



# The Bargain

**Author:** *Jocelynn Drake*

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** He's a golden retriever with a billion-dollar bank account.

Sebastian is a brilliant, thoughtful boss who's also too sexy for words. And for some crazy reason he has set his sights on me—his lowly, boring, always-proