sides.”

She considers this, then nods. “Alright. Temporary truce.”

“I’ll take it.”

We sit across from each other at the candlelit table. The setting is undeniably romantic—waves lapping at the shore, stars emerging in the darkening sky, lanterns casting a warm glow over the sand. Under different circumstances, with a different woman, I might have orchestrated this exact scene as a seduction.

But with Harper, I am focusing less on the romantic potential and more on her

genuine reactions. The way her eyes light up when the first course arrives—locally caught ceviche with island herbs. How she asks the chef detailed questions about his sourcing. The small sounds of appreciation she makes with each bite.

“This is incredible,” she admits after tasting the main course, a grilled fish with coconut-lime sauce.

“Better than the ship’s buffet?”

“Marginally.” She smiles. “Thank you for arranging this. And for the research access. I... misjudged your intentions.”

“Only partially. I did want positive PR.”

“But you care about the conservation work.”

I nod, taking a sip of wine. “My family built its fortune on industries that damaged the oceans. I can’t undo that history, but I can try to change our legacy in the future.”

“That’s... admirable.”

“Now you’re just being nice.”

“Don’t get used to it.” She says. I doubt she will ever let anyone off easily.

As we finish our meal, the chef serves dessert—a passion fruit tart with honey from hives kept on the island—then retreats to the far end of the beach, giving us privacy.

The night is dark now, the stars brilliant above us, the only sounds the gentle crash of waves and distant island insects. Harper leans back in her chair, looking relaxed.

“This was supposed to be our romantic grand finale for the guests watching at home,” I observe. “But there’s no audience here.”

She considers this. “No cameras, no performance.”

“Just us.”

Our eyes meet across the table, and something shifts in the air between us. Without the pretense of our fake relationship, without the antagonism of our professional positions, we’re just a man and a woman on a beautiful beach under the stars.

“Walk with me?” I ask, standing and offering my hand.

She hesitates only briefly before taking it. “Okay.”

We leave our shoes at the table and walk barefoot down the beach. I don’t let go of her hand, and she doesn’t pull away. The sand is still warm from the day’s sun, the water cool as it rushes over our feet.

“I didn’t expect this,” Harper says after we’ve walked in comfortable silence for a while.

“The dinner?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Any of it. When I boarded the ship, I was prepared to document environmental violations and write a scathing expose. Instead...”

“Instead, you’re holding hands with the enemy on a moonlit beach?”

She laughs, the sound light and genuine. “Precisely that.”

We reach the end of the small bay, where a natural rock formation creates a secluded alcove. Without discussion, we sit side by side on a smooth boulder, watching the moonlight dance across the water.

“What happens when we get back to the real world?” Harper asks. “When the cruise ends, and we return to our respective corners?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But I know I’m not the villain you thought I was.”

“And I’m not just the angry environmentalist you assumed me to be.”

“You’re definitely angry,” I tease. “But it’s one of the things I like about you.”

She turns to face me, her expression curious. “What else do you like about me?”

The question hangs between us, more intimate than she perhaps intended. In the moonlight, her eyes reflect the stars, her skin glowing silver blue. My gaze drops to her lips before I can stop myself.

“Your integrity,” I answer. “Your passion. The way you don’t back down, even when

it would be easier.”

She looks surprised by my sincerity. “I thought you’d say something flippant.”

“I can do flippant if you prefer.”

“No, I... I like the honesty.”

We’re sitting close enough that I can feel the warmth of her body, see the pulse at the base of her throat. The air between us feels charged, almost electric with possibility.

“Harper,” I say, my voice lower than intended.

“Yes?”

“I’m going to kiss you now, if that’s alright.”

Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t move away. “This isn’t part of our agreement.”

“No, it’s not. This would be off-script.”

She swallows. “Why?”

“Because I want to. No cameras, no audience. Just because I’ve wanted to since you threw champagne in my face.”

A small laugh escapes her. “That’s a strange trigger for attraction.”

“What can I say? I admire women who stand up to me.”

She studies my face, searching for deception. Finding none, she nods. “Okay.”

I lean forward, giving her every opportunity to change her mind. Her eyes flutter closed just before our lips meet, and then—finally—I'm kissing Harper Bennett.

Her lips are soft, hesitant at first, then responding with increasing warmth. My hand comes up to cradle her face, thumb brushing her cheekbone as I deepen the kiss. She tastes like passion fruit and wine, her scent a mix of salt air and something her own.

What begins as a tentative kiss quickly changes. Harper's hand finds my shoulder, then slides into my hair, pulling me closer. I respond in kind, my arm circling her waist, eliminating the space between us. The kiss turns hungry, months of tension and antagonism channeling into something else entirely.

A soft sound escapes her throat as I gently bite her lower lip, and it nearly undoes me. I pull her onto my lap, her legs straddling mine as we continue kissing with increasing urgency. Her body is warm against mine, her hands now exploring my chest, my shoulders, my back.

"This is a bad idea," she whispers against my lips, even as she presses closer.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Terrible,” I agree, trailing kisses down her neck. “We should stop immediately.”

“Absolutely.” Her head tilts back, giving me better access to the sensitive skin below her ear.

“Any second now.” My hands slip under her shirt, finding the warm skin of her lower back.

“Mmhmm.” She gasps as I nip at her collarbone.

Our mouths find each other again, the kiss deep and consuming. Her hips shift against mine, and I groan at the friction, my body responding. The thin material of her shorts and my linen pants does little to disguise my arousal, and Harper’s eyes widen as she feels it against her.

Instead of pulling away, she rocks deliberately against me, her pupils dilated, lips swollen from our kisses.

“Harper,” I manage, my voice rough. “If we don’t stop now...”

“Do you want to stop?” she asks, her breathing uneven.

“God, no.” My hands tighten on her waist. “But I don’t want you to regret this.”

She stills, reality crashing back. For a moment, I think she’ll pull away. Instead, she cups my face between her hands, her expression serious.

“I’ve spent two years criticizing you. I threw champagne in your face three days ago. This is irrational.”

“Completely,” I agree.

“No one can know about this.”

“Not a soul.”

She takes a deep breath, then kisses me again. “Just for tonight.”

Words fail me as she kisses a path down my neck, her hands working the buttons of my shirt. I surrender to the sensation for a moment before reclaiming control, lifting her and laying her on the soft sand beside the rock.

I hover above her, taking in her flushed face and tousled hair. “Are you sure about this?”

In answer, she pulls me down for another kiss, her body arching up to meet mine. My hand slides along her thigh, up under her shorts, finding the lace edge of her underwear. She gasps against my mouth as my fingers explore higher, discovering the heat of her.

“Ethan,” she breathes, her head falling back as I stroke her through the thin fabric.

I’ve never heard her say my name like that—like a plea, like she is begging. I want to hear it again. I push the material aside and touch her wetness, watching her face as pleasure overtakes her. Her skin glows in the moonlight as she moves against my hand, seeking more pleasure.

Her fingers fumble with my belt, her usual precision abandoned in urgency. I help

her, then groan as her hand wraps around me, stroking slowly at first, then faster.

“Harper,” I warn as her touch threatens my control.

She smiles, a flash of the competitive woman I first met. “Problem?”

“Only that I want this to last.”

I reclaim her mouth, my fingers continuing their exploration, finding the rhythm that makes her breath hitch. She’s gorgeous like this—uninhibited, responsive, her defenses abandoned.

“I need—” she starts, then breaks off with a gasp as I circle her sensitive clit.

“What do you need?” I murmur against her ear.

“You,” she admits. “Now.”

I pull back just enough to look in her eyes, needing absolute certainty. “Harper?—”

“Please, Ethan.” Her voice is urgent. “I want this.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

That's all I need to hear. Harper watches me with heavy-lidded eyes as I grab a condom from my pants pocket, then welcomes me back into her arms.

When I finally thrust inside her, we both gasp at the overwhelming sensation.

"Okay?" I ask, holding still.

She nods, her hands pulling me closer. "More than okay."

I begin to move in a rhythm that has her meeting me thrust for thrust. Her legs wrap around my waist, changing the angle, drawing me in deeper. The only sounds are our mingled breaths, the waves crashing nearby, and the occasional gasped direction—"there," "harder," "don't stop."

It's better than I imagined—and I've imagined this more than I should have. Harper is passionate, uninhibited, present in the moment. She pays attention to what makes me groan, what makes my rhythm falter, then uses that knowledge mercilessly.

When I feel her begin to tighten around me, I don't hold back, I want to watch her come undone. Her eyes lock with mine as her orgasm takes over, her body arching, my name on her lips as she shatters. The sight of her—brilliant, beautiful Harper—lost in pleasure because of me is enough to send me over the edge right after her.

For a long time afterward, we lie tangled together, catching our breath, neither speaking. Her head rests on my chest, my arm around her shoulders, her leg thrown over mine. I trace lazy patterns on her back, unwilling to break the spell of what just

happened.

Finally, she stirs. “We should get back. The boat?—”

“It will wait for us.” I tighten my arm around her. “I own the ship, remember?”

She laughs softly. “How could I forget?”

I kiss the top of her head, inhaling the scent of her hair. “Regrets?”

She’s quiet for a moment, and my heart beats faster in the silence. Then she presses a kiss to my chest, just over my heart.

“The sand up my ass.”

It’s not the answer I wanted, but it’s honest. And with Harper, I’m learning that honesty is worth more than comforting fictions.

“Fair enough.”

We help each other dress, pausing for kisses that threaten to reignite the desire we’re both trying to keep under control. Eventually, we make ourselves presentable enough to return to the dinner table, where the chef has packed everything away, leaving only a small lantern to guide us.

The walk back to the dock is quiet, our hands occasionally brushing but not quite holding. Whatever just happened between us we are not ready to say anything about it yet.

On the boat ride back to the ship, Harper sits beside me, close enough that our shoulders touch. When a cool spray from the waves makes her shiver, I put my arm

around her without asking. She leans into me, and it feels like a victory.

As The Rendezvous comes into view, lights glittering against the night sky, I feel Harper tense beside me.

“Back to reality,” she murmurs.

“Not quite yet.” I squeeze her shoulder. “We’ve still got several days of fake dating ahead of us.”

She laughs, the sound lighter than I’ve ever heard from her. “God help me.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Will you?”

I turn to look at her, finding her watching me. “If that’s what you want.”

Her eyes search mine, looking for something. Whatever she finds makes her smile.

“Ask me tomorrow,” she says.

Chapter Seven

HARPER

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

### MORNING AFTER CALCULATIONS

I wake to sunlight streaming through the balcony curtains and the distant sound of waves against the hull. For a moment, I lie still, noticing all the sensations—soft sheets, the gentle rock of the ship, and a pleasant soreness in my muscles that brings memories of last night flooding back.

Ethan's hands on my skin. My name on his lips. Sand beneath my back and stars overhead.

“Oh god,” I groan, pulling a pillow over my face.

I, Harper Bennett, PhD, respected marine biologist and vocal critic of corporate environmental exploitation, had sex on a beach with Ethan Cole. Fantastic, mind-blowing sex that I initiated just as much as he did.

It was supposed to be a professional arrangement. A fake relationship to repair both our public images while I gathered information for my report. Nothing more.

Yet here I am, remembering how he kissed me, how he touched me, how he looked at me like I was the most fascinating woman he'd ever been with.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, interrupting my spiraling thoughts. I peek out from under the pillow to see Zoe's name on the screen.

Did you murder the billionaire yet or are you too busy hate-making out with him?

If she only knew.

I ignore the text, not ready to explain to my best friend that I've crossed a line I swore I'd never cross—mixing professional with personal. We all know that is a dangerous cocktail.

A soft knock at the balcony door makes me sit bolt upright. Through the sheer curtains, I can make out Ethan's silhouette on his adjacent balcony, holding a coffee cup.

I consider pretending to be asleep, but I've never been one to hide from my mistakes. Even extraordinarily handsome, orgasm-inducing mistakes. No shame.

I pull on a robe, rake a hand through my hopelessly knotty hair, and slide open the glass door.

“Good morning,” Ethan says, his voice infuriatingly casual. He looks unfairly good—freshly showered, dressed in a simple t-shirt and shorts, his hair still slightly damp.

“Is it?” I reply, accepting the coffee he offers. “I'm still deciding.”

His lips twitch with amusement. “How scientific of you to reserve judgment pending further investigation.” He's mocking me.

“Don't make jokes. I'm having a personal crisis.”

“About last night?”

I take a fortifying sip of coffee—prepared how I like it, which is disconcerting—and meet his eyes. “Yes, about last night. That was...”

“Amazing? Surprising? Long overdue?” he replies.

“Unprofessional. Complicated, and really poor impulse control.”

His smile dims. “Ah.”

“This was supposed to be straightforward, Ethan. I pretend to date you, I get my report written, we both get what we want.”

“And last night didn’t fit into that equation? Did you not get what you wanted?”

“Of course it didn’t!” I set the coffee cup down. “We’re on opposite sides of an environmental debate. I’ve criticized your company for years.”

“And I’ve given you access to data proving we’re making massive improvements.” He leans against the railing. “Some might say that’s progress.”

“Some might call sleeping with the subject of my investigation a massive conflict of interest.”

His expression turns serious. “Is that what I am to you? Just the subject of an investigation?”

The question catches me off guard. What is Ethan to me now? Antagonist, research subject, fake boyfriend, lover... the categories are blurring dangerously.

“It’s too complicated,” I say.

“It doesn’t have to be.” He moves closer, not touching me but close enough that I can smell his soap. “We’re two consenting adults who are attracted to each other. We acted on that attraction. Simple.”

“There’s nothing simple about this situation.”

“Only because you’re overthinking it.” His eyes search mine. “Last night, when I asked if you had regrets, you said ‘ask me tomorrow.’ Well, it’s tomorrow. Do you regret what happened?”

The honest answer is more complex than I want to admit. “I regret the complications, not the experience.”

A slow smile spreads across his face. “So, the experience itself was...?”

“Don’t push your luck, Cole.”

He laughs, and I feel myself smiling too.

“Fine, I’ll take that non-answer as a positive review.” He picks up his own coffee cup. “What’s on your agenda today?”

The abrupt change of subject throws me. “Um, I was planning to review the turtle data and start drafting that part of my report.”

“Meet me for lunch first? The ship docks at Saint Lucia at noon. There’s a seafood restaurant in port that I think you’d appreciate.”

“Are the cameras coming too?” I ask, only half-joking.

“No cameras. Just lunch.”

I should say no. I should maintain professional distance and remember that one night of admittedly incredible sex doesn’t change our fundamental positions.

“Okay,” I hear myself say instead. “Lunch.”

His smile is like sunlight breaking through clouds. “I’ll meet you at the gangway at 12:30.”

Before I can react, he leans forward and places a quick kiss on my lips, then retreats to his own balcony. “Enjoy your data analysis, Dr. Bennett.”

I stand there, coffee in hand, lips tingling, wondering how I’ve lost control of this situation so completely.

After a shower, I settle on the balcony with my laptop and the turtle research. It’s genuinely impressive—comprehensive, well documented, with clear evidence of population recovery. The conservation protocols align with best practices, and the funding Ethan has provided has enabled technological monitoring that most research stations could only dream of.

It complicates my narrative. I can’t paint Cole Tech as environmental villains when they’re funding such amazing conservation work. And I can’t dismiss Ethan as a corporate greenwasher when he seems committed to this project.

My phone rings, displaying my publisher's number. I answer with trepidation.

"Eleanor, hi."

"Harper! Just checking in on your exposé. Social media is buzzing about you and Ethan Cole. Tell me you're getting good dirt."

I wince. "It's... more nuanced than I expected. They're doing some legitimate conservation work."

"But the cruise ship itself? The consumption, the waste?"

"Still room for improvement," I concede, thinking of the excessive food waste I've documented and the single-use plastics still in use. "But they're implementing changes, and some of their initiatives are innovative."

A pause from Eleanor's end. "Harper, we sold this as an exposé, not a puff piece. The publisher wants 'Playground of the Privileged: The Environmental Cost of Luxury Cruising,' not 'Rich People Trying Their Best.'"

"I understand, but I have to report what I find, not what fits a predetermined narrative."

"Of course," Eleanor says, though her tone suggests disappointment. "But remember, readers want drama. If everything's sunshine and sea turtles, there's no story."

After we hang up, I stare at my data spreadsheets, feeling caught between my integrity and my publishers expectations. Eleanor wants environmental villains. The cruise wants good publicity. Ethan wants...

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

What does Ethan want? Beyond the obvious beach sex, what is his endgame here?

My phone buzzes with a notification from the ship's app—a reminder about today's couples' activity: "Sensual Massage Workshop, 3 PM, Lotus Spa."

I close the app with a groan. Of course there's a massage workshop. Because being half naked and touching each other is exactly what Ethan and I need after last night.

At 12:25, I make my way to the gangway, having changed into a casual yellow sundress and sandals. The ship has docked in Castries, St. Lucia's capital, the lush green island rising from the turquoise water.

Ethan is already waiting, somehow looking like a luxury travel advertisement in simple linen pants and a blue button-down that makes his eyes even more impossibly blue. He smiles when he sees me, and my stomach does an embarrassing flip.

"Right on time," he says, offering his arm. "The restaurant's about a ten-minute walk along the coastal road."

I take his arm, conscious of other passengers watching us. "Are we still playing 'couple' for the audience?"

"We're whatever you want us to be," he says, his voice low enough that only I can hear. "On camera, off camera—your call."

The sincerity in his tone catches me off guard. I expected gloating after last night, or at least smug satisfaction. This consideration of my feelings is... disarming.

We disembark, stepping into the tropical heat of St. Lucia. The port area bustles with activity—locals selling handicrafts, tourists taking photos, taxi drivers calling out destinations. Ethan pushes through the crowd with ease, placing a protective hand on my lower back to guide me.

“How many times have you been here?” I ask as we turn down a less crowded side street.

“Seven or eight. My grandfather used to bring the ships here for maintenance. There’s a good natural deep-water harbor.”

“You spent a lot of time on these islands growing up?”

He nods, pointing out a colorful building. “My childhood was split between boardrooms and boat decks. My father wanted me in business meetings; my grandfather wanted me to understand the ships from the engine room up.”

“And which did you prefer?”

“The ships, without question.” He smiles at the memory. “Nothing better than standing on the bow as you approach an island like this one. My grandfather would tell me the geological history of each formation we could see.”

“He sounds like he had a naturalist’s perspective.”

“He loved the ocean in his way, even if that love was complicated by the fact that he built vessels that polluted it.” Ethan points to a small, blue-painted restaurant ahead. “Here we are—Mer Durable. It’s run by a local chef who only serves sustainable, locally caught seafood.”

The restaurant is charming—open air with views of the water, colorful local art on

the walls, ceiling fans spinning lazily overhead. The host greets Ethan by name and leads us to a table on a covered patio overlooking the water.

“The owner started as a fisherman,” Ethan explains once we’re seated. “He became concerned about declining fish populations and helped establish sustainable fishing practices in the local community.”

“Is there anything you don’t know about every port we visit?”

He grins. “I do my research.”

“On marine conservation efforts?”

“On things that might impress you.”

The candid admission catches me off guard. “You’ve been trying to impress me?”

“Since you threw champagne in my face, yes.” He unfolds his napkin casually. “Though I admit, I didn’t expect it to be quite so hard.”

A server arrives with water and menus, giving me a moment to process what he said. Ethan has been working to impress me. Not just manipulate public opinion, not just secure positive press, but impress me personally.

“Why?” I ask after the server leaves. “Why bother? You could have just had me removed from the ship after the champagne incident.”

He looks up from his menu. “Because you were right.”

“About what?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“About Cole Tech not doing enough. About our seabed mining technology needing more environmental safeguards. About our responsibility to do better.” He sets his menu down. “You’re brilliant, Harper, and your criticism is valid. I wanted to show you we’re trying to improve, not just dismiss you.”

I study him, trying to reconcile this thoughtful man with the corporate figurehead I’ve spent years ripping apart. “That’s... not what I expected you to say.”

“What did you expect?”

“Something about PR, or damage control, or?—”

“Oh, that too,” he interrupts with a grin. “But I can have multiple motivations. Improving our environmental practices and getting to know the gorgeous scientist who’s been publicly challenging me for years aren’t mutually exclusive goals.”

The server returns for our orders, and we both select the day’s special—locally caught Mahi-Mahi with island vegetables. When we’re alone again, I want to continue our honest talk.

“Last night,” I begin, “when you asked if I regretted it, and I said to ask me tomorrow...”

“Which is today,” he supplies.

“Right. I’ve been thinking about my answer.”

His expression remains neutral. “And?”

“I don’t regret it.” The admission feels both terrifying and liberating. “But I’m still not sure what it means. For us, professionally or... otherwise.”

“It doesn’t have to mean anything you don’t want it to mean.” He reaches across the table, his fingers lightly touching mine. “We’ve got three more days on this cruise. We can define this—us—however we want.”

“And when the cruise ends?”

A shadow crosses his face. “That depends on what conclusions you reach in your article, I suppose.”

The reminder of my professional purpose here feels like a splash of cold water. No matter how perfect last night was, no matter how genuine our connection feels in this moment, we still have opposing interests.

“My article will reflect what I find,” I say carefully. “The good and the bad. The facts.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.” His fingers still touch mine, neither advancing nor retreating. “I’m not asking you to compromise your integrity, Harper. I just want a fair chance.”

“Why does my opinion matter so much to you?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“Because you can’t be bought.” His answer comes without hesitation. “Your approval can’t be purchased with donations or manipulated with PR stunts. If Harper Bennett says Cole Tech is making real environmental progress, people will believe it because they know you wouldn’t say it unless it was true.”

The food arrives, pausing our conversation. The dish is beautifully presented, the fish perfectly cooked, the flavors rich and fresh. We eat in companionable silence for a few minutes, the tension between us settling.

“This is delicious,” I say after a few bites.

“I thought you’d like it.” He looks pleased by my approval. “The chef trained in Paris but uses traditional island cooking techniques.”

“Your research on things that might impress me is very thorough.”

He laughs. “I’m a Cole. Thoroughness is in our DNA.”

“Is that so?” I raise an eyebrow, thinking of last night. “I had noticed that talent.”

His eyes darken at my implication. “Dr. Bennett, are you flirting with me?”

“Merely making an observation.”

“In that case, I hope your research continues. I believe there are several aspects of my... thoroughness... that warrant looking deeper.”

Heat rises to my cheeks despite my best efforts at composure. “You’re impossible.”

“So, you keep saying.” His smile is infectious. “And yet, here you are, having lunch with me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“The restaurant is impressive.”

“Just the restaurant?”

I roll my eyes, but can’t help smiling. “Your ego doesn’t need the feeding. We’ve already established that.”

After lunch, we walk along the harbor, our hands occasionally touching. It feels both strange and natural to be with Ethan like this—no cameras, no audience, just two people enjoying each other’s company.

He points out historical sites and shares stories about the island, and I find myself engaged. It’s like being with a different person than the corporate villain I’d made up in my mind.

“We should head back,” he says, checking his watch. “Unless you want to skip the massage workshop?”

I’d almost forgotten about the scheduled couples’ activity. “God, that’s going to be awkward.”

“More awkward than what we’ve already done?” His expression is teasing.

“Different context.” I bite my lip. “Last night was private. This will be in front of others.”

“We can skip it. Say we lost track of time exploring the island.”

I consider this escape option, then shake my head. “No, we should go. It’s part of the itinerary, and besides, the massage might be relaxing.”

We make our way back to the ship, arriving with just enough time to change before the workshop. In my cabin, I swap my sundress for yoga pants and a tank top, as suggested by the activity description. My phone buzzes with a text from Ethan:

Ready for me to get my hands on you again?

I type back:

Professional context only, Cole. Don’t get ideas.

His response is immediate:

Too late for that warning, Bennett.

The massage workshop is held in the ship’s largest spa room, with eight couples’ massage tables arranged in a circle. An instructor stands in the center—a serene-looking woman in flowing clothes who introduces herself as Celeste.

“Welcome to our Sensual Massage Workshop,” she says once all couples have arrived. “Today you’ll learn techniques to enhance intimacy and relaxation with your partner.”

Ethan and I exchange glances. He looks amused; I try for professional detachment.

“Each couple should decide who will receive the massage first,” Celeste continues.

“The receiver, please lie face down on the table. Givers, stand beside your partner.”

“Your choice,” Ethan says quietly. “Give or receive?”

The double entendre is obvious, but I refuse to acknowledge it. “I’ll receive first.”

I settle on the table, face down, trying to maintain my composure as Ethan stands beside me. The other couples around us are all at various stages of coupledness—some dating, others longtime partners or spouses.

“Givers, start by warming the massage oil in your hands,” Celeste instructs, her assistants handing out small bottles of oil. “We’ll begin with the back and shoulders, where we hold most of our tension.”

I hear Ethan rubbing his hands together, and then his warm palms make contact with my shoulders through the thin fabric of my tank top. Despite my resolve to remain clinical about this experience, I can’t help the small sigh that escapes me as his strong fingers work the knots in my upper back.

“Feel free to remove your clothing for better contact,” Celeste suggests. “Always respecting your partner’s comfort, of course.”

“May I?” Ethan asks, his hands pausing on my shoulders.

I hesitate, then nod. “Just the tank top.”

His fingers lift the hem of my top, sliding it up to expose my back while leaving my front covered against the table. The oil is warm as he spreads it across my skin, his touch sensual.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Begin with long, sweeping strokes from the lower back to the shoulders,” Celeste instructs. “Connect with your partner’s body, feel the areas of tension.”

Ethan’s hands move as directed, applying perfect pressure as they travel up my spine. I close my eyes, surrendering to the relaxation.

“You’re tense,” he murmurs, thumbs working a tight knot between my shoulder blades.

“Occupational hazard of hunching over research papers, and dealing with annoying billionaires.” I manage, trying to ignore how good his hands feel on my skin.

“Hmm, and here I thought it might be the stress of pretending to date someone you claim to hate.”

I’m about to retort when his thumb hits a sensitive spot, drawing a soft groan from me instead. I can sense his smug smile without seeing it.

“Now, partners, pay special attention to the neck and base of the skull,” Celeste continues. “This area holds our emotional tension as well as physical.”

Ethan’s fingers work their way up my neck, applying gentle pressure at the base of my skull. It feels divine—intimate yet therapeutic. As much as I hate to admit it, he’s very good at this.

“Where did you learn to massage like this?” I ask quietly.

“A retreat in Thailand. Three weeks of daily practice.”

“Of course,” I murmur. “Billionaire things.”

He chuckles, his breath warm near my ear. “If it makes you feel better, I was terrible at first. My instructor said I approached human bodies like engineering problems.”

“Don’t you?”

His thumbs trace small circles at the tender junction where my neck meets my shoulders. “Not yours.”

The simple statement, delivered in that low, intimate voice, sends a shiver down my spine.

The instruction continues, moving to arms and hands, then legs and feet. By the time Celeste announces it’s time to switch positions, I feel like I’ve melted into the table.

I sit up, careful to keep my tank top in place. Ethan looks very pleased with himself.

“Your turn,” I say, trying to sound more composed than I feel.

We switch positions, Ethan lying face down on the table. As he settles, he pulls his shirt off, revealing the tanned muscles of his back. I’ve seen it before—felt it beneath my hands just last night—but in the clinical light of the spa room, I can appreciate the defined muscles and smooth skin.

“Begin as before,” Celeste instructs. “Warm the oil between your palms and start with long strokes to warm the muscles.”

I’m nervous, my usual confidence wavering. This is Ethan Cole, and despite what

happened last night, despite our lunch today, touching him like this feels like I'm crossing another line.

"Whenever you're ready, Dr. Bennett," Ethan says, his voice muffled by the face rest but unmistakably amused. "Unless you need a demonstration first."

The challenge in his voice snaps me back to reality. I warm the oil between my palms and place my hands on his shoulders with more confidence than I have.

"I think I can manage," I reply, beginning the long strokes down his back as instructed.

His skin is warm beneath my hands, muscles relaxing under my touch. As I continue the massage, following Celeste's instructions, I get more comfortable, more focused on the task rather than who I'm touching.

"You're good at this," Ethan murmurs as I work on a knot in his shoulder.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I assumed scientists would be more analytical than intuitive with this stuff."

I dig my thumb into a tight spot, drawing a satisfying groan from him. "The human body is just another system to understand, Cole. Action and reaction. Pressure and release. Cause and effect."

"Is that how you approach everything?" His voice has dropped lower. "Analytically?"

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

I think of last night—the decidedly non-analytical way I responded to his touch, the abandonment of thought for pure sensation.

“Not everything,” I admit.

He turns his head slightly, catching my eye from the massage table. “Good to know.”

For the rest of the massage, there is a charged silence, my hands working over his back, arms, and legs as instructed. By the time Celeste announces the end of the workshop, the air between us feels thick with tension.

As we leave the spa, Ethan leans close. “So, Dr. Bennett, was that part of your professional assessment, or purely recreational?”

“Both,” I answer. “The spa uses excessive water and imported products, but the experience itself was... educational.”

“Educational,” he repeats, looking amused. “Is that your scientific term for fun?”

“Don’t push it, Cole.”

We reach the elevator bank, and an awkward silence falls as we both realize we’re heading to the same place—our adjacent cabins.

“Any plans for the evening?” he asks as the elevator ascends.

“Data and my report,” I reply. “I need to incorporate the turtle research into my

draft.”

“Sounds riveting.” He rolls his eyes.

“It is to me.” I love my job.

The elevator stops at our floor, and we walk down the hallway together. At my door, I pause, uncertain about the right way to end whatever this non-date was.

Ethan solves the dilemma by leaning in and placing a soft kiss on my cheek. “Enjoy your data, Harper.”

“Ethan,” I say before he can turn away, surprising myself. “Thank you for lunch. And... for respecting my boundaries.”

“Always.”

He starts toward his own door, then stops. “If you finish your data analysis early, I’ll be on my balcony with a bottle of wine that I think you’d appreciate. Ethically farmed grapes, of course.”

“I’ll consider it,” I reply, not quite committing.

His smile suggests he knows I’ll show up. The most irritating part is that he’s right.

Inside my cabin, I sit at the desk and force myself to focus on my work. The turtle data is impressive, and I work it into my draft. But as evening falls, my concentration starts to wear thin. I keep glancing at the balcony door, aware that just beyond it, separated by a glass partition, Ethan is waiting.

I should finish my work, and remember that in three days, this cruise ends, and I

return to my real life—where Ethan Cole is a subject of my professional criticism, not my personal affection. We live in two different worlds off this boat.

I save my document, change into a sundress, and open my balcony door. Ethan is there, as promised, two glasses and a bottle of wine on the small table between the chairs. He looks up when he hears the door, and his smile makes my stomach flutter with butterflies.

“Data all analyzed?” he mocks as I take the seat beside him.

“Enough for tonight.” I accept the glass of wine he offers. “Tell me about this sustainably produced wine you were raving about.”

As he launches into an explanation of the vineyard’s organic farming and renewable energy use, I am smiling. This man is nothing like I expected when I boarded this ship. He’s complex, thoughtful, and committed to environmental improvement—even if his methods and timeline don’t always align.

More dangerously, he makes me laugh. He challenges me intellectually. And the way he looks at me makes me feel both seen and desired in a way I haven’t experienced before.

Three more days, I remind myself as we sip wine and watch the stars emerge over the Caribbean. Three days to figure out what this is, and what happens when we return to reality.

But tonight, with the gentle rock of the ship beneath us and Ethan’s voice painting pictures of vineyards and wine making, I allow myself to enjoy the moment.

Chapter Eight

ETHAN

### UNEXPECTED STORMS

I wake up before my alarm, sunlight streaming through the balcony curtains I forgot to close. The gentle rock of the ship and the lingering scent of Harper's perfume on the pillow beside me create a moment of perfect contentment.

Last night was unexpected. After our wine on the balcony, conversation had flowed, the tension between us transforming from antagonistic to something more. When an evening rainstorm forced us inside, Harper accepted my invitation to continue our discussion in my suite.

One bottle of wine became two. Sustainable agriculture gave way to childhood memories. Professional debate softened into personal connection. And somehow, as the storm passed and stars reappeared, Harper Bennett ended up in my bed for the second time in twenty-four hours.

Only this time, there was no pretense of "just for tonight." This time, when I kissed her, she kissed me back with a certainty that made my heart race faster than any business negotiation ever has.

I roll over, expecting to find her still asleep beside me, but her side of the bed is empty, sheets cool to the touch. My disappointment fades when I spot a note on the pillow, written in Harper's precise handwriting:

Early meeting with the ship's environmental officer. Last night was... worth

repeating.

I smile at the clinical understatement. “Worth repeating” doesn’t begin to capture what happened between us—the way she’d whispered my name as I moved inside her, her hands mapping my body, the look in her eyes when she came apart beneath me.

The sound of water running in the bathroom interrupts my thoughts. I’d assumed Harper had returned to her own suite, but apparently, she’s still here. I stretch, enjoying the lingering muscle soreness that comes from a night well spent, then get up to join her.

The bathroom door isn’t closed. Through the gap, I can see Harper in the glass-walled shower, water cascading over her naked body as she rinses shampoo from her hair. For a moment, I appreciate the view—the elegant curve of her spine, the subtle muscle definition in her shoulders, the freckles scattered across her lower back that I discovered last night.

I push the door open, and her eyes find mine in the steamy mirror. Instead of surprise or embarrassment, her lips curve in a slow smile.

“Good morning,” she says, voice raised over the running water. “I hope you don’t mind. I have an 8 am meeting and needed to freshen up.”

“I don’t mind.” I approach the shower door. “Though I’m offended you didn’t wake me.”

“You looked peaceful.” She rinses the last of the shampoo from her hair. “Besides, this meeting is important for my work.”

“More important than morning sex?” I tease, opening the shower door and stepping in

behind her.

She turns to face me. “That’s why I set my alarm early.”

Her hands slide up my chest as I back her against the tile wall, capturing her mouth in a kiss that becomes heated. The hot water flows over us as my hands explore her wet skin, relearning the curves I’d memorized in the darkness.

“So efficient, Dr. Bennett,” I murmur against her neck. “Multitasking shower and seduction.”

“Time management is—” She gasps as my fingers find the sensitive spot between her thighs. “—a valuable skill.”

“I agree.” I drop to my knees, hooking her leg over my shoulder. “Let me show you how I multitask.”

Her breath hitches as my mouth replaces my fingers. I look up to see her watching me, lips parted, pupils dilated. The vulnerability in her expression makes me want to bring her pleasure.

“Ethan,” she whispers, her hand tangling in my wet hair. “You don’t have to?—”

“I want to.” I punctuate the statement by doubling my efforts, using everything I learned about her body last night to push her toward the edge.

She comes with her hand pressed against her mouth to muffle her scream, her body trembling against me. I steady her with my hands on her hips, placing gentle kisses on her inner thighs as she recovers.

When I stand, she pulls me into a deep kiss, unconcerned that she can taste herself on

my lips. Her hand slides between us to wrap around my cock.

“Your turn,” she says.

“We don’t have time,” I protest halfheartedly as her thumb circles the sensitive tip.  
“Your meeting...”

“I’m sure they’ll wait.” She drops to her knees in a graceful reversal of our positions.  
“Not like they can leave, we’re on a ship.”

Her mouth is warm and perfect around me, as she slides up and down my shaft. I brace myself against the shower wall, looking down at the surreal sight of Harper Bennett on her knees before me, her auburn hair darkened by water, her eyes watching my reaction with interest as she dismantles my self-control with nothing but her sinful mouth.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Harper,” I warn as heat builds at the base of my spine. “I’m close.”

She doesn’t pull away, just increases her pace, her hand working with her mouth until I come with a groan that echoes off the walls. She doesn’t stop, swallowing, then rises to rinse her mouth under the shower-head.

“Efficient enough?” she asks with a satisfied smile.

I pull her against me, our wet bodies sliding together. “I think we could improve if we practiced often enough.”

She laughs. “I’ve created a monster.”

“You’ve awakened my curiosity.” I brush a strand of wet hair from her face. “I now have several ideas on how I can make Dr. Harper Bennett lose her composure.”

“Save your ideas for tonight.” She gives me a quick kiss, then steps out of the shower. “I have a meeting to get to.”

I watch as she towels off and dresses in yesterday’s clothes. There’s something intimate about observing her morning routine—the way she wrings excess water from her hair, her methodical application of the minimal contents of her makeup bag, the little adjustments she makes to her clothing.

“What’s your day look like?” I ask, wrapping a towel around my waist and leaning against the doorframe.

“Meeting with Environmental Officer Chen until around 10, then reviewing the waste management systems.” She glances at me as she fastens her watch. “You?”

“Conference call with the board at 9, then a meeting with the captain.” I step closer, drawn to her like a magnet. “Dinner tonight? The chef’s table does an incredible tasting menu.”

She hesitates. “We have that ridiculous ‘Love Under the Stars’ event at 8.”

“Ah yes, the mandatory couples’ stargazing.” I tuck a strand of damp hair behind her ear. “Dinner after that?”

“Maybe.” She smiles, but there’s a guardedness in her eyes that wasn’t there moments ago. “Let’s see how the day goes.”

“Of course. Good luck with your meeting.”

She gathers her belongings in a hurry. At the door, she pauses, turning back.

“Thank you for last night,” she says. “And this morning.”

“Harper,” I say before she can leave. “This doesn’t have to be complicated.”

“Doesn’t it? In two days, this cruise ends. I publish my expose. You go back to running Cole Tech. We return to opposing sides of an environmental war.” She runs a hand through her damp hair. “Seems pretty complicated to me.”

“Only if we make it complicated.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?”

“I’m not suggesting anything, yet. I’m just asking you not to overthink this because you’re worried about the future.”

“That’s rich coming from a CEO whose entire job is projecting future outcomes,” she says, but there’s a hint of a smile now.

“Fair point. Let me say it differently—I’m enjoying this. You’re enjoying this. Can we agree to keep enjoying it until we don’t?”

She considers this proposition. “I suppose that’s reasonable.”

“High praise indeed.”

This earns me a genuine smile. “You’re impossible.”

“So, you keep saying. And yet, here you are.”

“Yes, well.” She straightens her shoulders. “Even brilliant scientists make questionable decisions occasionally.”

“Am I a questionable decision?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Her expression softens. “The jury’s still out, Cole.”

With that cryptic response, she leaves, the door clicking shut behind her. I stand in my towel, water cooling on my skin, trying to understand what’s happening between us.

Whatever it is, it’s far more than just physical attraction. And not just the PR stunt we’d planned either.

I’m still confused when my phone rings. Alex’s face appears on the screen, and I answer with some trepidation.

“Please tell me you’re not still torturing the environmental scientist,” she says.

I glance at the rumpled sheets visible through the bedroom doorway. “Define ‘torturing.’”

“Ethan.” Her tone is warning. “The social media reactions to your Truth or Confession interview have been off the charts. You two are trending as #ColevsBennett. But I need to know if this is still a PR strategy or if you’re genuinely trying to seduce the woman who could sink our sustainability credentials the moment you break her precious heart.”

I consider how to answer. The truth—that what started as strategic has become something I can’t quite define—seems too much for a morning phone call.

“The situation is developing,” I say finally.

“That’s corporate speak for ‘I’m making this up as I go along,’” Alex sighs. “Have you forgotten why we arranged this in the firstplace? The board meeting is next week. We need Bennett’s piece on us to be positive.”

“Her piece will be whatever she honestly believes, Alex. That was always the deal.”

“And how do you think this is going to end? You charm her for a week, then go back to business as usual while she writes her expose? There’s a reason they call it a ‘cruise ship romance,’ Ethan. It’s not designed to survive in the real world.”

Her words are pretty close to the concerns Harper just expressed. “I appreciate the insight, Alex, but I have this under control.”

“Do you?” She sounds concerned now. “Because from where I’m sitting, it looks like you’re setting yourself up for both professional and personal scandal.”

“I have to go. Board meeting is in thirty minutes.” I deflect, unwilling to listen to her warning too closely.

“Just be careful, E. Harper Bennett isn’t your usual type. She has principles. She is smarter than your charm.”

“Maybe that’s what I like about her,” I reply.

After ending the call, I dress for the day in lightweight slacks and a button-down, my mind still torn between the pleasure of waking up with Harper and the complications awaiting us outside this temporary bubble.

The board call is tedious—quarterly projections, market analysis, and pointed questions about the upcoming sustainability reports. We need funding, the guys with the money are ‘green’ this time. I answer, but my thoughts are elsewhere.

It's mid-afternoon by the time I finish my meetings. The ship is approaching our last port—a small, private island owned by a wildlife trust. Tonight's stargazing activity will take place on the pristine beaches, followed by an overnight stay for passengers who choose to stay ashore.

I'm reviewing logistics for the transfer when my phone dings with a message from Harper:

Found some issues with waste processing systems that need addressing. Can we discuss before tonight's event?

I respond:

Of course. My cabin or the environmental office?

Her reply comes quickly:

Professional meeting. Office at 4.

I smile at her deliberate emphasis on “professional.” Despite our very casual morning, she's trying to maintain boundaries—at least during working hours.

The environmental office is on Deck 3, a utilitarian space compared to the luxury throughout the rest of the ship. Harper and Environmental Officer Chen are huddled over blueprints when I arrive.

“Mr. Cole,” Chen greets me. “Dr. Bennett has identified some concerning inconsistencies in our waste processing reports.”

Harper looks up, she's not happy. If I didn't know better, I'd never guess this was the same woman who was on her knees in my shower this morning.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“There’s a discrepancy between reported waste processing volumes and actual capacity,” she says without preamble. “Either your systems are more efficient than documented, which seems unlikely given the age of the equipment, or some waste is being discharged illegally.”

I feel a flash of irritation, not at the issue itself, but at her automatic assumption of wrongdoing. “Have you checked the maintenance logs? The primary system was upgraded last quarter.”

“I have the logs right here,” Chen interjects, pulling up a file on his tablet. “The upgrade increased efficiency by 15%, but that only accounts for part of this discrepancy.”

“How significant is the difference?” I ask, moving closer to examine the numbers myself.

“About 20% of total waste volume,” Harper says. “Most concerning are the gray water systems.”

I frown, concerned. Gray water—from sinks, showers, and galleys—should be treated before discharge, especially in sensitive areas. Most if it should be recycled and reused on board.

“Could it be an equipment, or recording error?” I ask Chen.

“Possibly. The sensors were recalibrated during the upgrade. They might be misreporting volumes.”

“Or,” Harper interjects, “waste is being illegally discharged during night hours when passengers are asleep and less likely to notice.”

The accusation is clear, and I feel a familiar frustration rising. Just when I thought we’d moved past her assumption that I’m an environmental villain...

“That would violate both company policy and international maritime law,” I reply, keeping my voice even. “I’d like to check the system, and have an engineer test it.”

“I’ve already scheduled an inspection for tomorrow morning,” Chen says. “0600 hours, before most passengers are awake.”

“I’d like to be there,” Harper says.

“As would I,” I add. “In the meantime, please pull all discharge logs for the past month, both automatic records and manual entries. And get a qualified engineer on board, use the helicopter if needed.”

Chen nods and departs to get the data, leaving Harper and me alone in the office. The anger and tension between us feel at odds with our intimate morning.

“You assume deliberate wrongdoing,” I observe once we’re alone.

“I assume nothing. I identified a discrepancy and presented the most likely explanations.”

“Including illegal dumping.”

She looks up from the blueprints, her expression challenging. “Is that not a possibility? Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Whatever is happening, it’s not intentional discharge. Not on my ship.”

“Your ship,” she repeats, a hint of her earlier skepticism returning. “But not your day-to-day operations. How certain are you about every procedure being followed when you’re not looking?”

It’s a fair question, if an uncomfortable one. “I trust my team. And I vouch for their work.”

“Hence your presence at tomorrow’s inspection?”

“Yes.” I move closer, lowering my voice. “Harper, I’m not your enemy here. If there’s a problem with our systems, I want it fixed as much as you do.”

“I believe you,” she says finally. “But good intentions aren’t outcomes. If your ship is polluting, regardless of whether it’s deliberate?—”

“Then we address it and implement safeguards to prevent recurrence.” I complete her thought. “We’re on the same side.”

“Are we?” The question seems to encompass more than just the waste processing issue.

“I think we are,” I say quietly. “In more ways than you want to admit.”

Her cheeks flush, but she maintains eye contact. “Let’s stick to the shit flowing into ocean for now.”

“Fine. Boundaries until we resolve this.” I gesture to the blueprints. “What else have you found?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

For the next hour, we review the ship's environmental policies. Harper is thorough, her criticisms fair and her praise—whengiven—genuine. Despite the tension between us, I'm impressed by her knowledge and attention to detail. Nothing gets past her, every loophole we have exploited she points it out.

"Your water conservation plan is quite innovative," she admits as we conclude the review. "Especially the gray water recycling for deck cleaning and laundry."

"Thank you. It was an expensive retrofit, but worth it."

"Why didn't you publicize it? It's the kind of initiative that would counter criticism."

I shrug. "We implemented it because it was the right thing to do, not for publicity."

She looks surprised by this answer. "That's very unlike you, not using the positive PR to spin things your way."

"I'm still full of surprises, Dr. Bennett."

Her lips curve in a small smile. "Apparently so, Mr. Cole."

Using our formal titles feels like a private joke now, given how intimately we know each other. The tension shifts subtly, warming with pleasure.

"About tonight," I say, changing the subject before we get distracted. "The stargazing event includes dinner on the beach, followed by an astronomy talk. Will you join me, or are you still checking your schedule?"

She hesitates, then nods. “I’ll join you. For research, of course.”

“Of course. Purely professional interest in how couples’ activities affect the environment.”

“Exactly.”

The spark of humor in her eyes belies her serious tone. For a moment, I’m tempted to lock the office door and remind her just how unprofessional our relationship has become. But her earlier boundary-setting deserves my respect, so I nod and step back.

“I’ll pick you up at 7:30. Dress warmly—the beach gets cool after sunset.”

“I’ll be ready.”

As I leave the environmental office, I can’t help feeling that we’ve reached some kind of turning point. The passion of this morning has given way to complications. Tomorrow’s inspection might well determine not just the environmental status of the ship, but how things end between Harper and me.

I return to my suite to get ready for the evening, my mind cycling through possibilities. If there is a problem with the waste management, it needs to be addressed—not just for Harper’s expose, but because it’s the right thing to do. If there isn’t a problem, then maybe we can salvage this connection.

Either way, I find myself unwilling to dismiss what’s happening between us as a temporary cruise ship romance. It feels like so much more than that.

At 7:30, I knock on Harper’s door. She opens wearing jeans and a light sweater, her hair loose around her shoulders, a jacket draped over her arm. She looks beautiful in the simple outfit, more like herself than in any of the fancy clothing she’s been forced

to wear.

“Ready for some stargazing?” I ask, offering my arm.

“As ready as I’ll ever be for another manufactured romantic moment,” she replies, but accepts my arm.

“Think of it as an astronomical education with benefits,” I suggest as we walk toward the elevators. “The wildlife trust that owns the island has strict light pollution policies. The star visibility is spectacular.”

“That sounds nice,” she admits. “I haven’t stargazed since a research trip to the Galapagos three years ago.”

“No romantic stargazing in your regular life, Dr. Bennett?” I tease.

“Shockingly few opportunities for romance when you’re publishing papers criticizing major corporations. It is such a turn on, I have to chase the men away.”

“Their loss.”

She glances at me, a hint of vulnerability in her eyes. “Smooth talker.”

“I’m only stating facts.”

We join other couples boarding small boats to the island. The sunset paints the sky in dramatic oranges and pinks as we approach the shore, where torches illuminate a path leading to the beach. Staff members escort couples to blankets arranged on the sand, each with a small picnic basket and a telescope.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“This is... quite lovely,” Harper admits as we settle onto our blanket.

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“I expected something tackier. Heart-shaped everything and photographers lurking in the bushes.”

I laugh, opening the picnic basket to find wine, cheese, fruit, and chocolate. “The night is young. The heart-shaped chocolate-covered strawberries might still make an appearance. I doubt there is anything lurking the bushes though.”

“God help me.” She’s smiling as she accepts a glass of wine.

As darkness falls, the sky transforms into a blanket of stars more brilliant than any city dweller ever sees. Harper tilts her head back, I can see the wonder in her eyes.

“It’s incredible,” she breathes. “You can see the entire Milky Way.”

“Try the telescope,” I suggest, adjusting it for her. “Jupiter and its moons should be visible tonight.”

She leans forward, peering through the eyepiece with fascination. “There it is! I can see three—no, four of the moons.”

I watch her rather than the stars, captivated by the pleasure on her face.

An astronomer circulates among the couples, offering insights about visible

constellations and our galaxy. When he reaches us, Harper engages him in a detailed discussion about light pollution.

“Your girlfriend knows her stuff,” the astronomer comments to me after their conversation.

Neither of us corrects him. Instead, Harper sips her wine, a small smile on her lips.

“She’s brilliant,” I agree, not looking away from her. “I’m learning from her.”

The astronomer moves on to the next couple. Harper turns to face me.

“You didn’t correct him,” she observes.

“Neither did you.”

She takes another sip of wine. “Maybe I’m getting used to the title.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Temporary cruise girlfriend,” she clarifies, but her tone is lighter than her words. “It expires in 48 hours.”

“Unless renewed by mutual agreement,” I suggest, keeping my voice casual despite the sudden tightness in my chest.

She laughs softly. “Is there a form for that? Terms and conditions?”

“I’m sure legal could draw something up.”

We’re joking, but there’s an undercurrent of seriousness that neither of us

acknowledges. Instead, we turn our attention back to the stars, sharing the telescope.

“Tell me something about yourself that isn’t in your corporate bio,” Harper says after a comfortable silence.

I consider the question. “I wanted to be a marine biologist before I joined the family business.”

She looks surprised. “Really?”

“Really. I was fascinated by ocean ecosystems. Had all the Jacques Cousteau books, spent every summer diving with my grandfather. Even started a marine biology program in college before my father forced me to switch to business.”

“Do you regret it?” she asks.

“Sometimes,” I admit. “But I’ve tried to bring that perspective to Cole Tech. We might not always get it right, but we’re trying to balance progress with protection.”

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“That explains a lot.” She adjusts her position on the blanket, sitting closer to me now. “Your understanding of marine issues is more nuanced than most ‘executives’.”

“What about you? Something not in your academic bio.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “I grew up on a farm in Iowa, about as far from the ocean as you can get. Didn’t see the coast until I was seventeen.”

“How did you end up in marine biology?”

“A documentary about coral bleaching.” She smiles at the memory. “I watched it in science class and was just... devastated. These incredible ecosystems dying because of human activity. I decided then that I wanted to protect them.”

“And now you do.”

“I try.” She looks up at the stars again. “Sometimes it feels like swimming against the tide, though. For every corporate initiative that helps, there are a dozen more causing damage.”

“Including mine?”

She turns to face me. “Some of yours,” she says. “But not all. That’s what makes you interesting, Ethan. You’re not the straightforward villain I expected.”

“A villain, huh,” I say.

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

We fall into another comfortable silence, the sound of waves providing a gentle backdrop. Around us, other couples are more romantic—kissing, feeding each other chocolate-covered strawberries, taking selfies against the starry sky.

“I should tell you something,” Harper says, her voice serious. “About my piece.”

I tense. “Go on.”

“I’ve been taking extensive notes, documenting both the positives and negatives. My publisher wants the negatives emphasized—the ‘exposé’ angle sells better.”

“That’s not surprising.”

“But I’ve decided I need to write what I observe, not what fits a predetermined narrative.” She says. “That includes acknowledging the genuine conservation efforts and sustainability initiatives you’ve implemented.”

Relief and gratitude wash over me. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for doing my job,” she says. “But I wanted you to know that whatever happens between us, my professional write up will be honest. Both the good and the bad.”

Her integrity, even when it would be easier to give her publisher the scandal they want, reinforces what’s been drawing me to Harper beyond the physical attraction. She’s principled in a way few people in my world are.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from you,” I say, meaning it.

She smiles, then shivers as a cool breeze sweeps across the beach. Without thinking, I wrap my arm around her shoulders. She stiffens, then relaxes into my side.

“Just because you are warm,” she murmurs.

“Of course.”

We watch the stars in silence, her body warm against mine. After a while, she rests her head on my shoulder, her hair tickling my neck. It feels right.

“Ethan,” she says softly. “About tomorrow morning’s inspection...”

“Let’s not worry about that now,” I interrupt. “Whatever we find, we’ll deal with it. Together.”

She nods against my shoulder. “Okay.”

The overnight portion of the event begins, with staff erecting small, luxurious tents for couples who’ve chosen to stay on the island. Harper and I have both opted to return to the ship, not quite ready to commit to a full night together in such a small tent or public setting.

As the last boat prepares to depart, we gather our things and make our way down to the shore. The ride back is quiet, both of us lost in thought.

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Would you like to come to my suite?” I ask as we step back aboard. “No expectations, just... I’m not ready for the night to end.”

She hesitates, then nods. “Neither am I.”

In my suite, Harper kicks off her shoes and curls up on the sofa while I pour us each a nightcap.

“What time is the inspection tomorrow?” she asks, accepting the glass of whiskey I offer.

“0600, Chen said. Early.”

“I should try to get some sleep, then.” She takes a sip of her drink, making no move to leave.

“Probably,” I agree, sitting beside her. “We both should.”

Instead, she sets her glass down and turns toward me. “Ethan.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t want to overthink this. Whatever happens when the cruise ends... I’m not denying what I want right now.”

“And what do you want right now?” I ask, my voice low.

In answer, she leans forward and kisses me, her lips taste like whiskey and desire. I respond, pulling her closer, one hand in her hair as the kiss deepens.

She climbs onto my lap, straddling me as she pulls at the buttons of my shirt. I slide my hands under her sweater, finding warm skin and the delicate lace of her bra.

“Wait,” I say breathlessly as she grinds against me. “Are you sure? Earlier today?”

“I’m sure,” she interrupts, pulling her sweater over her head in one fluid motion. “Less talking, more action, Cole.”

I laugh at the commanding tone, so perfectly Harper. “Yes, Doctor.”

I stand, lifting her with me, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her to the bedroom. She loosens my belt as I walk.

“This is research,” she murmurs as I lay her on the bed. “I need all the information.”

“Happy to contribute to your research,” I reply, shrugging off my shirt and joining her on the bed.

When she comes apart beneath me, calling my name in a breathless chant, I feel like I have won.

Later, tangled in sheets and each other, Harper traces patterns on my chest with her fingertip.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, brushing a strand of auburn hair from her face.

“Tomorrow’s inspection,” she admits. “And what happens if we find evidence of environmental violations.”

“We deal with them,” I say. “Transparency and immediate action.”

She props herself up on one elbow, studying me. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“And if it affects the company’s bottom line?”

“Some things are more important than profit margins.” I pull her closer. “I meant what I said earlier, Harper. We’re on the same side.”

She settles against me, her head resting on my chest. “I want to believe that.”

“Then believe it. I haven’t lied to you yet, have I?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“No,” she concedes. “You haven’t.”

We fall asleep like that, wrapped around each other, the ship’s gentle motion rocking us to sleep. My last thought before drifting off is that Alex is wrong—this doesn’t feel like atemporary cruise romance. It feels like something that could survive in the real world, if we’re brave enough to try.

My dream of Harper is interrupted by a sharp, persistent buzzing. I reach for my phone, groggy and disoriented.

“Cole,” I answer without checking the screen.

“Mr. Cole, this is Captain Reyes.” The voice is tense, professional. “I’m afraid we have a situation that requires your immediate attention.”

I sit up, alert. Beside me, Harper stirs, blinking sleepily.

“What’s happened?”

“There’s been an incident with the waste management system. One of the gray water tanks has ruptured. We’ve contained it within the ship, but there’s damage.”

“Any injuries?”

“No, sir. But Environmental Officer Chen believes this may explain the discrepancies Dr. Bennett identified yesterday. The system has been leaking for some time.”

Harper is awake now, watching me with concern. “What is it?” she whispers.

I cover the phone. “Problems with the waste system. A tank ruptured.”

Her eyes widen in understanding. “That would explain the discrepancies. Or someone trying to cover them up.”

I nod, then return to the call. “I’ll be right there. Alert the environmental clean-up team and begin a damage report.”

After hanging up, I turn to Harper. “Looks like our 6 AM inspection just got moved up. A gray water tank has ruptured. Chen thinks it’s related to what you found yesterday.”

She’s already out of bed, gathering her clothes. “This could explain the volume discrepancies. If the system was leaking rather than discharging externally... Or they didn’t want us to find anything at six when we got there.”

“We’ve had a containment problem, not a pollution issue.” I pull on pants and a fresh shirt. “Either way, it needs to be fixed.”

We dress, all romance gone. As we head for the door, Harper pauses.

“Ethan, if this confirms internal leakage rather than external discharge...”

“Then your write up should reflect that,” I finish for her. “Whatever the facts show, Harper. That’s all I ask.”

She nods, determination settling over her features. “Let’s go see what we’re dealing with.”

## Chapter Nine

### HARPER

#### DAMAGE CONTROL

“The rupture affected two of our five gray water tanks,” Environmental Officer Chen explains, pointing to a diagram of the ship’s waste management system. “Internal sensors show the leak began three weeks ago, small enough to avoid detection but significant enough to cause the volume discrepancies you noticed, Dr. Bennett.”

We’re standing in the cramped maintenance corridor of Deck 1, the smell of disinfectant and something less pleasant filling the air. I’m still wearing yesterday’s clothes, my hair pulled back, aware of Ethan’s presence beside me. Just an hour ago, we were tangled in his sheets. Now we’re inspecting ruptured waste tanks. Talk about mood whiplash.

“So, the ‘missing’ waste wasn’t being discharged into the ocean,” I clarify. “It was leaking into the internal containment area.”

“Correct,” Chen nods. “Our containment systems prevented environmental contamination, but the internal damage is significant.”

I glance at Ethan, whose expression remains calm. He’s asking the right questions, demonstrating genuine concern about both the environmental implications and passenger safety. It’s another glimpse of the competent, principled man behind the corporate façade—the man I’ve spent the last two nights discovering in other ways.

“Estimated repair time?” Ethan asks.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“At least 36 hours for temporary repairs,” the chief engineer interjects. “We’ll need a proper shipyard for permanent solutions.”

“That’s our last day at sea,” Ethan notes. “Can we maintain operations with the remaining tanks?”

“Yes, sir, but we’ll need to implement water conservation measures.”

Ethan nods. “Draft an announcement for passengers explaining the situation and necessary conservation steps. Chen, I want hourly monitoring of the containment area and confirmation that no external discharge has occurred.”

“Already underway, sir.”

“And prepare comprehensive documentation for Dr. Bennett’s assessment, and our insurance.” he adds, surprising me. “Complete transparency.”

Chen nods and returns to work, leaving Ethan and me alone in the corridor.

“You didn’t have to include that last part,” I say quietly.

“Yes, I did.” His eyes meet mine. “Your records of what we do on this ship need to reflect what happened, not what might have happened.”

“It’s still an environmental issue. Outdated equipment, delayed maintenance?—”

“Which will be in my report to the board,” he interrupts. “Along with an accelerated

timeline for the system upgrades and waste management overhaul.”

I stare at him, looking for any sign of corporate doublespeak or empty promises. I find none, just sincerity and—more disturbingly for my professional detachment—evidence that he has genuine concern for the environmental impact of his company’s operations.

“You’re serious about this,” I observe.

“Did you think I wasn’t?” He steps closer, lowering his voice. “Harper, I meant what I said last night. The environment and profit aren’t mutually exclusive concerns.”

The intensity in his blue eyes makes my stomach flip in a very unprofessional way. Standing here in a maintenance corridor, discussing waste management systems while sleep deprived, I shouldn’t be thinking about how his lips felt against my skin just hours ago.

“I need coffee before I can process any more corporate environmentalism,” I say, taking a deliberate step back. “Especially at 5 in the morning.”

His lips quirk in a small smile. “Breakfast in my suite? The chef can deliver something while we review the preliminary reports.”

“That would be...” Dangerous. Intimate. Exactly what I want. “... practical.”

“Practical,” he repeats, amusement warming his voice. “How very thoughtful of you, Dr. Bennett.”

“Efficiency is essential in crisis response,” I reply, though we both know my motivation isn’t professional.

Twenty minutes later, I'm showered and changed in my cabin, trying to gather my composure before rejoining Ethan. This wasn't how I expected my assignment to unfold—discovering a legitimate environmental issue, watching Ethan handle it with transparency and competence, then returning to his suite for “breakfast.”

My phone buzzes with a text from him:

Coffee's getting cold, Bennett. Avocado toast awaits.

I smile and head next door.

Ethan answers on the first knock, looking attractive in fresh clothes, his hair still damp from a shower. The suite behind him has been transformed—breakfast laid out on the dining table, reports stacked beside two laptops, the bed where we'd spent the night remade by housekeeping.

“Efficient,” I comment, accepting the coffee he offers.

“I try.” He gestures toward the food. “Eat first, then work?”

We settle at the table. This feels dangerously normal—sharing breakfast, discussing our day, existing in the same space without fighting or pretending.

“About last night,” I begin, unsure where I'm going with this but feeling the need to talk about our situation-ship.

“Which part?” Ethan asks, spreading avocado on toast. “The stargazing, the business revelations, or the part where you researched what makes me lose control?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“I was going to say to our conversation about what happens after the cruise.”

“Ah.” He looks up, his expression turning serious. “What about it?”

“We never talked about it.”

“True.” He says. “Does that bother you? The lack of clarity?”

“I’m a scientist, Ethan. I need defined parameters.”

A smile tugs at his lips. “Would you like a flowchart? Decision tree for post-cruise relationship options? A spreadsheet, or graph?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I mutter, though the idea has a certain appeal to my analytical mind.

“Harper.” He reaches across the table, his fingers brushing mine. “Not everything can be put into a spreadsheet. Relationships are messy, more like a mind map.”

“Says the CEO with five-year strategic plans.”

“Touché.” His thumb traces circles, sending inappropriate shivers up my arm. “But even the best plans have to be flexible, change is part of the plan.”

“And have things changed?” I ask, breathless.

“I think you know they have.” His voice drops lower. “For both of us.”

The intensity of his gaze makes it hard to maintain my detachment. Three days ago, I was determined to expose Cole Tech's environmental shortcomings. Now I'm sharing breakfast with its CEO after spending the night in his bed, contemplating the possibility of continuing... whatever this situation-ship is... beyond the artificial world of the cruise.

"Let's focus on the problem," I say, reluctantly withdrawing my hand. "We only have today and tomorrow left before I have to hand over my conclusions to a publisher that is dying to pull you to pieces."

A flash of disappointment crosses his face, but he nods. "Of course."

We spend the next hour reviewing documentation, which supports the internal leak theory. The waste wasn't being discharged into the ocean; it was contained within the ship's secondary systems as designed. It's still an issue—outdated equipment, delayed maintenance—but not the deliberate environmental violation I'd suspected. It is less of a me issue, and more of a financial issue for Cole Tech.

"The system worked," Ethan points out. "The waste was contained, not discharged."

"By backup systems, yes," I concede. "But the primary system failure means it needed upgrades."

"Which were already scheduled for the next dry dock." He pulls up a schedule on his laptop. "The propulsion system upgrades I mentioned yesterday are part of a larger overhaul that includes a complete waste management modernization."

I review the plans, impressed. "These upgrades exceed the current regulatory requirements."

"That was the point." He looks proud. "We're trying to set new standards, not just

meet existing ones.”

“Why haven’t you publicized this more? It would have stopped a lot of criticism Cole Tech receives. I would have taken notice, if I knew.”

“We wanted results first, announcements second.” He shrugs. “Too many companies make grand promises they never fulfill. I wanted tangible results.”

It’s exactly the approach I respect—substance over spin.

“Your write up will reference these planned upgrades?” he asks.

“Of course. Along with the current system limitations and this incident.” I meet his eyes. “Honesty, as promised.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything else.”

There’s that look again—admiration mixed with something more intimate. It makes my heart race.

“So,” he says, closing his laptop. “Reports reviewed, crisis averted, breakfast eaten. What now, Dr. Bennett?”

“Now I need to draft my preliminary findings.” I gather my notes, needing distance from his magnetic presence. “And you probably have CEO things to handle.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“CEO things,” he repeats with amusement. “Very technical terminology.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do.” He stands when I do, moving around the table. “But before you go...”

He stops in front of me, close enough that I can smell his cologne. My body remembers his touch from last night, from the morning’s shower, and it responds with embarrassing eagerness.

“What?” I ask.

“I forgot to say good morning.” His hand cups my face, thumb brushing my cheekbone. “Considering how we woke up.”

“Oh.” I swallow hard. “That’s... an oversight.”

His smile turns predatory making my knees weak. “I’d hate to be thorough in waste management reports but neglectful in personal matters.”

When his lips meet mine, any pretense evaporates. I’m kissing him back, as my hands find his chest, feeling his heart racing beneath my palm.

The kiss deepens, his tongue teasing mine as his hands slide down to my waist, pulling me against him. I make a small sound of approval when he backs me against the dining table, his intentions very clear.

“I thought—” I gasp as his lips find my neck, “—you had meetings.”

“Rescheduled,” he murmurs against my skin. “CEO things privilege.”

“How convenient.” My head falls back as he nips at my collarbone.

“Very.” His hands find the hem of my shirt. “May I?”

“Please.”

My shirt joins the laptops on the table, followed by my bra. Ethan’s appreciative gaze makes me forget all about boundaries and post-cruise complications.

“You are extraordinary,” he says. “Absolutely extraordinary.”

I should be embarrassed by how responsive I am to his touch, to the naked admiration in his eyes, but instead I feel powerful. Desirable. I reach for his shirt, impatient to feel his skin against mine.

“Off,” I demand, tugging at the fabric.

He complies, pulling the shirt over his head to reveal the chest I’ve been exploring over the past forty-eight hours. I feel the definition of his muscles, enjoying the way his breath catches when my fingers brush over sensitive spots.

“Bed?” he suggests, voice strained as my exploration continues downward.

“Too far,” I decide, undoing for his belt. “Here.”

His eyes darken with desire. “Dr. Bennett, are you suggesting we desecrate the dining table?”

“I’m suggesting you stop talking and start doing, Mr. Cole.”

He laughs, the sound transforming into a groan as my hand slips beneath his waistband. “Your directness is incredibly sexy.”

“Less commentary, more action,” I insist, though I’m smiling against his lips as he kisses me again.

This is hungry, desperate—clothes pushed aside rather than removed, the dining table creaking beneath me as Ethan positions me at its edge.

When he pushes inside me, we both groan. My legs wrap around his waist, pulling him deeper as his hands grip my hips with delicious intensity. There’s nothing gentle about this—we move together with urgency, the table shifting beneath us.

“Ethan,” I gasp as he hits the right spot, pleasure building. “Right there—don’t stop?—”

“I am not stopping,” he growls, adjusting his angle to hit the right spot. “Come for me, Harper. Let me feel you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

His command, combined with the perfect pressure of his thumb where I need it most, sends me over the edge. I cry out, not caring who might hear through the thin walls as waves of pleasure crash through me. Ethan follows moments later, his rhythm faltering as he buries his face against my neck with a deep groan.

For several minutes afterward, we remain connected, breathing hard, my legs still wrapped around him, his arms supporting my weight. Eventually, he lifts his head, hair mussed, a look of contentment on his face.

“So much for boundaries,” he murmurs, placing a soft kiss on my forehead.

“A temporary lapse in judgment,” I reply, though we both know it’s more than that.

“Mmm, is that what we’re calling it?” He helps me sit upright, as he passes me my discarded clothing. “Because I’d call it the best breakfast meeting, I’ve ever had.”

I laugh. “I can’t imagine any of your other breakfast meetings ending like this.”

“My accounts exec is seventy in the shade, he flirts sometimes.” He pulls his own clothes back on. “Usually right before he cuts my budget.”

“Pattern recognition. Very scientific of you.”

“He sounds fun.” He helps me down from the table, steadying me when my legs are embarrassingly wobbly. “Now, as much as I’d like to continue this research project, I have a real meeting in twenty minutes.”

“And I have an expose to finish,” I agree, though reluctance colors my voice.

“Dinner tonight?” he asks as he walks me to the door. “The chef’s table? Seven o’clock?”

I should say no.

“Yes,” I say instead. “Seven works.”

His smile is worth the inevitable consequences. “I’ll pick you up at your suite.”

“Try not to cause any more environmental crises before then,” I tease, feeling light-hearted despite the early morning emergency and my professional obligations hanging over me.

“I make no promises,” he replies with a grin. “They seem to lead to positive outcomes for us.”

I roll my eyes, but can’t suppress my smile as I leave his suite.

Back in my cabin, I shower again (necessary after our “breakfast meeting”) and change into fresh clothes, determined to focus on work.

The waste system incident provides perfect material—a legitimate issue revealed, dealt with showing complete transparency, contained before environmental damage could happen. It’s the kind of case study that shows the challenges and the potential for improvement in the cruise industry.

I work through the morning, fueled by room service coffee and the adrenaline of both the crisis and my breakfast with Ethan. Around noon, a text from Zoe pulls me from my concentration:

Earth to Harper! Haven't heard from you in DAYS. Did you throw the billionaire overboard or are you too busy with your fake boyfriend to text your real friend?

Guilt washes over me. I've been so caught up in the Ethan Cole whirlwind that I've neglected to update my best friend.

Sorry! It's been intense. Assessment going well. Will call when I'm back on solid ground.

Her reply comes instantly:

Intense HOW exactly? My reporter senses are tingling.

I hesitate, then type:

There was an environmental incident this morning. Waste system rupture. Contained, no oceanic discharge.

That's the "intense" you meant? Not, say, intense with tall, rich and aggravating? Because your social media absence suggests distraction of the horizontal variety.

I feel my cheeks warm. Zoe has always been able to read me, even through text messages.

Focus on the environmental assessment, please.

## Page 50

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

OMG YOU SLEPT WITH HIM! I KNEW IT! Spill everything immediately! Size, stamina, style—I need details!

I laugh despite myself, almost relieved to have someone to confide in about the surreal turn my professional assignment has taken.

It's complicated. He's not what I expected. More tomorrow when I'm back on land. Promise.

You're killing me, Bennett. At least tell me if the sex was good.

I think of this morning, of last night, of the shower—the way Ethan seems to approach my pleasure like a challenge he's determined to master, his attention to detail, his responsiveness to my direction.

Better than good.

KNEW IT. Use protection and take photos for blackmail purposes. Call me the MINUTE you're back on land.

Will do. Love you.

Love you too, you corporate-seducing hypocrite.

I smile at her teasing and return to my work, feeling lighter for having shared even that small bit of my confusing situation-ship with someone who knows me well.

The afternoon passes as I compile my data, review documentation, and organize my findings. By six, I've completed a solid draft of my preliminary findings—balanced, factual, acknowledging both commendable initiatives and areas requiring improvement. It's not the scathing exposé my publisher wanted, but it's honest, which matters more.

I close my laptop and get ready for dinner, a flutter of anticipation in my stomach that has nothing to do with work. Tonight is our last night at sea, our last night in this strange bubble where Ethan Cole isn't my adversary.

I choose a simple black dress that I'd packed just in case I needed to look like belonged on this ship, more elegant than sexy but flattering. As I apply my makeup and arrange my hair in loose waves, I look at the woman in the mirror—a scientist who now knows exactly how Ethan Cole looks when he comes apart in her arms, who has shared not just her body but pieces of her life and dreams with a man she was supposed to hate.

At seven, a knock sounds at my door. I open it to Ethan in a charcoal suit that emphasizes his broad shoulders, a bouquet of tropical flowers in his hand.

"You look beautiful," he says, handing me the flowers. "These are from the ship's sustainable garden. No rainforest destruction involved."

I laugh, accepting the vibrant blooms. "You've learned all my triggers."

"I pay attention to what matters to you." His sincerity is disarming.

"Thank you. Let me put these in water before we go."

As I arrange the flowers in the ice bucket (the only suitable container in my suite), Ethan watches me.

“What?” I ask, self-conscious.

“I was just thinking how strange it is that five days ago, you threw champagne at me, and now I’m bringing you flowers.”

“Life is full of plot twists,” I agree, smoothing my dress. “Ready for dinner?”

He offers his arm with old-fashioned courtesy. “Absolutely.”

The chef’s table is in a private dining room next to the main kitchen, an intimate space with just ten seats surrounding an elegantly set table. To my surprise, we’re the only guests.

“I may have reserved the entire experience,” Ethan admits when I comment on the empty seats. “I wanted you to myself tonight.”

“Extravagant,” I observe.

“Worth it.” His hand rests on my lower back as the maître d’ seats us side by side rather than across from each other, allowing us both to see the open kitchen area where the chef will prepare our meal.

The executive chef himself greets us, explaining that each course will showcase sustainable seafood and locally sourced ingredients from the islands we’ve visited. As he prepares the first course, Ethan’s hand holds mine beneath the table.

“Last night at sea,” he says quietly. “Any regrets?”

I consider the question. “About the job? No. I’ve documented what I found, good and bad.”

“I meant about us.”

I meet his eyes. “No regrets. Confusion about what happens next, yes. But no regrets.”

His smile is soft, it makes my heart stutter. “Good.”

Between courses, our conversation flows, touching on our childhoods, our education, our professional journeys—the kind of getting-to-know-you exchange that normally precedes physical intimacy rather than follows it. It strikes me we’ve done everything in reverse—professional antagonism, followed by fake relationship, followed by real physical intimacy, and only now the personal connection most couples build first.

“What are you thinking?” Ethan asks as dessert is served.

“That we’ve done this all ass-backward,” I admit, the wine making me more candid than usual. “Most people talk first, then kiss, then sleep together, then fight.”

“We’re not most people.” His thumb traces circles on my skin. “I knew your opinions before I knew how you take your coffee.”

“And now?”

“Now I know how you sound when you come, how you look first thing in the morning, and that you secretly enjoy romantic stargazing despite your cynicism about manufactured couples’ activities.”

I feel my cheeks heat at his blunt assessment. “They are cheesy, and awkward.”

“Still,” he counters, his voice dropping lower. “There’s so much more I want to learn about you, Harper.”

The intensity in his blue eyes makes my breath catch. This isn’t just about physical attraction anymore.

“Like what?” I ask, heart racing.

“Like whether you’d consider continuing this—us—after tomorrow. When we’re back in the real world.”

And there it is—the question that’s been hovering unspoken between us. What happens when the cruise ends, and we return to our normal lives? When he’s the CEO of Cole Tech and I’m the environmental scientist critiquing his company’s practices?

“It would be complicated,” I say, stating the obvious. “No cheesy organized fake-dates.”

“Most worthwhile things are complicated, and not fake.”

“Your board members would hate it.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“My colleagues would think I’d gone soft.”

“Possibly at first,” he concedes. “Until they realize it hasn’t changed you.”

“You sound like you’ve thought this through,” I observe.

“Haven’t you?”

I have, of course. More than I want to admit. Imagining dinners in actual restaurants, debates over environmental policy in his apartment, waking up together without the cruise itinerary telling us what to do. Wondering if what feels so significant within the bubble of this ship could survive in the real world, where he’s a billionaire and I am not.

“Yes,” I admit. “I have.”

“And?”

I take a deep breath, terrified but wanting to be honest. “And I think I’d like to try. Even if there are complications, and professional awkwardness. Even if I have absolutely no idea how it would work.”

The smile that transforms his face makes my confession worth the risk. “That’s all I’m asking for, Harper. A chance to try.”

“But,” I continue, holding up a hand, “my write up on this trip, remains honest and uninfluenced. My professional critique of Cole Tech practices is not going away. No special treatment.”

“I wouldn’t respect you if you offered it,” he says seriously. “Maybe in the bedroom, we can have some special treatment.” He winks.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“And when we disagree? When I criticize a Cole Tech initiative?”

“Then we disagree.” He shrugs. “We discuss it, find compromise where possible, and respect each other’s positions when we can’t.”

“That simple?”

“That complicated,” he corrects. “But worth the effort, I think.”

It won’t be easy. There will be raised eyebrows, accusations of conflicts of interest, potential professional backlash. But the alternative—walking away from whatever this is between us without seeing where it might lead—seems worse.

“Let’s try,” I say, setting down my dessert spoon. “One day at a time, figuring it out as we go.”

His smile is brilliant. “An extremely unscientific approach, Dr. Bennett.”

“I can make you a spreadsheet, Mr. Cole.”

After dinner, we walk along the ship’s promenade deck, the night air warm and fragrant with salt spray. Stars blanket the sky above us, the moon casting a silver path across the dark water. It’s romantic.

“Stay with me tonight,” Ethan says, his arm around my waist as we pause at the railing. “Our last night on board.”

I turn in his embrace, facing him. “I was planning to, anyway.”

His laugh is warm against my lips as he kisses me, a perfect blend of tenderness and desire that makes my toes curl in my heels.

“I need you to know something,” he says. “This isn’t a game to me, Harper. You’re not a conquest or a PR strategy or a way to influence your opinion of my company. What’s happening between us is real for me.”

The vulnerability in his voice touches something inside me. “It’s real for me too,” I admit. “Unexpected and inconvenient and ethically questionable, but real.”

“Unexpected, inconvenient, and ethically questionable.” He grins. “Perfect description for both of us.”

We can’t keep our hands off one another, the moment the door to his suite closes.

“Harper,” he whispers as we both approach the edge, my name a whisper. “Fuck, Harper.”

I come apart in his arms, his name escaping me in a breathless chant as he follows, our bodies and hearts synced in a way that both terrifies and exhilarates me.

Afterward, lying beside each other, I trace the line of his jaw with my fingertip. “I still can’t believe this happened.”

“Which part? The work assignment or it turning into a torrid affair, or the part where we decided to continue said affair in the real world?”

“All of it,” I laugh softly. “It’s not what I planned when I boarded this ship.”

“Life’s best moments are not in the plan.” He presses a kiss to my forehead. “For what it’s worth, you’ve changed my plans too.”

“For the better, I hope.”

“Definitively for the better,” he assures me. “Though my board of directors might disagree when they see the money I want to spend on upgrades. I’m planning to implement some big changes based on your recommendations.”

“Are you serious?” I prop myself up on one elbow. “They’ll have me locked up, or I’ll mysteriously disappear.”

“Dead serious. You highlighted several things we can improve way faster than our current timeline. I’ll be presenting the new plan next week.”

“That’s... thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for doing what’s right,” he echoes my earlier words. “But I wanted you to know that your work here matters, regardless of what’s happening between us.”

I settle against his chest, listening to his heartbeat, marveling at how completely my perception of Ethan Cole has changed in five short days. From corporate villain to complicated ally to lover—even partner, if we can survive beyond this ship.

“What are you thinking?” he asks, playing with my hair.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“That I’m looking forward to fighting with you in the future,” I admit. “You’re a worthy adversary.”

“And a sexier ally,” he adds. “Don’t forget that part.”

“And a sexier ally,” I agree, smiling against his skin.

### Chapter Ten

ETHAN

#### RETURNING TO REALITY

I wake before dawn, Harper’s warm body curled against mine. She sleeps, her breathing slow and even, messy hair spread across my pillow like a flame.

Our last morning on the ship. In a few hours, we’ll disembark at Miami, returning to the real world where I’m the CEO of Cole Tech and she’s a respected environmental scientist whose pending article could blow up my company’s sustainability reputation. The bubble we’ve lived in for the past five days—this strange space where antagonism changed into attraction, and attraction deepened into love—will burst.

I should be concerned, planning damage control strategies and PR angles. Instead, I’m watching Harper sleep and contemplating how I can convince her to have dinner with me in New York next weekend.

She stirs, stretching against me before her eyes flutter open. For a moment, she seems

disoriented, then her lips curve in a sleepy smile.

“Morning,” she murmurs, voice husky.

“Morning.” I brush a strand of hair from her face. “Sleep well?”

“Mmm, eventually.” The mischief in her eyes reminds me of our late-night activities.

“You’re dangerously good at that, Dr. Bennett.”

“I believe in being hands on.” She props herself up on one elbow. “What time do we dock?”

“Nine. Disembark at ten.” Reality intruding on our last moments of privacy.

She nods. “My flight back to New York is at two.”

“Mine as well. Different airline, I presume?”

“Probably. I doubt my economy ticket is on your private jet.”

I laugh, grateful for her humor. “I flew commercial. But I’d be happy to upgrade your seat to first class if you’re on my flight.”

“No special treatment, remember? That was our agreement.” Her tone is light, but her eyes are serious. “We start as we mean to go on, Ethan.”

“Fair enough.” I pull her closer, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Though I reserve the right to spoil you for personal reasons.”

“We’ll set those boundaries later.” She stretches again, the sheet slipping lower to

reveal the freckled skin of her shoulders and the gentle swell of her breasts. “Right now, I think we have more important things to attend to.”

“Such as?”

Her hand slides beneath the sheet, finding me already hard. “Making the most of our remaining ship time.”

Any clever response dies in my throat as her fingers wrap around me with confidence. I’ve been with beautiful, accomplished women before, but none who approach intimacy with Harper’s genuine passion.

“Harper,” I warn as she works her way down my body, trailing kisses across my chest and stomach. “We have breakfast reservations in an hour.”

“Plenty of time,” she murmurs against my skin. “I’ve streamlined this process.”

When her mouth replaces her hand, warm and wet around me, I surrender to the sensation, tangling my fingers in her auburn hair as she makes me forget my self-control. Just when I’m approaching the edge, she pulls back, a wicked smile playing at her lips.

“Not yet,” she says, moving up my body to straddle my hips. “I want to try something.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

I watch, mesmerized, as she positions herself above me, sinking down with agonizing slowness until I'm sheathed inside her. The sight of Harper taking her pleasure—head thrown back, eyes half-closed—is enough to make me forget every responsibility awaiting me outside this cabin.

“You're incredible,” I manage, hands guiding her hips as she builds a rhythm that has us both gasping.

“Just—” she falters as I thrust upward to meet her, “—don't stop.”

“I wasn't planning to.”

Her laugh transforms into a moan as I reach between us, my thumb finding her sensitive clit, that I know will push her to her climax. Her movements become more erratic, her breathing more ragged.

“Ethan,” she gasps, nails digging into my skin. “I'm so close?—”

“I know,” I murmur, increasing the pressure of my thumb. “Let go, Harper. I've got you.”

When she comes, it's with my name on her lips and her eyes locked on mine—a moment of perfect connection that sends me following right after her, my release leaves me breathless.

She collapses against me, her heartbeat racing in time with mine, our bodies still joined as we catch our breath. I wrap my arms around her, committing to memory the

scent of her hair and the feel of her skin.

“I think we can still make breakfast?” she asks after a moment, voice muffled against my shoulder.

I laugh, pressing a kiss to her temple. “Yes. Though I’d happily miss breakfast for more of this.”

“Don’t tempt me.” She lifts her head, expression softening. “But we should start getting ready to go home too.”

Reality again. I nod, though I make no move to release her. “Five more minutes.”

“Five more minutes,” she agrees, settling back against my chest.

Finally, with reluctance, Harper slides from my embrace and begins gathering her clothes from where they ended up scattered across the floor.

“I need to finish packing,” she says, pulling her dress over her head. “And I should check if Chen has the final documentation I requested.”

“I’ll handle Chen,” I offer, pulling on boxers and reaching for my phone. “You can pack. Meet me for breakfast at eight?”

Her smile is warm enough to chase away my concerns about our impending return to reality. “Eight works. Here or the dining room?”

“Dining room. We should make at least one public appearance before disembarking.”

“For the cameras?” she asks, a hint of her earlier skepticism returning.

“For closure on our official arrangement,” I clarify. “Our fake relationship deserves a proper ending, don’t you think?”

“You’re right. One last performance before we restart on real terms.”

She crosses to where I sit on the edge of the bed, bends down, and kisses me. “See you at eight, Cole.”

After she leaves, I shower and get dressed, my mind shifting between anticipation and real company concerns. Standard CEO concerns, but now infused with Harper’s influence.

My phone buzzes with a text from Alex:

Docking in an hour. Media waiting for your disembarkation with Dr. Bennett. How do you want to play this?

An excellent question. How do we present ourselves? The fake relationship was arranged for mutual benefit—positive PR for me, access for Harper. But what we’ve developed is genuine, if complicated. Too new and fragile for public consumption, yet too good to hide.

We’ll disembark together, cordial. Emphasize her thorough assessment and our commitment to implementing improvements. No hint of romantic attachment yet—she needs space for her assessment to be perceived as unbiased.

Alex’s response comes quickly:

Wise approach. Though the internet is already shipping you two based on passenger social media. #ColevsBennett trending again, but now with heart emojis.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

I smile despite myself.

Let them speculate. Official line is professional respect and environmental commitment.

Got it. See you shore-side.

At eight, I enter the main dining room to find Harper already seated by a window, looking out at the approaching Miami skyline. She's wearing a simple green sundress that brings out her eyes, her hair loose around her shoulders. Several passengers glance at us with interest—our antagonism-to-romance storyline has provided quality entertainment throughout the cruise.

“Dr. Bennett,” I greet her as I approach, mindful of our audience.

She looks up with a small smile. “Mr. Cole. Right on time.”

“Always, for important matters.” I take the seat across from her, noting the array of breakfast options she's already selected from the buffet. “I see you've started without me.”

“The ship's waste processing incident made me conscious of food waste this morning,” she replies, loud enough for nearby tables to hear.

“Admirable principles, as always.”

Our public performance continues through breakfast—professional, cordial, with just

enough lingering eye contact to fuel gossip. To any observer, we appear to be a corporate executive and an environmental scientist finding unexpected common ground—nothing more.

Only the slight reddening of Harper's cheeks when my foot brushes hers beneath the table betrays our more intimate connection.

As we finish our coffee, the captain announces our arrival at Port Miami. Passengers move toward observation decks to watch the docking process, leaving us alone in the dining room.

"So," Harper says quietly. "Here we are. End of the cruise."

"End of the cruise," I agree. "Not the end of us."

She meets my eyes, uncertainty flashing across her features. "It will be different on land. Complicated."

"I know." I reach across the table, covering her hand with mine. "But I meant what I said last night. I want to try, Harper. No pressure, no expectations, just... possibility."

Her expression softens. "I want that too. Even with all the logical, rational arguments against it."

"When do you plan to publish your expose?"

"I'll submit the preliminary findings to my publisher next week. The full report will take another two weeks to complete with all the data." She hesitates. "Once it's published, people will have opinions about our... relationship."

"People always have opinions. The question is whether we care more about those

opinions than about us.”

“Very philosophical for a corporate CEO,” she teases, but her eyes are serious.

“I am not just a CEO.”

Her smile reaches her eyes this time. “You’ve proven that.”

The ship’s horn sounds, announcing our arrival. Around us, passengers gather belongings and bags preparing to leave the boat. Our private moment ends.

“My suite is closer to the main gangway than yours,” I say, standing. “Would you like to collect your luggage and meet me there in thirty minutes? We can disembark together.”

She nods. “Professionally together? For appearances.”

“For now,” I agree. “Until you’ve published your findings, and we can plan our next steps without compromising your professional credibility.”

“Thank you for understanding that.” The relief in her voice confirms I’ve made the right decision, however much I might want to claim her as mine.

“See you in thirty,” she says, then surprises me by leaning in and placing a quick kiss on my cheek—the kind of goodbye a casual friend might offer, nothing that would raise eyebrows. But her whispered words are for me alone. “Last night was worth repeating, Cole. Many times.”

Then she’s gone, moving through the crowded dining room with grace, leaving me watching her with what I suspect is a ridiculously obvious expression of admiration.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Thirty minutes later, my luggage is packed and waiting by the door when Harper arrives, looking composed and professional in jeans and a light blazer, her hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. Only the slight darkening of a mark just above her collar—a memento from our more enthusiastic activities last night—hints at our intimate connection.

“Ready?” she asks, all business despite the memories of her naked in my bed just hours ago.

“Ready.” I pick up both our bags.

Her lips twitch with suppressed amusement.

I maintain a professional distance from Harper, though every instinct urges me to take her hand, to place my palm against the small of her back, to give some outward sign of my internal claim.

“Alex says there’s media waiting at the cruise terminal,” I warn as we approach the exit. “Standard coverage, but they’ll be interested in us given our initial champagne baptism and subsequent social media storm.”

“How should we handle it?” she asks, tensing.

“You completed your case study, I provided full access and transparency, we developed mutual professional respect through the process.” I meet her eyes. “The truth, just not the whole truth.”

She nods, squaring her shoulders. “I can manage that.”

We reach the gangway, where Chen waits with a final data package for Harper. As they exchange professional goodbyes, I scan the terminal, spotting several camera crews positioned to capture passenger reactions.

“Dr. Bennett,” I say as she finishes with Chen, loud enough for nearby passengers to hear. “Thank you for your thorough assessment of our environmental initiatives. Cole Tech looks forward to your findings and recommendations for continuous improvement.”

She slips into her role, extending her hand for a formal shake. “Thank you for your transparency, Mr. Cole. It’s refreshing to work with a corporation committed to environmental progress, even when that means spending money.”

We shake hands, the touch brief despite the electricity that still courses between us. Around us, passengers watch with interest, several recording our interaction on their phones.

“Shall we?” I gesture toward the gangway, allowing her to walk ahead.

Together, we disembark, walking side by side but not quite together down the long ramp toward the terminal. At the bottom, Alex waits with my small team, alongside several reporters hoping for a statement.

“Mr. Cole!” One steps forward, microphone extended. “How would you characterize your cruise experience with Dr. Bennett? Sources say you two moved from adversaries to allies on this journey.”

I glance at Harper, who gives an almost imperceptible nod.

“I would say it was enlightening,” I respond. “Dr. Bennett’s expertise provided valuable insights for Cole Tech’s ongoing commitment environmental sustainability. What began as a fight evolved into a mutually beneficial professional exchange?”

“And Dr. Bennett?” Another reporter turns to Harper. “Your initial confrontation with Mr. Cole went viral. Has your opinion of him and Cole Tech changed?”

Harper straightens, every inch the poised scientist. “I am not paid for my opinion, but to find the facts. My findings will be published in the coming weeks, but I can confirm that Cole Tech has showed more genuine environmental commitment than I expected. There remain areas that need improvement, which I’ve documented, but I’m impressed by Mr. Cole’s willingness to acknowledge his shortcomings and commit to fixing them.”

“So, no more champagne throwing?” a reporter jokes.

Harper’s smile is professional but warm. “I believe we’ve found more effective ways to communicate.”

If only they knew just how effective.

“Mr. Cole, will you be implementing Dr. Bennett’s recommendations? At what cost to Cole Tech? Does your board support this?” another asks.

“Without having seen her complete assessment, I can’t commit to specifics,” I reply. “But I value her expertise and perspective. Cole Tech is dedicated to continuous improvement, and insights from respected scientists like Dr. Bennett are crucial to that process.”

Alex steps forward, interrupting before more personal questions can come out of the woodwork. “Thank you all for your interest. Mr. Cole has a board meeting to prepare

for, and I'm sure Dr. Bennett has her own obligations."

As the media disperses, Alex gives me a knowing look that I ignore. She's been my PR director long enough to recognize when I'm not telling the complete story.

"Your car is waiting, Ethan," she says. "Dr. Bennett, it was a pleasure to work with you on this project. I look forward to reading your assessment."

"Thank you for arranging the access," Harper replies. "It was more transparent than I expected."

"I'll bet," Alex murmurs, too low for others to hear.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

I shoot her a warning glance before turning to Harper. “Your Uber should arrive any minute. I’ve arranged for priority interview access when your assessment is published, if you want to?”

“That seems appropriate,” she agrees, her formal tone belied by the warmth in her eyes. “Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Cole.”

“The pleasure was mine, Dr. Bennett.”

We stand for a moment, the professional facade awkward between us. There’s so much I want to say, to ask, to promise—but not here, not with Alex watching and port staff bustling around us.

Harper solves the dilemma by offering her hand again. As I take it, she presses something small and firm into my palm—a folded piece of paper.

“Safe travels,” she says, releasing my hand and stepping back. “I’m sure we’ll be in touch.”

“Count on it,” I reply, resisting the urge to open the note.

She nods once, then turns and walks toward the terminal exit.

Only when I’m in the privacy of my car, do I unfold the note. Written in Harper’s neat handwriting is a phone number—her personal cell, not her work contact—and beneath it, three words that make me smile.

Call me tonight.

“Productive professional exchange, huh?” Alex asks from the front passenger seat, turning to face me. “Want to tell me what really happened on that ship?”

“Not particularly,” I reply, tucking the note into my pocket.

“The board meeting is Wednesday. They’ll want a full briefing on her assessment and what to expect from Bennett’s report.”

“They’ll get it.”

“And if they ask about your relationship with her?”

I consider my answer. “I’ll tell them Dr. Bennett and I developed mutual respect through the process, and that I value her scientific expertise and integrity.”

“And the personal aspect?”

“Is personal, Alex. And not relevant to the board’s interests.” My tone makes it clear the subject is closed.

She nods slowly. “Just be careful, E. I’ve never seen you look at anyone the way you looked at her just now.”

“I know what I’m doing,” I say, though I’m not sure that’s true. Harper Bennett has upended my controlled life in ways I am not ready for.

“I hope so.” Alex turns back to her tablet. “For what it’s worth, I like her. She doesn’t take your shit, and you need more people like that in your life.”

I smile, thinking of champagne dripping down my suit and Harper's uncompromising principles. "On that, we agree."

At the airport, I get through security and boarding, my thoughts divided between the upcoming board meeting and the woman who's changed my life in less than a week. My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number as I settle into my first-class seat.

Spotted your flight on the departure board. We're on the same plane. Economy, row 27. The universe has a peculiar sense of humor.

I smile, typing.

A coincidence I'm tempted to interpret as cosmically significant. How's the legroom in economy these days?

Nonexistent. The passenger in front of me has already reclined, and we haven't even taken off.

An upgrade offer stands. No professional implications, just legroom considerations.

Her response takes longer this time.

Rain check on the upgrade. But I wouldn't object to a drink being sent back once we're airborne. For hydration only.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Hydration is essential. Consider it done.

I signal a flight attendant before takeoff, arranging for champagne to be delivered to row 27 once we're in the air. The irony of sending her champagne after our first encounter isn't lost on me.

Two hours into the flight, my phone buzzes again.

The champagne was a nice touch. Much better when I'm drinking it rather than throwing it.

Progress. Though I found both experiences memorable in their own way.

You're impossible. Also, I may have drafted the opening of my assessment during this flight. It's... balanced.

I wouldn't expect anything less from you. Integrity looks good on you, Bennett. So does that green dress, by the way.

Stop flirting and let me work, Cole. Some of us use flights productively.

Understood. Though I can think of a more productive use of our time if you'd accepted that upgrade offer...

NOW who's being unprofessional? Behave yourself until we land.

No promises. But I'll try.

I spend the rest of the flight reviewing board materials and drafting implementation plans for the environmental initiatives Harper highlighted during her assessment. By the time we begin our descent into New York, I have a comprehensive strategy for accelerating our sustainability timeline—one that will surprise the board but transform Cole Tech's environmental impact.

As passengers prepare for landing, I send one last text.

Dinner tomorrow night? My place. I'll cook something organic

.

Her response comes quickly.

You cook?

One of my many hidden talents. Say yes.

Yes. Send your address. I'll bring wine.

Looking forward to it, Dr. Bennett.

It's a date, Mr. Cole.

The simple exchange fills me with anticipation. Not just for tomorrow's dinner, but for the possibilities beyond it—challenging and worth exploring.

When we land, I wait, allowing other first-class passengers to disembark ahead of me. From my seat, I can see down the aisle as economy passengers begin to gather their belongings. Eventually, Harper appears, looking rumpled but no less striking. Our eyes meet across the distance, a private moment of recognition amid the bustle.

She gives me a small smile before disappearing into the terminal crowd.

I follow more slowly, respecting the distance she needs while already planning tomorrow's menu and imagining her in my apartment, our strange, reversed relationship continuing its unconventional evolution.

Five days ago, Harper Bennett threw champagne in my face and called me an environmental hypocrite. Now she's coming to my apartment for dinner, having spent two nights in my bed.

Life rarely unfolds according to plan, but sometimes, the unexpected detours lead to far more interesting destinations. And Harper Bennett is undoubtedly the most interesting detour I've encountered in years—one I'm certain might become my most important destination.

Tomorrow can't come soon enough.

Chapter Eleven

HARPER

### FIRST DATE REVELATIONS

New York feels jarringly normal after the surreal bubble of the cruise ship. My apartment—filled with stacks of research papers, potted plants in various stages of dying, and the familiar clutter of academic life—seems almost foreign, as if it belongs to a different version of me.

In a way, it does. The Harper Bennett who left five days ago was laser-focused on exposing corporate environmental hypocrisy. The Harper Bennett who returned has... complications and a situation-ship.

Specifically, one six-foot-two complication with blue eyes and a maddening ability to make me forget every reason getting involved with him is questionable.

“Earth to Harper!” Zoe waves her hand in front of my face. “You’ve been staring at that same paragraph for ten minutes.”

We’re sitting in my living room, takeout containers spread across my coffee table as I attempt to focus on drafting my ‘expose’ while Zoe interrogates me about the cruise.

“Sorry.” I blink, refocusing on my laptop screen. “Just trying to get the wording right.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She gives me her journalist’s scrutiny. “Nothing to do with your dinner plans tonight?”

I’d made the fatal error of mentioning my upcoming date with Ethan, unleashing a

barrage of questions I'm not qualified to answer.

"I can complete work on a deadline," I mutter, though my concentration has been scattered all day. "It's not like I'm some teenager with a crush."

"No, you're a grown woman who spent a week having hot sex with a billionaire she despised and is now attempting to write an objective assessment of his company while preparing to go to his apartment for a 'dinner' that we both know is about getting naked again."

Put like that, it sounds ridiculous.

"It's more complicated than that," I protest.

"Obviously." She steals a piece of broccoli from my forgotten takeout container. "That's what makes it fun to watch. Harper 'Principles Above All' Bennett, sleeping with the corporate enemy, and I have a front-row seat."

"He's not the enemy."

"Exactly my point." Zoe looks triumphant. "Five days ago, you called him 'the poster boy for corporate greenwashing.' Now you're defending him. So, what happened between the champagne throwing and the bedroom gymnastics?"

I sigh, closing my laptop. There's no point in pretending to work until I satisfy her curiosity.

"He surprised me," I admit. "The conservation work is legitimate, not just PR. He's implementing significant environmental improvements, many exceeding regulatory requirements. And he's..." I struggle to articulate the complexity that is Ethan Cole. "He's not what I expected."

“Meaning?”

“He listens. Really listens, not just waiting for his turn to talk. He asks thoughtful questions. He’s willing to acknowledge where he’s falling short. And when I identified an issue with their waste systems, he didn’t get defensive or try to cover it up. He focused on fixing it.”

“Wow.” Zoe’s expression turns serious. “You like him. Not just because he’s hot and good in bed, but as a person.”

“I do,” I confess, the admission both frightening and liberating. “It’s inconvenient and complicated and a terrible idea, but... yes. I like him.”

“And he likes you?”

I think of Ethan’s expression when I agreed to try an actual relationship, the way he respected my need for professional distance, the text exchange on the plane that made me smile even when I was exhausted.

“I think so,” I say cautiously. “But it’s new and strange and neither of us knows if it can work in the real world.”

“Hence tonight’s dinner.” Zoe nods sagely. “The first real-world test.”

“Exactly.”

“What are you wearing?”

I laugh at the abrupt shift. “Clothes. I haven’t decided. Something casual but nice. Not trying too hard.”

She looks horrified. “Please tell me you’re not planning to wear one of your ‘scientific conference’ outfits. This is a date with a hot billionaire who’s already seen you naked. Up your game, Bennett.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“I have game!” I protest, though my wardrobe leans toward practical rather than sexy.

“You have academic game. Different sport.” She stands, already going into my bedroom. “Show me your options.”

Thirty minutes later, after rejecting everything in my closet (“How do you own six identical black blazers but no decent date dresses?”), Zoe approves a simple green wrap dress I’d forgotten I owned.

“This works,” she declares. “Casual enough for dinner at his place but still shows off your figure. And green brings out your eyes.”

“He mentioned liking me in green,” I admit, remembering his text on the plane.

“See? The man has taste.” She eyes me. “Now, underwear.”

“Absolutely not. I draw the line at my best friend selecting my knickers.”

“Fine, but please tell me you have something sexier than cotton for this date.”

The flush rising to my cheeks answers before I can.

“Harper Bennett!” Zoe looks delighted. “You’ve been planning this all along!”

“Not all along,” I correct her. “But I may have purchased something... appropriate... at the ship’s boutique. For research.”

“Research,” she repeats with a knowing grin. “Of course.”

By six-thirty, I’m dressed, my hair falling in loose waves around my shoulders, minimal makeup applied with more care than usual. The butterflies in my stomach feel like bats—I’ve already been intimately involved with this man multiple times. There’s no logical reason for first-date nerves.

Yet here they are.

Zoe gives me a last inspection before leaving. “You look fantastic. Smart and sexy, which is your whole brand, anyway.”

“I have a brand?”

“Absolutely. Brilliant but hot scientist who doesn’t take corporate bullshit.” She grins. “Apparently it works on billionaire CEOs.”

“Just one specific billionaire CEO,” I correct her, checking the address Ethan texted one more time before ordering an Uber.

“For now. You might start a trend.” She hugs me at the door. “Call me tomorrow with full details. And Harper?”

“Yes?”

“If it feels right, go for it. Complications and all. I haven’t seen you this excited about a man... well, ever.”

Her observation follows me into the Uber and throughout the ride to Ethan’s address in Tribeca. Am I so different? So affected by what’s happened between us?

The butterflies intensify as the car pulls up to his building—sleek, modern, and expensive without being cocky. The doorman greets me by name, expecting me, he directs me to the private elevator that serves only the penthouse.

“Mr. Cole is expecting you,” he says.

The elevator requires a keycard, which the doorman provides. As it ascends to the top floor, I take deep breaths, reminding myself that this is just dinner with a man I’ve already slept with multiple times. No reason for this fluttering sensation in my chest or the slight sweatiness of my palms.

When the doors open into Ethan’s apartment, all coherent thoughts are gone.

The space is stunning—floor-to-ceiling windows offering panoramic views of the city, the decor modern but warm, with attention to sustainability in the reclaimed wood furniture and living green wall. But it’s the man standing in the open kitchen area, sleeves rolled up as he stirs something that smells incredible, that captures my attention.

Ethan looks up at the sound of the elevator, his face breaking into a genuine smile that makes my heart perform a gymnastic worthy flip.

“You’re right on time,” he says, setting down his wooden spoon and crossing to greet me. “Punctuality—yet another thing we have in common.”

“Professional habit,” I reply, unsure of the appropriate greeting. Do I shake his hand? Kiss his cheek? Jump into his arms?

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

He solves my dilemma by leaning in and placing a soft kiss on my lips—brief but sexy, a perfect middle ground.

“You look beautiful,” he says, taking in my dress. “I like the green.”

“You mentioned that once.” I’m happy he noticed. “What are you cooking? It smells amazing.”

“Organic beef stew with vegetables.” He leads me deeper into the apartment, his hand touching the small of my back. “Wine? I have a Sauvignon Blanc that should pair well.”

“Sounds perfect.” I follow him to the kitchen, admiring both the apartment and its owner with equal appreciation. Ethan in casual clothes—jeans and a simple button-down with rolled sleeves revealing muscular forearms—is a different but very appealing version of the polished CEO.

He pours two glasses of wine, handing one to me. “How does it feel to be back on land?”

“Strange,” I admit, taking a sip. The wine is excellent, crisp and bright. “My apartment feels the same and yet foreign.”

“I know what you mean.” He returns to stirring the stew. “I spent two hours yesterday staring at acquisition reports and realizing I no longer see them with quite the same priorities.”

“Because of the environmental report?” I ask, leaning against the counter beside him.

“Because of you,” he says simply, meeting my eyes. “Your perspective has... shifted things for me.”

The directness of his response catches me off guard. “That’s... good, I think?”

“It is. Challenging, but good.” He smiles. “How’s the expose coming along?”

“First draft is almost complete. I’m being thorough—documenting both the positives and the areas needing improvement.” I take another sip of wine. “My publisher is unhappy with my balanced approach. They wanted more scandal.”

“And you’re giving them truth instead. How inconvenient for their marketing department.”

I laugh, relaxing. This is the easy banter we had on the ship, the connection that goes deeper than physical attraction.

“Truth is my only non-negotiable,” I tell him. “Even when it’s inconvenient for me.”

“That’s what makes your opinion so valuable,” he says, adding fresh herbs to the stew. “And it’s why I trust your findings, even if they’re critical.”

“There will be criticisms,” I warn him. “The waste system maintenance issues, the excessive food waste, the still-too-high carbon footprint of the older ships in your fleet.”

“I know.” He tastes the stew, adjusts seasoning. “We have room for improvement. But you’ve also noted our legitimate conservation efforts, our expansion of sustainable seafood sourcing, our marine habitat protection initiatives.”

“I have,” I confirm. “It’s a mixed picture. Like most things in real life.”

“Speaking of mixed pictures,” he says, gesturing toward the dining area visible through an archway. “Shall we eat? The stew is ready.”

The dining table is already set—simple but elegant, with linen napkins and handmade pottery dishes. A small arrangement of seasonal flowers forms the centerpiece—nothing ostentatious, just thoughtfully selected blooms.

“Your apartment isn’t what I expected,” I comment as he serves the food.

“What were you expecting? Gold fixtures and priceless art?” He looks amused.

“Maybe? Something more... flashy.”

“Not my style.” He takes the seat across from me. “I prefer functionality and comfort over flashy. Though I admit, the view is an indulgence.”

He’s right—the city sparkles beyond the windows, lights flickering on as dusk settles, the Hudson River reflecting the sunset in shades of pink and gold.

“It’s beautiful,” I acknowledge, then taste the food. “This is delicious. Where did you learn to cook?”

“My grandfather,” he answers, surprising me again. “He believed every man should know how to prepare food. Said it was a life skill, not a luxury. We spent many evenings in the galley of his yacht, with him teaching me how to make the most of a fresh catch.”

The image of a young Ethan learning to cook from his grandfather creates an unexpected warmth in my chest. “That sounds like a special relationship.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“It was.” Affection softens his features. “He was a complicated man—built a business that contributed to the greenhouse effect you are fighting, but he also taught me to respect the ocean and its creatures. I think he’d approve of the direction I’m trying to take his company now.”

“Balancing progress with protection,” I recall his words from the ship.

“Exactly.” He looks pleased that I remembered. “What about you? Any special family influences on your career path?”

“My father,” I say, memories surfacing. “He farmed in Iowa, but he was meticulous about being organic, even when it cost more or reduced short-term yields. He understood environmental stewardship as a moral obligation, not just a business decision.”

“That explains a lot about you,” Ethan observes. “The unwavering principles, the long-term perspective.”

“I suppose it does.” I’ve never connected those dots before. “He would have liked your turtle conservation program. He had a soft spot for endangered species.”

“And what would he think of you having dinner with a corporate CEO?” There’s genuine curiosity in Ethan’s question.

“He’d be suspicious of your intentions,” I admit with a smile. “But he’d respect that you’re trying to do better. He valued action over words.”

“Another thing you have inherited.”

The conversation flows through dinner—filling in the personal context missing from our reversed relationship timeline. I learn about Ethan’s conflicted relationship with his father, his initial resistance to joining the family business, his gradual recognition that he could drive more change from within the corporate structure than from outside it.

I share stories of my academic path, the mentors who shaped my approach to environmental science, the frustrations and rewards of advocacy work.

“Most people assume I enjoy conflict,” I say as we move to his living room with fresh glasses of wine, settling onto a comfortable sofa with the city glittering beyond the windows. “I hate it. I’d much rather collaborate than fight.”

“Says the woman who threw champagne in my face five days ago,” Ethan teases, sitting close enough that our knees touch.

“That was an anomaly! I was provoked.”

“By my very existence, apparently.” His eyes crinkle with amusement.

“You were baiting me?” I narrow my eyes.

“Testing you,” he corrects. “I wanted to see if the passionate advocate I’d read about was genuine or just another agenda being pushed.”

“And did I pass your test?” I ask, torn between irritation and intrigue.

“With flying colors. And excellent aim.” His smile turns rueful. “I didn’t anticipate being quite so impressed. Or that it would lead here.”

“Here” encompasses more than his apartment. It’s this unexpected connection, this complex relationship.

“I didn’t plan for ‘here’ either,” I admit, setting down my wine glass. “But I’m... glad it happened.”

“Are you?” He asks. “Even with all the complications?”

“Even with those.” I meet his gaze. “Though I’m still not sure how we are going to manage them.”

“Day by day,” he suggests, reaching to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering against my cheek. “With honesty and respect for each other, even when we don’t align perfectly.”

“That sounds great in theory,” I say, hyperaware of his touch. “Though I suspect the practice part will be more challenging.”

“It’s worth it.” His voice drops lower as his hand slips to the nape of my neck, drawing me closer. “Speaking of worthwhile things...”

When his lips meet mine—as if we’re remembering our intimacy and creating something new. I respond, my hands finding their way to his chest, feeling his heart race beneath my palms.

The kiss deepens, his tongue teasing mine as he pulls me closer, until I’m in his lap. What began as a gentle reconnection ignites into something more urgent, fueled by the few days of separation and the strange tension of being together outside the cruise ship.

“Harper,” he murmurs against my neck, his hands slipping beneath the hem of my

dress to find bare skin. “I’ve been thinking about this since we landed.”

“Just since we landed?” I tease. “Your restraint is impressive.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

He laughs against my skin, the vibration sending shivers down my spine. “Fine. Since you left my suite yesterday morning. Possibly since I first saw you in the ship’s lobby, though that’s more complicated to explain.”

“You wanted to kiss me when I was calling you an environmental hypocrite?” I pull back, intrigued by this.

“I wanted to do so much more than kiss you,” he admits, eyes darkening. “Your passion was incredibly attractive, even when directed at humiliating me.”

“That’s... flattering.” I shift into his lap now, knees on either side of his hips, enjoying the sharp intake of his breath at the contact. “Though concerning from a psychological perspective.”

“Are you analyzing me, Dr. Bennett?” His hands grip my waist, holding me steady against him.

“I am,” I murmur, rolling my hips subtly against his growing arousal. “I analyze everything.”

“Everything?” His eyebrow raises in challenge as his hands slide higher beneath my dress.

“Well, some things I prefer to experience.”

This earns me a genuine laugh that transforms into a groan as I repeat my hip movement with more deliberate pressure. “You are sexy, you know.”

“So, you’ve mentioned.” I kiss him again, deeper this time, reveling in the way his hands tighten on my waist in response. “I’m a nerd, you don’t have to lie.”

“A sexy nerd,” he manages, voice strained as I unbuckle his belt. “We should move this to the bedroom?”

“The bedroom?” I smile against his lips. “How conventional, Mr. Cole.”

“I am not conventional,” he reminds me, standing with me still wrapped around him, my legs tightening around his waist. The display of strength sends a fresh wave of heat through me.

“Impressive,” I comment as he carries me toward his bedroom.

“You haven’t seen impressive yet,” he promises, his expression making my stomach flip in anticipation.

His bedroom, like the rest of the apartment, is minimalist—centered around an enormous bed with simple, high-quality linens in deep blue. He sets me down on the edge, stepping back to look at me it makes me feel exposed and powerful.

“You are extraordinary,” he says softly, echoing words he’s said before. “I still can’t quite believe you’re here.”

“Where else would I be?” I ask, reaching for him.

“Anywhere.” He steps between my knees, cupping my face in his hands. “With anyone. Instead of with the corporate villain you’ve spent years loathing.”

The vulnerability in his voice catches me off guard. Beneath the confident CEO exterior, Ethan has a real uncertainty about his worthiness—at least where I’m

concerned.

“You’re not a villain,” I tell him, holding his gaze. “You’re a complex man trying to balance profit and principle. And you’re where I want to be right now.”

His hands move to the tie of my wrap dress, pausing for silent permission. He unwraps it, revealing the lacy emerald lingerie beneath—the impulse buy that amused Zoe so much.

“Green,” he observes. “You were paying attention to what I like.”

“You are very obvious,” I reply. “It isn’t hard to see when you like something.”

“I love this.” His fingers trace the edge of the lace, barely touching my skin yet sending electricity through my nerve endings. “Very much.”

“Stop talking and kiss me again,” I demand, impatient.

“So, demanding,” he murmurs, his mouth capturing mine as he presses me back onto the bed.

Each touch feels more meaningful, each response more honest.

Ethan takes his time, to rediscover every inch of my body. His mouth and hands map a leisurely path from my lips down my throat, across my collarbone, to the swell of my breasts above emerald lace. When he removes my bra, his growl makes me arch into his touch.

“Beautiful,” he breathes against my skin before taking a nipple into his mouth, the warmth drawing a gasp from me.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

My hands push his shirt from his shoulders, gripping the perfect muscles of his back, slipping beneath his waistband to urge his hips closer to mine. His hard cock presses against my thigh, making me shift.

“Patience,” he says, kissing his way down my ribcage, across my stomach. “We have all night.”

“Easy for you to say,” I mutter, then lose my train of thought as his mouth continues its downward journey.

By the time he is between my thighs, I’m already close to the edge. The first touch of his tongue against my lace-covered clit makes me gasp his name, fingers tangling in his hair.

“Still want me to hurry?” he asks, looking up my body with smugness.

“Don’t you dare stop,” I manage, I am beyond caring about his ego at this point.

He laughs, the vibration against sensitive flesh nearly undoing me, before hooking his fingers in the waistband of my underwear, drawing them down my legs. When his mouth returns to me, the sensation is so intense I have to bite my lip to keep from screaming.

Just as I approach the peak, he slides two fingers inside me, curving them forward in the perfect motion to send me tumbling over the edge. I come with his name on my lips, one hand fisted in his hair, the other gripping his expensive sheets.

Before I've even recovered, he's moving up my body, discarding his remaining clothing. When he settles between my thighs, now gloriously naked, the weight and heat of him draws a fresh moan from me.

His eyes close, jaw tightening with restraint as I grip his cock in my hand.

"Harper," he groans when I give him a last stroke. "You're testing my control."

"Good," I reply, guiding him to my entrance. "I like it when you lose control."

His eyes lock on mine as he pushes forward, filling me in one slow, perfect thrust that makes us both moan. For a moment, we remain still, connected in the most intimate way.

Then he begins to move, and coherent thought dissolves into sensation. We find our rhythm, our bodies remembering each other. His hands pin mine above my head, fingers interlocking as he drives deeper, the position allowing him to hit my g-spot with each thrust.

"Ethan," I gasp as pressure builds again, faster than I would have thought possible after my first orgasm. "Right there—don't stop?—"

"Not stopping," he promises, his rhythm faltering as his own control frays. "Come again for me, Harper. I want to feel you come on my cock."

The commanding tone combined with the perfect angle pushes me over the edge a second time, my body clenching around him as pleasure radiates through me in waves. He can't hold back, my name a groan against my neck as his hips stutter and still.

For several long minutes afterward, our breathing slowing, neither willing to break

the connection. Ethan shifts his weight to the side, keeping one arm draped across my waist.

“That was...” he begins, then laughs softly. “I’m not even sure how to describe that.”

“Hmmm,” I moan, turning to face him.

“Is that scientific terminology for ‘mind-blowing’?”

“It is.” I trace patterns on his chest, enjoying the freedom to touch him like this, in his bed.

We fall silent, comfortable in the afterglow. After a while, Ethan traces his fingers along my spine in a gentle caress.

“Stay the night?” he asks, voice casual but with an undercurrent of vulnerability that tugs at my heart.

“I’d like that,” I reply. “Though I didn’t bring anything for tomorrow.”

“I have a functional shower and can provide a t-shirt,” he offers. “Or we could stop by your place in the morning before work.”

“A t-shirt works,” I decide. “Though my publisher might have questions if I show up in this dress, or your shirt.”

“Tell them you were conducting very important environmental research,” he laughs, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Overnight monitoring.”

I laugh, the sound free and genuine. “Terrible. You’re terrible.”

“You like it,” he says.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“God help me, I do.” The admission feels important somehow, an acknowledgment of how completely my idea of him has changed.

“Hungry?” he asks after another comfortable silence. “There’s dessert I didn’t get around to serving. Chocolate mousse.”

“That sounds amazing,” I admit. “Though I’m not sure I can move yet.”

“Who said anything about moving?” He reaches for his phone on the nightstand. “One benefit of a building with full service.”

Minutes later, his security phone buzzes, and Ethan pulls on boxer briefs to retrieve what turns out to be two perfect chocolate mousses delivered to his private elevator by the night doorman.

“This is decadent,” I comment as we eat in bed, me wearing his discarded shirt, him in just boxers.

“The dessert or the delivery service?” he asks, looking very attractive with his hair mussed and a relaxed smile playing at his lips.

“Both,” I admit. “Though I meant the service. I’m used to walking to the corner bodega in sweatpants when I have late-night cravings.”

“We could do that too, if you prefer the authentic New York experience.” His tone is teasing, but there’s genuine consideration beneath it—a willingness to adapt to my comfort level that I find touching.

“Maybe next time,” I suggest, setting aside my empty dessert cup. “This has its advantages.”

“Next time,” he repeats, looking pleased. “I like the sound of that.”

“Did you think this was a onetime thing?” I ask.

“I hoped not.” His expression turns more serious. “But I understand that my life doesn’t fit with yours.”

“I know.” I lean back against his pillows, considering. “My publisher already has concerns about my ‘balanced’ approach. If they find out about... this... they’ll question my objectivity.”

“Would they be right to?” he asks, watching me carefully.

“No,” I answer without hesitation. “I’ve documented what I found, good and bad. My personal feelings haven’t affected my professional verdict.”

“I believe you.” He takes my hand, interlacing our fingers. “But will others?”

“Most won’t,” I acknowledge. “There will be criticism, accusations, questions about both our motives.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

I consider the question, weighing my reputation against my happiness—an equation I’ve never had to calculate before.

“I think,” I say slowly, “that I’m tired of letting external expectations dictate my personal choices. I’ve spent years being the uncompromising environmental

advocate, maintaining perfect professional distance. And that work matters—it still matters to me. But so does this. I deserve a life too.”

The smile that transforms his face makes my heart race. “That’s... great to hear.”

“But,” I add, holding up a cautionary finger, “we should be careful about going public. We should, wait until after my piece publishes.”

“Agreed.” He nods. “No sense adding unnecessary outside pressure until we’ve given this a chance.”

“I’m sorry, I think that it’s better this way for now.” I slip closer to him, drawn by the warmth of his body. “I don’t want to lose everything I have worked for.”

“I understand,” he says, wrapping an arm around me. “You have a reputation to protect, just as much as I do.”

I rest my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat, marveling at how right this feels despite all the logical reasons it shouldn’t. “This is strange, isn’t it? Us, together like this.”

“Strange,” he agrees, fingers playing with my hair. “But right.”

“Right,” I repeat, liking the phrase.

As I drift toward sleep in Ethan’s arms, surrounded by the comfort of his bed and the twinkling city beyond the windows, I contemplate the unpredictable nature of human connection. Five days ago, I condemned this man as the embodiment of corporate evil. Now I’m falling asleep in his arms, contemplating a future that somehow has him in it.

### Chapter Twelve

ETHAN

#### MEETING THE BEST FRIENDS

Two weeks after our first real-world date, Harper sits across from me at my dining table, her laptop open as she makes final edits to her paper. Her hair is pulled back in a messy bun, a pencil stuck through it, and she's wearing one of my old Columbia Business School t-shirts over her underwear. It's a Saturday morning, sunlight streaming through my apartment windows, she is gorgeous.

"You're staring again," she says without looking up from her screen.

"I'm admiring," I correct, sipping my coffee. "There's a difference."

She glances up, a smile playing at her lips. "Is there?"

"Staring is rude. Admiring is admiring." I set my mug down. "And you're admirable in my shirt with the serious scientist expression."

A light blush colors her cheeks, but she rolls her eyes. "Smooth talker."

"Just honest." I slide a plate of fresh fruit toward her. "Eat something. You've been editing since before the sun came up."

"I'm almost done." She takes a strawberry, attention already back on her work. "My

publisher's final review is Monday, and then it goes live Wednesday."

I try to ignore the tension in my shoulders at the reminder. Harper's findings will be published in three days, laying out both Cole Tech's environmental successes and shortcomings for public consumption. While I've seen earlier drafts and know it's fair—brutally honest and balanced—the public response remains unpredictable.

"Nervous?" she asks, proving once again her uncanny ability to read my mind.

"Cautiously optimistic," I reply. "You are thorough and fair. The board has already approved the improvements you recommended."

"But?"

"But public perception rarely follows logic." I shrug, aiming for nonchalance. "There will be those who focus only on the wrong things."

Harper closes her laptop, giving me her full attention. "People determined to see Cole Tech as the bad guy will find evidence to support that view, regardless of what I wrote. Just as those invested in seeing you as saviors will dismiss the negative."

"Very philosophical for an empirical scientist," I tease, though her pragmatism is reassuring.

"I've learned that humans are objective, even scientists." She steals a piece of melon from my plate. "Speaking of perception, Zoe wants to meet you."

The abrupt change of subject catches me off guard. "Your journalist best friend? The one who thinks I've compromised your professional integrity?"

"She's coming around." Harper grins. "She's suggested dinner tonight. Her and

Lucas, you and me.”

“Lucas being...?”

“Her boyfriend. He’s a sous chef at Terroir, the restaurant in Brooklyn.” She watches my reaction carefully. “It would be our first public outing as a couple. Well, semi-public. Among trusted friends.”

The significance isn’t lost on me. We’ve spent the past two weeks hiding in a private bubble, alternating between my apartment and hers, deliberately keeping our relationship secret. Meeting her best friend represents allowing the outside world in.

“I’d like that,” I say. “Though I’m prepared for a grilling from Zoe.”

“Oh, there will be a full-blown interrogation,” Harper confirms. “She’s already compiled a list of questions.”

“Should I bring my legal team? Alex might need to vet the questions.”

“Just your charm and honesty.” She laughs, coming around the table to perch on my lap, arms looping around my neck. “She’s important to me, Ethan. Her opinion matters.”

“Then I’ll do my best to win her over.” I marvel yet again at how naturally this intimacy has grown between us. “What time is dinner?”

“Seven, at their place in Park Slope.” She presses a kiss to my jaw. “Casual, but nice. Lucas is cooking.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Should I bring wine?”

“Definitely. Something impressive, but not flashy enough to suggest you’re trying to buy her approval.”

I laugh at her specific parameters. “You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“I want it to go well,” she admits, a hint of vulnerability in her expression. “My best friend and my...” She hesitates, searching for the right word.

“Boyfriend?” I suggest, testing the label. “Partner? Formerly antagonistic CEO turned personal project?”

Her laughter is worth the self-deprecation. “All of the above, I think.”

“Then bring on the interrogation,” I say, pulling her closer for a proper kiss. “I’ve faced hostile takeover attempts and board rebellions. How bad could one journalist be?”

Her answering smile contains equal parts amusement and warning. “Don’t underestimate Zoe. She once made a senator cry during an interview.”

“Noted.” I slide my hands under my borrowed t-shirt, finding warm skin beneath. “Now, since you’ve finished your editing, and we have hours before dinner...”

“Are you suggesting a more recreational use of our time, Mr. Cole?” Her breath hitches as my fingers trace higher.

“I’m suggesting,” I murmur against her neck, “that we have some fun.”

“Mmm, interesting argument.” She shifts to straddle me, the position bringing our bodies into perfect alignment.

“Are you saying you are done working?” I ask, hands settling on her hips.

Her smile turns wicked as she rolls her hips against mine, drawing a groan from deep in my chest. “I’m saying we might need to relax before dinner.”

Hours later, having “relaxed” (including on my kitchen counter and in the shower), we’re dressed and en route to Brooklyn in the back of my car, a bottle of reasonably priced wine in hand.

Harper looks stunning in simple jeans and a green top that brings out her eyes, her hair loose around her shoulders. She’s been quiet since we left the apartment, fingers tapping a nervous rhythm on her knee.

“Having second thoughts?” I ask, covering her restless hand with mine.

“No,” she says, then sighs. “Maybe a little nervous. Zoe’s opinion is important to me, and this is... a big deal.”

“The first person from your real life to meet me as your partner, not your nemesis.”

She nods, looking relieved that I understand. “Exactly. It makes this more real somehow.”

“It’s already real to me,” I tell her, bringing her hand to my lips. “Has been since that night on the beach.”

The smile she gives me makes my heart race.

“Me too,” she admits. “Though I tried very hard to deny it at first.”

“You? Stubborn? I’m shocked.”

She laughs. “Says the man who rearranged an entire cruise ship schedule to get under my skin.”

“One of my better decisions, in retrospect.”

“Really even if I threw champagne in your face, landed on you in an obstacle course?”

“Really,” I say. “Your feisty attitude, lack of coordination, and good aim got to me.”

“You have odd turn-ons, Cole.”

“So, I’ve been told, Bennett.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

The car pulls up outside a charming brownstone in Park Slope. As we get to the door, Harper takes a steadying breath, then laces her fingers with mine.

“Ready?” she asks.

“Absolutely.”

A petite woman with dark hair and sharp eyes opens the door before we can knock. She looks as I’d imagined from Harper’s chats about her—already sizing me up like only the media can.

“So, it’s true,” she says. “Harper Bennett is willingly touching a corporate executive. I thought the photos might be doctored.”

“Hello to you too, Zoe,” Harper replies. “Yes, I’m well, thank you for asking.”

Zoe grins, unrepentant, then extends her hand to me. “Zoe. I’ve written three articles criticizing your company and have another ten lined up, no hard feelings.”

“Ethan Cole,” I reply, accepting her handshake. “I’ve read them all. Your lashing of our Caribbean shipping routes was top-notch journalism.”

She blinks, not expecting this response. “You read my articles?”

“I make a point of staying on top of any media scandal,” I explain. “It’s more useful than flattery sometimes.”

Her eyes narrow, reassessing me. “Interesting tactic.”

“Zoe, maybe let them come inside before beginning the inquisition?” A tall man appears behind her, wiping his hands on a kitchen towel. “I’m Lucas. Welcome to our home. Please ignore my girlfriend’s lack of basic hospitality skills.”

“I’m making sure there is no stranger danger,” Zoe protests, but steps aside to let us enter.

Lucas shakes my hand, then kisses Harper’s cheek. “It’s good to meet the man who’s got our Harper breaking her ‘no dating corporate villains’ rule.”

“Lucas!” Harper looks mortified.

“What? It’s literally a framed rule in your apartment. Rule three, right after ‘no supporting fast fashion’ and ‘always know where your food comes from.’”

I laugh, amused by this insight into Harper’s life. “I’m glad to be the exception.”

“You’re not an exception,” Harper corrects. “I’m dating you because I like you, the corporate stuff is still up in the air.”

“That distinction is very important to her,” Zoe stage-whispers to me. “She’s repeated it at least twelve times.”

Their home is cozy and eclectic, filled with books, plants, and what appears to be Zoe’s collection of press credentials from magazines, and newspapers. Delicious aromas drift from the open kitchen, where Lucas returns to his cooking.

“Wine?” I offer, handing the bottle to Zoe.

She examines the label. “Well played, Cole.”

Harper shoots me an “I told you so” look while Zoe uncorks the bottle.

“So,” Zoe begins as she pours four glasses, “how did we get from ‘Harper throws champagne in your face’ to ‘Harper spends multiple nights per week at your apartment’? The journalistic timeline seems... compressed.”

“We bonded over turtle conservation and waste management systems,” Harper replies with a straight face.

“Sexy,” Lucas calls from the kitchen.

“You’d be surprised,” I murmur, earning a sharp elbow from Harper and a raised eyebrow from Zoe.

“The environmental assessment required close collaboration,” Harper explains more seriously. “I also fell on top of him in a race, did tantric yoga and gave him a massage.”

“I saw the sexual tension was off the charts,” Zoe adds helpfully. “It was obvious even from the social media clips.”

“Was not,” Harper protests.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Was too,” Lucas and Zoe say in unison.

“The point,” Harper continues, cheeks flushed, “is that things developed naturally.”

“And your work has stayed objective?” Zoe asks. “Even with this... close collaboration?”

“Completely,” I answer before Harper can. “In fact, she’s been harder on Cole Tech because of our personal connection.”

“It’s true,” Harper confirms. “My publisher wanted more scandal, I have not gone easy on them.”

“And when it publishes next week? When people go a little nut, make accusations? Then what, are you two just going to breakup, ignore it, cause a media frenzy? If you do, I want the first interview. Best friend privilege.”

“We’ll deal with it if it happens,” I say. “I doubt we will just beak up. That is ridiculous.”

“Guys have broken up with me for less,” Harper says.

“Not billionaire playboys though,” Zoe points out.

“Technically, but I am nervous about it,” Harper replies.

“I like him,” Lucas announces, bringing a platter of appetizers to the coffee table.

“He’s not afraid of you two lunatics.”

Dinner progresses from our tense beginning to being more relaxed as Lucas serves course after incredible course of seafood and local vegetables. By the time we get to dessert—a remarkable chocolate creation with sea salt—Zoe’s interrogation has evolved into actual conversation.

I learn about her journalism background, her fiery dedication to exposing the bad guys, and how she and Harper became friends during a protest at a chemical plant in their college years. I share stories of Cole Tech’s evolution, my grandfather’s contradictory legacy, and my own efforts to redirect the company toward a different future.

“You care,” Zoe observes over after-dinner drinks, sounding surprised. “About the environment, not just the PR advantages of looking like you care.”

“I do,” I confirm. “Though I can understand your skepticism. Most corporate environmental initiatives are more for show than substance.”

“What made you change the way you do things?” Lucas asks. “Most CEOs see environmental regulations as obstacles, not opportunities.”

“Partially my grandfather’s influence—he loved the ocean despite building ships that killed it. A bit of my background in marine biology before business school. And honestly, critics like Harper and you, Zoe, who’ve pushed people like me to do better.”

“Critics you dismissed,” Harper reminds me.

“Until one threw champagne at me and forced me to pay attention,” I smile.

“God, you two are adorable together. It’s horrifying.”

“Told you,” Lucas says, collecting empty dessert plates. “The enemies-to-lovers thing always works.”

“This isn’t a romance novel, Lucas,” Harper protests.

“Could’ve fooled me,” he replies. “CEO and environmental scientist, forced proximity on luxury cruise, heated arguments transforming into passion... it writes itself.”

“Please stop,” Harper groans, but she’s smiling.

As the evening winds down, I am enjoying the company of Harper’s friends. Lucas’s unpretentious warmth and Zoe’s sharp wit complement each other, just the way I like to think Harper’s passion and my calmness do.

“Walk with me to get more wine?” Zoe asks me as Lucas prepares coffee. Harper gives me a panicked look but nods.

I follow Zoe into the small hallway that leads to their wine rack, aware that I’m about to receive the best friend’s warning.

“She’s happy,” Zoe says without preamble, her back to me as she selects a bottle. “Happier than I’ve ever seen her.”

“That’s... good?” I reply, uncertain where this is heading.

She turns, fixing me with a penetrating stare. “It’s unexpected. Harper doesn’t compromise her principles for anyone. The fact that she’s reconciled her beliefs with dating you...” She shakes her head slightly. “It means she sees something in you,

beyond the billionaire playboy, sexy-pants, hot-guy.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“I promise you, my feelings for her are real.”

“I believe you,” she says, surprising me. “Which is why I’m only going to say this once: If you hurt her, or if this turns out to be some elaborate PR strategy or if your corporate bullshiteventually make you do something she cannot stand by, I will ensure that every environmental journalist and advocacy group in the country knows where you live.”

The protective fierceness in her voice is reassuring—Harper has people who care about her.

“I understand,” I say. “And I doubt you’ll need to dox me.”

“Good.” She hands me the wine bottle. “For what it’s worth, I think you might be good enough for her. But the jury’s still out for now.”

“Fair enough.”

When we return to the living room, Harper gives me a questioning look. I smile reassuringly, and the tension leaves her shoulders.

“Everything okay?” she asks as Zoe joins Lucas in the kitchen.

“Your friend loves you,” I tell her, brushing a kiss against her temple. “As she should.”

Later, in the car heading back to Manhattan, Harper leans against my shoulder, a

smile playing at her lips.

“That went well,” she says. “Zoe only threatened you once, from what I could tell.”

“You were counting?”

“I know my best friend.” She looks up at me. “What did she say, exactly?”

“That she’ll dox me if I hurt you,” I summarize.

Harper laughs softly. “You don’t seem concerned.”

“Because I have no intention of hurting you,” I say. “Your friends are important to you, and now I know why. They’re good people, Harper.”

“They liked you,” she says, sounding amazed. “Zoe said you were ‘surprisingly nice for a corporate type’ when you were helping Lucas with the dishes.”

“Nice, huh?”

“From Zoe, nice is more than just nice.” She shifts closer. “This feels good, doesn’t it? You meeting my friends, them approving...”

“It is good,” I agree. “Next milestone. You meeting Alex without professional pretenses.”

“Your terrifying PR director? The one who arranged our fake relationship?” She looks alarmed.

“She’s excited to meet the woman who’s ‘humanized’ me,” I assure her. “Her words, not mine.”

“I’ve done no such thing,” Harper protests. “You were already human. Just... romantically stunted.”

“Stunted,” I repeat with a laugh. “A condition you’ve cured.”

“Hmmm.” She smiles up at me, and the simple happiness in her expression makes my chest tighten.

Back at my apartment, Harper is hanging her jacket in the closet, kicking off her shoes by the door, helping herself to water from the kitchen. Watching her, I’m struck by how quickly she’s become comfortable in my space, with my routine, and my life.

“What?” she asks, catching me watching her.

“Just thinking about how good this feels,” I admit. “You, here. Us.”

Her expression softens. “It does, doesn’t it?”

“Very good,” I suggest, stepping closer.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“I like being here with you,” she teases, and slides her arms around my waist.

“Maybe you should be here more then,” I murmur, brushing my lips against hers. “Since it feels so good.”

“You know I can’t move in yet,” she agrees, pressing closer. “We just met Cole, and we are not supposed to be public about us yet.”

“I know.” I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her toward the bedroom. “I just like having you here. Don’t you want to be here?”

Her laughter against my lips is all the answer I need.

Hours later, we need a shower before we settle down next to one another to try get some sleep—we’ve tried three times already.

“Your article publishes on Wednesday,” I say into the comfortable silence.

“Mmm. Are you nervous?”

“Not about the content.” I’ve seen drafts, know it’s fair—critically honest but also acknowledging my genuine efforts. “More about what happens afterward. When people realize we’re...”

“Together?” she replies when I hesitate.

“Together,” I confirm, liking the simple clarity of the word. “There will be questions,

assumptions of impropriety, or conflicts of interest. The media can be horrible to deal with.”

“We knew that going into this,” she points out. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“About us? Not at all,” I assure her immediately. “About the timing of going public, maybe. I don’t want your professional credibility wrecked because of me.”

She props herself up on one elbow. “My work has always stood on its own merit. The data and evidence are there. Anyone who dismisses my findings because of our relationship isn’t smart enough to make an educated judgement, anyway.”

“Still, maybe we should wait a few more weeks after the publication before being seen together,” I suggest. “Give things time, let your readers make their assumptions without this. We can see how things go, once it blows over and the press has another CEO to hound, we can go public.”

“Or,” she counters, “we could acknowledge it now. Complete transparency. Yes, we have a personal relationship. Yes, it started while I was working on this paper. No, it did not compromise the integrity of the findings. The data speaks for itself.”

She has no idea how much the press hates men like me, how any woman in my life will be ripped to pieces, or just how ugly this will get.

“You’re suggesting we just... announce it?”

“Not with a big press release,” she clarifies, rolling her eyes. “But I don’t want us hiding it either. If we’re asked, we answer honestly. The article publishes this Wednesday. If we’re seen having dinner together Thursday, so be it.”

“That’s... refreshingly direct. But also, not how the media, and press, and haters

work.”

“I find it hard to lie, it is against everything I stand for,” she says with a small smile. “It feels wrong to keep this secret.”

“Maybe.” I pull her closer, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “You’re sure this is what you want? The backlash could be intense, especially in environmental circles where I’m still viewed as a close cousin to the devil.”

“I’m sure about us,” she says. “The rest is just noise.”

I hadn’t acknowledged even to myself that our relationship might remain hidden, a complication rather than a partnership to be open about.

“Then I will speak to Alex, and we can go public,” I decide. “And I will be here however it unfolds.”

“I am sure people have other things to gossip over,” she says, settling back against my chest. “Me falling for the enemy is not newsworthy.”

“Tell that to Zoe.” I smile against her hair. “Actually, that might not be a bad way to do this.”

“Are you kidding?” she asks, amusement in her voice.

“She’s our friend,” I say to her. “she’ll be gentle about it.”

She laughs, the sound warm and genuine. “Oh, you underestimate her. Zoe is not gentle.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Okay, but it won’t hurt to have a friend in the media, who can tell our side if things get ugly.”

### Chapter Thirteen

HARPER

GOING PUBLIC

“It’s officially live,” I announce, staring at my laptop screen where my environmental expose of Cole Tech’s cruise operations now appears on my publisher’s website, complete with an attention-grabbing headline.

Inside Cole Tech’s Environmental Impact: The Unvarnished Truth.

Ethan leans over my shoulder, his coffee mug paused halfway to his lips. “Well, that headline’s subtle.”

“My publisher’s choice, not mine.” I scroll through the introduction, checking for any last-minute editorial changes. “I wanted ‘Comprehensive Assessment of Environmental Practices and Future Sustainability Initiatives.’”

“Shockingly, that doesn’t have quite the same clickbait appeal.” His hand rests warm on my shoulder, thumb tracing small circles at the nape of my neck. “How are you feeling?”

“Nervous. Relieved. Proud of my work.” I close the laptop, turning to face him.

“Concerned about the inevitable backlash once people realize we’re together.”

We’re in my apartment this morning—a deliberate choice so I could do this from my space, maintain some professional separation. Ethan arrived at dawn with coffee and breakfast, understanding without being told that I needed the emotional support today.

“Your work speaks for itself,” he reminds me, settling into the chair beside mine. “The backlash is nothing we cannot handle.”

“And those who only read the headline or cherry-pick quotes to support their opinions?”

“We’re never going to engage with the crazy people,” he finishes for me. “You’ve always known that.”

I sigh, leaning back in my chair. “I know. I just want the work to matter. To be a part of real change, not just generate controversy.”

“It already has,” Ethan points out. “My board approved all my requests based on your findings. The change was already happening before it’s even been public for five minutes.”

“Thank you,” I say. “For respecting the process. For not trying to influence me. For understanding why this matters so much to me.”

“Of course.” He leans forward, brushing a kiss against my temple. “Your ethics is one thing I admire most about you.”

My phone buzzes with an incoming text, the first of what will be many reactions today. It’s from Zoe:

It's live! Already getting social media traction. The waste system analysis is damning while acknowledging the containment effectiveness. Perfect balance of critique and credit. You knocked it out of the park, Bennett.

I show Ethan the message, relief washing through me at this first positive response.

"One endorsement down," he says with a smile. "Arguably from my toughest critic, since she's both a journalist and protective of you."

"True." I set the phone down as it buzzes again with notifications. "And how are things on your end? Any board tantrums yet?"

"Alex is monitoring things," he replies, his deliberate corporate phrasing making me smile. "She will tell me if I need to worry, or calm any tantrums."

My phone rings—my publisher. I take a deep breath, answering with professional composure.

"Dr. Bennett speaking."

"Harper, it's Richard. The piece is live and already generating significant traffic." My publisher's voice contains the enthusiasm of expected controversy. "We're getting media requests for interviews. How's your availability today and tomorrow?"

"I can make time," I reply, making eye contact with Ethan, who nods. "Which outlets?"

"Environmental publications, obviously. But also, mainstream business media—CNBC wants you for a segment this afternoon, and Bloomberg is requesting a joint interview with you and Ethan Cole."

I freeze momentarily, unprepared for this specific complication so quickly. “A joint interview? Why?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Ethan raises an eyebrow, following enough of the conversation to understand the question.

“Yes, their angle is the collaboration—a corporation opening itself to external scientific scrutiny, that whole transparency narrative,” Richard explains. “It’s excellent exposure, especially with Cole agreeing to take part.”

“I haven’t discussed this sort of request with Mr. Cole yet,” I say, earning a questioning look from Ethan.

“Well, reach out to his team and let me know. It would make an excellent follow-up to the initial splash.” Richard pauses. “By the way, this is excellent work. More nuanced than I was expecting, but solid journalism.”

“Thank you.” I keep my tone even, resisting the urge to point out that it’s solid science, not journalism. “I’ll check my schedule and confirm which interviews I can make time for.”

After ending the call, I look at Ethan with a mixture of exasperation and amusement. “Bloomberg wants a joint interview with us. Apparently, they’re pitching it as ‘corporation opens itself to scientific scrutiny’ human interest story.”

“Clever angle,” he replies. “How do you feel about that?”

“Professionally, it makes sense. It makes it look like a collaborative transparency initiative rather than an antagonistic exposé.” I chew my lip, considering. “Personally...”

“It might announce our relationship,” he finishes for me. “which is what they’re after.”

“The speculation would be there, out in the open.” I run a hand through my hair, thinking through possible consequences. “Especially given our situation-ship all over socials.”

“The champagne incident remains most memorable,” he agrees with a small smile. “it still gets clicks. Look we said if they ask, we will tell. I respect you not wanting to hide this.”

“This is...”

“Reality,” he supplies. “The question is whether you’re ready for that reality today, or if you’d rather wait.”

His thoughtfulness continues to surprise and impress me.

“What would you prefer?” I ask, wanting his honesty.

He considers this. “Professionally, a joint interview showcases Cole Tech’s commitment to environmental improvement. Personally...” He takes my hand, his expression vulnerable. “I’m not interested in hiding our relationship forever, Harper. I’m proud to be with you. I love you,”

“Even though I’ve just published a rigorous critique of your company’s environmental shortcomings?”

“Especially because of that,” he says.

“Most men would find it inconvenient,” I point out.

“I’m not most men.”

“No,” I agree. “You’re not.”

Decision made, I reach for my phone again. “I’ll tell Richard we’re open to the joint interview, but that I’d like to do the solo ones first, establish some credibility.”

“That’s great,” Ethan agrees, rising to refill our coffee mugs. “I want you to be happy.”

“Look at us, finding middle ground,” I tease. “We’re a case study in collaboration.”

“Is that what we’re calling it now?” He returns with fresh coffee, eyes crinkling with amusement. “And here I thought it was just two stubborn people who love each other.”

The heat in his gaze sends a familiar warmth through me, distracting me from the professional obligations of the day. Three weeks of mind-blowing sex has done nothing to slow down how much we want more.

“Focus, Cole,” I admonish, though I can’t help smiling. “Today is about work, not your appreciation of my bedroom skills.”

“Can’t it be both?” he suggests, leaning closer. “The paper is published. We have forty minutes before you need to get ready for your first interview.”

“And you’re suggesting we use that time for...”

“Bedroom skills,” he supplies. “Stress relief. Take your pick.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“You’re so bad,” I inform him, even as I lean toward him.

“You like it.” His fingers trace the line of my jaw, sending shivers down my spine.

“I do like it,” I agree, before closing the distance between us.

The kiss begins gently, but quickly intensifies as it always seems to between us, an underlying current of attraction refuses to be tamed. His hand slips down to my waist, tugging me from my chair onto his lap with an ease that still thrills me.

“Forty minutes isn’t much time,” I murmur against his lips as his hands find their way under my t-shirt.

“I can work with forty minutes,” he assures me, skillful fingers already trace the outline of my bra.

“Is that a challenge, Mr. Cole?” I ask, deliberately grinding against him.

His sharp intake of breath is satisfying. “If you’d like it to be, Dr. Bennett.”

I stand, pulling him toward my bedroom. “I think we should test those bedroom skills, right now.”

“Always happy to practice,” he replies, following eagerly.

We barely make it through the doorway before clothes drop to the floor—my t-shirt, his button-down, both of us impatient. When we reach the bed, I push him down,

straddling his hips.

“This is my bedroom,” I remind him, pinning his wrists above his head. “I get to be in charge.”

The flash of heat in his eyes confirms he’s as affected by my tone as I’d hoped. “Whatever you say, Doctor.”

Later, with seven minutes remaining before I need to get dressed and fix my hair for my first interview, I lie sprawled across his chest, both of us catching our breath.

“I think you pass the skills test,” I murmur against his skin. “And you made every minute work.”

His laughter rumbles beneath my ear. “Oh, I pass do I?”

“Don’t let it inflate your ego,” I say, pressing a kiss to his chest before reluctantly sitting up. “I need to shower before my interview.”

“Can I help with that?” he offers, though he makes no move to rise, looking thoroughly satisfied and smug.

“Absolutely not. Your help would turn a two-minute shower into an hour.” I grab my robe from the bedpost, wrapping it around myself. “Besides, don’t you have actual CEO work today? Board reactions to manage? PR strategies to approve?”

“All being handled,” he assures me, sitting up and reaching for his discarded boxer briefs. “But yes, I should check in with Alex. She’s probably wondering why I’m not responding to her ten-thousand updates.”

I pause in the bathroom doorway, struck by a sudden thought. “Does Alex know

where you are right now?”

“She knows I’m not in the office,” he hedges.

“But does she know you’re with me? At my apartment? In my bed?”

His slight hesitation answers before he does. “Let’s say she has made certain logical deductions but hasn’t asked for confirmation.”

“Ethan.” I cross my arms, trying to look stern despite my disheveled state. “Your PR director doesn’t officially know about us? Even though we’re considering a joint interview that will announce our relationship?”

“Alex is...,” he says carefully.

“Fucking terrifying, she will want to kill me.”

“She has made several pointed comments about my god mood and mysterious schedule changes. But no, we haven’t had a formal discussion about our relationship status. I did not think it was at the tell Alex point yet.”

“That seems like an oversight for someone like you,” I say.

“Maybe,” he acknowledges. “Or a deliberate choice to keep some privacy in an otherwise public life.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

The vulnerability beneath this admission catches me off guard. For all his corporate power and public persona, Ethan values the private parts of his life—including, apparently, our relationship—as something separate from his CEO identity.

“I understand,” I say more gently. “But if we’re doing this interview...”

“Then I’ll speak with her today,” he finishes. “She needs to be briefed before we go public.”

“Good.” I nod. “Now I really need to shower. Alone. Or I’ll be late for my first interview.”

“Go,” he says with a smile. “Be brilliant. I’ll make more coffee.”

Ninety minutes later, showered and dressed, I’ve completed my first phone interview with an environmental journal. Ethan has retreated to my small home office for his own calls, giving me space to focus on articulating my findings without his distracting presence.

When I emerge from the bedroom after changing for my on-camera interview with CNBC, he’s in my kitchen, frowning at his phone.

“Problem?” I ask, adjusting my blazer.

He glances up, his expression clearing as he takes in my appearance. “Just board antics. Nothing unexpected.” His gaze turns appreciative. “You look fantastic. Very sexy environmental scientist.”

“That’s not the goal,” I reply, though I like his reaction. The green blazer over a simple white blouse is professional without being stuffy, conveying both authority and authenticity. “How did your call with Alex go?”

“Enlightening,” he says with a rueful smile. “Apparently, she’s known about us since the second week after the cruise and has been waiting for me to ‘stop being an emotionally constipated CEO’ and tell her.”

I laugh at the direct quote, liking Alex more. “And her reaction to doing the interview together?”

“She thinks it’s excellent idea from a corporate perspective—” He hesitates. “She’s more concerned about the personal side of it, for you.”

“For me?” This surprises me. “Not for you or Cole Tech?”

“Her exact words were, ‘Harper’s credibility will face more scrutiny than your corporate reputation.’” He looks troubled by this. “She has a point. Cole Tech is expected to engage in strategic PR; you’re expected to be objective.”

“She’s not wrong,” I acknowledge, checking the time. My car will arrive in ten minutes. “If our relationship becomes public through this interview, my reputation will survive.”

His expression softens into something that makes my heart race. “You are too brave, Harper Bennett.”

“What is the worst that can happen?”

“Do not ask that.” He steps closer. “It’s a zoo out there.”

“A zoo really?” I ask. “I am a grown woman, I don’t want us to hide this away.”

My phone buzzes—my car has arrived. Ethan walks me to the door.

“Knock ‘em dead, Dr. Bennett,” he says as I gather my notes and bag. “I’ll be watching from here.”

“No ‘helpful’ text commentary during the segment,” I warn him. “I need to focus.”

“I would never,” he protests with mock offense. “I would... I have.”

“Admire silently,” I say, but can’t help smiling as I leave.

The CNBC interview goes smoothly—my years of presentations and environmental conferences have prepared me for media appearances. I articulate the key findings, emphasizing both the areas where Cole Tech exceeds industry standards and those requiring major improvement.

“Your assessment is unusually an environmental critique of a major corporation, this one time you are not on the attack,” the interviewer notes. “Some might say suspiciously so, given the antagonistic relationship between advocates and Cole Tech. How do you respond to that?”

“Science isn’t about antagonism, it’s about facts.” I reply. “My findings document exactly what I observed and measured during my time evaluating Cole Tech’s operations. Their waste management systems need major upgrades, which I’ve detailed. Their marine habitat protection initiatives exceed regulatory requirements and show a genuine commitment, which I’ve also documented. Pretending either doesn’t exist would be advocacy, not science.”

The interviewer nods, then unexpectedly pivots.

“Sources show you and Ethan Cole had some... tense interactions during your time on board on of his hips. Has your professional opinion of him changed through this process?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

The question allows just enough wiggle room to avoid or acknowledge our personal relationship, depending on my answer.

I think of Ethan watching from my apartment, of our agreement about transparency if directly asked.

“Mr. Cole and I approached working together with different professional perspectives but shared goals,” I respond. “Through the process, we found more common ground than either of us expected.”

“Common ground?” the interviewer probes, sensing a story.

“I continue to evaluate Cole Tech’s environmental impact, and he continues to balance corporate interests with sustainability. The difference now is that we do it by talking, rather than throwing drinks at one another.”

It’s not a full disclosure of our relationship status, but it’s truthful enough. The interviewer wants to push it further but respects my boundaries, returning to specific findings for the rest of the segment.

When I return to my apartment, Ethan greets me with a slow applause. “Well don, you did not let him bait you at all.”

“Not too revealing?” I ask, kicking off my heels with relief.

“Perfect,” he assures me, pulling me into a gentle embrace. “I’m impressed.”

My phone buzzes with an incoming text. It's from Richard:

Bloomberg still wants the joint interview. They've seen the CNBC segment and are even more interested in the "professional antagonists finding common ground" angle. Tomorrow at 3PM?

I show Ethan the message, searching his face for his reaction. "What do you think? After my 'personal connection' comment, this interview will confirm we're together."

"I think," he says, "that I'm ready if you are."

"It will complicate things," I warn, though I'm already leaning toward acceptance. "I don't want it ruin this, us. What we have."

"It won't," he says.

"Let's do the interview," I decide.

The smile that transforms his face tells me this was the right choice. "Complete honesty," he agrees. "Though perhaps omitting certain specific details about waste management system inspections that led to shower activities."

"Obviously," I laugh. "Some research is private."

"Speaking of private..." He pulls me closer, hands settling at my waist.

Later, as evening falls and we're lying together on my couch with takeout containers scattered across the coffee table, my phone buzzes with another text from Zoe:

Just saw your CNBC interview. "Personal connection" eh? Might as well have worn a

sign saying, “I’m sleeping with the CEO.” Call me tomorrow with details on how you’re handling the Bloomberg interview. PS: You looked fantastic in that blazer.

I show Ethan the message, laughing at her directness. “My subtle comment wasn’t as subtle as I thought.”

“To be fair, Zoe already knows the truth,” he points out. “She’s primed to read between the lines.”

“True.” I set the phone aside, settling back against his chest. “Are you ready for tomorrow? Once we do this interview, there’s no going back.”

“I’m more than ready,” he says, his arms tightening around me.

“What are you thinking about?” Ethan asks, noticing my contemplative silence.

“How completely unpredictable life can be,” I reply. “And how sometimes, the most valuable discoveries come from experiments gone completely wrong.”

“Like an environmental assessment that leads to how shower sex on a cruise ship?”

“Exactly like that,” I agree, settling more comfortably against him.

Chapter Fourteen

ETHAN

### ONE LAST CONFRONTATION

“... a

nd joining us today are Ethan Cole, CEO of Cole Tech Industries, and Dr. Harper Bennett, environmental scientist and author of the recently published assessment of Cole Tech’s cruise operations. Thank you both for being here.”

The Bloomberg studio lights are uncomfortably hot, but I maintain my composure as Harper and I sit side by side for what will undoubtedly be the most personally revealing interview of my life.

“Thank you for having us,” I reply, hyper-aware of Harper beside me in another gorgeous outfit—navy this time, her auburn hair framing her face in soft waves. She looks confident, professional, and captivating.

“Dr. Bennett, your latest piece has generated a lot of attention for its unusually balanced approach,” the interviewer begins. “What led to this change in methodology?”

Harper sits straighter “My goal was to document what I observed—both the concerning practices and the conservation efforts. Anything less would undermine the integrity of the work.”

I watch her. Even knowing what’s coming—the inevitable pivot to our personal

relationship—I'm struck by her confidence.

“Mr. Cole, this level of transparency is unusual for a corporation of Cole Tech's size. What prompted you to open your operations to such thorough external scrutiny?”

“We have nothing to hide,” I answer. “Dr. Bennett's reputation for the truth and uncompromising standards made her the ideal person to show that. We wanted insight, not a public relations exercise.”

“Even knowing her history of criticizing Cole Tech's environmental practices?” the interviewer probes.

“Especially because of that,” I acknowledge with a small smile. “We knew she wouldn't go easy on us.”

The interviewer nods, then comes the pivot we've been expecting.

“Reports suggest your relationship got more personal during this process. Dr. Bennett, in your CNBC interview yesterday, you mentioned developing a ‘personal connection’ with Mr. Cole. Could you elaborate on how your interaction changed from your initial, rather famous confrontation to your current collaboration?”

Here it is—the moment of truth. Harper and I discussed this last night, agreeing on complete honesty without unnecessary details. Still, I hold my breath as Harper comes up with her response.

“I thought Cole Tech was trying to influence my findings, and not knowing Mr. Cole I was antagonistic,” she begins with a hint of a smile. “I had preconceptions about Mr., and he had preconceptions about me. The process of working together helped us to move beyond those assumptions.”

“And working together led to...?” the interviewer pushes.

Harper glances at me before continuing. “It led to us working together, without tossing drinks in faces.”

“Mr. Cole, would you characterize your current relationship with Dr. Bennett as only professional?” The question is direct, as we knew it would be.

“No, I wouldn’t,” I reply. “But I don’t think my current relationship with Dr. Bennet is relevant, do you?”

There—it’s done. Not stating “we’re dating” but clear enough that no one could misinterpret.

“To clarify,” the interviewer keeps going, “you and Dr. Bennett are involved romantically, even though she published this critical assessment of your company?”

Harper takes this question, as we’d agreed. “Yes, we are. My job is to call out corporations, but they are corporations, Mr. Cole is one man in a much bigger organization.”

“Wasn’t there concern about conflict of interest?”

“Of course,” I interject. “But there is no conflict, just nosy people looking for some scandal.”

“If anything,” Harper adds, “our personal connection made me much harder on Cole Tech than any other organization.”

By the time the interview concludes, we’ve accomplished what we intended, an honest acknowledgment of our relationship.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Harper murmurs as we’re escorted from the studio, microphones removed.

“You were brilliant,” I tell her

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

“We make a good team,” she says with a small smile. “Even when publicly confessing to our complicated relationship.”

Outside the studio, my driver waits with the car. As we settle into the back seat, I allow myself to relax, loosening my tie with a sigh of relief.

“So,” I say as the car pulls into Manhattan traffic, “we’re officially official.”

“But is it on Facebook?” Harper checks her phone, which has been buzzing since we left the studio. “Zoe has already sent seventeen texts, ranging from congratulatory to mildly scandalized. My publisher wants a meeting tomorrow to discuss ‘leveraging the revelation for maximum marketing impact,’ which sounds ominous.”

“Alex says that Cole Tech’s stock is up two points,” I say, checking my own messages. “Apparently, the market approves of me having a girlfriend.”

“Of course it does,” Harper says with an eye roll that doesn’t quite hide her amusement. “Everything ultimately serves the corporate interests.”

“Not everything,” I correct her gently, taking her hand now that we’re in private. “Some things exist outside of stock prices and corporate strategy.”

The look she gives me contains a warmth that makes my chest tighten. “Such as?”

“Such as this,” I say. “Us.”

Her phone buzzes again, interrupting the moment. She glances at it and sighs. “My

department chair. Probably wondering about the professional implications of dating a corporate CEO I've bashed for years."

"Any regrets yet?"

"None," she says.

The car pulls up outside my apartment building. "Stay with me tonight?" I ask, though Harper has spent more nights at my place than her own in recent weeks. "We can order in, avoid the social media, and news."

"Avoidance doesn't seem like your usual game plan," she teases.

The moment the elevator doors close, I pull her against me, her arms winding around my neck as she rises on tiptoes to meet my kiss.

She silences me with a kiss that goes from playful to heated, her hands pushing my shirt off impatiently. I match her urgency, making quick work of her blouse and the sensible bra beneath, eager to feel her skin against mine.

There's a particular pleasure in knowing how to touch her to elicit that sharp intake of breath, precisely where to kiss to make her fingers tighten in my hair, just how much pressure makes her whisper my name in that tone that drives me wild.

"Bed," she gasps as my mouth finds the sensitive spot just below her ear. "Now, Ethan."

I listen, backing her toward the mattress without breaking contact. When her knees hit the edge, she pulls me down with her. Clothes disappear until there are no barriers between us.

“I need you,” she breathes against my mouth, legs parting in invitation.

“So, demanding,” I tease, though I’m already positioning myself between her thighs. She’s so wet, and ready, I push forward, watching her face as I fill her completely.

The sight of Harper beneath my—lips parted, cheeks flushed with desire—never fails to take my breath away. For a suspended moment, we are still, connected in the most intimate way possible.

“Move,” she commands, hips rising to emphasize her point.

I obey with a laugh that transforms into a groan as she tightens around me.

Our rhythm builds quickly, urgency overtaking finesse after the buildup of the interview and publicly claiming her as mine. Harper’s legs wrap around my waist, changing the angle in a way that makes us both moan. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, urging me deeper, faster.

“Ethan,” she breathes, the sound of my name on her lips pushing me closer to the edge. “Right there—don’t stop?—”

“You feel so good,” I say, reaching between us to where our bodies join, finding her clit, knowing how sensitive she is. “Come for me, Harper.”

She does, back arching, my name a cry on her lips as she tightens around me. The sight of her release triggers my own, pleasure jolting through me as I follow her over the edge. “I love you.” I say.

Then I wait, heart hammering in my chest, giving her space to process and respond.

“I love you too,” she says finally. “Which is ridiculous given our history and

professional complications, yet undeniable.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Relief and joy wash through me. I pull her down for a kiss that tries to convey the depth of emotion I feel knowing she loves me.

“Only you,” I murmur against her lips, “could make that sound romantic.”

“It is romantic,” she insists.

“Okay...” I smile, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Very romantic.”

“Mock all you want,” she says, settling back against my chest. “But loving you is the least logical conclusion I’ve reached in my life.”

“What are you thinking about?” she asks, catching me watching her.

“How remarkably right this feels,” I admit. “You, here. Us together, going public with our relationship.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” she warns.

“Not flattery,” I correct, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Chapter Fifteen

EPILOGUE

ETHAN – ONE YEAR LATER

“You still owe me a boat,” Harper declares, leaning against the railing of my grandfather’s restored yacht, hair whipping in the sea breeze. We’re cruising along the coast of the Mediterranean, the sunset painting the water in shades of gold and rose that make her skin glow.

“I believe I promised you a research vessel,” I correct, moving to stand beside her. “This seventy-year-old wooden yacht, while beautiful, does not meet those specifications.”

“Mmm, true,” she says, smiling as I slip an arm around her waist. “Though the solar conversion and electric motor retrofit are impressive.”

“High praise from Dr. Bennett,” I press a kiss to her temple, still amazed that I can do this so freely—touch her, hold her, love her openly after a full year together.

“Credit where it’s due,” she says, leaning into my embrace. “The old Harper would have dismissed it.”

“The old Ethan would have considered it an unnecessary expense without clear ROI,” I admit. “We’ve both grown.”

A year. Twelve months since we disembarked from that insane love-cruise, our fake relationship grown into something neither of us expected. In that time, we’ve had professional complications, public scrutiny, and the everyday challenges of two strong-willed people with different worldviews being in a relationship.

It hasn’t always been smooth sailing. We’ve argued over seafood sustainability, carbon offset, and whether my private jet can be justified by any rational environmental cost-benefit analysis (her definitive conclusion: no).

Yet somehow, these disagreements haven’t wrecked our connection. If anything,

they've strengthened it—forcing us to communicate, respect different perspectives, and find creative compromises.

“What are you thinking about?” Harper asks, with that gaze that still makes my heart race after all these months.

“How remarkably well this has worked,” I answer. “Us. This unlikely partnership.”

“Worked so far,” she corrects.

“Always the scientist,” I say with a smile.

She laughs, the sound carrying across the water. “I am just being honest.”

She turns in my arms, studying me with unexpected vulnerability.

I silence her with a kiss, a tactic I've found effective for redirecting our disagreements in more enjoyable directions. She responds, her arms wind around my neck.

“Cheating,” she murmurs against my lips when we part.

“Intervention,” I correct.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

I nod toward the horizon, where the sun has just touched the water, igniting the sky in spectacular colors that reflect across the gentle waves. Harper turns in my arms to watch, her back against my chest as I hold her close.

“It’s beautiful,” she says softly. “Worth every debate about the yacht’s fuel efficiency.”

“I thought you might appreciate it,” I reply, my heart is racing. The small box in my pocket seems to pulse, the moment I’ve been planning for weeks is here.

“Harper,” I begin, my mouth suddenly dry. “Do you remember our first night on the cruise? When you asked what I was doing on the deck so late, and I told you I was hiding from matchmaking passengers?”

She laughs at the memory. “And I accused you of using strategic misdirection to avoid discussing environmental commitments.”

“You weren’t wrong,” I admit. “Though what I didn’t tell you was that I was also thinking about my grandfather. It was his birthday, and I was remembering how he loved watching the sunset from the deck of this yacht.”

She turns slightly, sensing the shift in my tone. “You never mentioned that.”

“We weren’t sharing personal histories at that point,” I remind her with a small smile. “You had just thrown champagne at me the day before.”

“True,” she acknowledges.

“It was the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” I say. “Because it started us on this journey.”

Something in my expression must change, because her eyes widen. “Ethan...”

I take a deep breath, turning her to face me as the sun continues its descent into the sea. “My grandfather built Cole Tech from nothing, created something that outlived him. But his true legacy wasn’t the company—it was teaching me to value what truly matters. The ocean he loved. The family connections he valued so much. The principle that a man’s character matters more than his success.”

Harper watches me.

“When I met you,” I continue, “I was running the company he built but had lost sight of some of his more important life lessons. You reminded me—forcefully, with excellent champagne aim—that success without them is hollow. That compromise isn’t the same as balance.”

“Ethan,” she says softly, but I shake my head.

“Let me finish while I still have my words in order,” I request with a nervous laugh. “Because what I’m trying to say is that loving you has made me not just a better CEO, but a better man. You challenge me, inspire me, frustrate me in the best ways possible. You’ve shown me I can have it all.”

I take her hands in mine, heart pounding so hard I’m certain she can hear it over the sound of the waves.

“I know we’ve joked about it,” I say, my voice growing more serious. “But I don’t need more.”

Her eyes grow bright as I reach into my pocket and drop to one knee on the polished

deck of my grandfather's yacht.

"Harper Bennett," I say, opening the small box to reveal a ring with a center stone surrounded by smaller gems in a pattern that mimics waves. "Will you marry me?"

For perhaps the first time since I've known her, Harper seems speechless, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"I have several questions about the sourcing of these gemstones," she says, voice wavering.

I laugh, relief and joy bubbling through me at this perfectly Harper response. "Full certification documentation is available."

"You expected my concerns," she laughs, a smile breaking through her momentary shock.

"I've learned to factor them into all major decisions," I confirm.

"That's fighting dirty, Cole."

"Is that a, yes?" I press, still on one knee, heart still racing.

"Yes," she says, simple and direct in the way that is so essentially Harper. "Yes, I will marry you."

"I love you," I murmur against her lips.

"And I love you," she replies, her voice more emotionally unguarded than I've ever heard it.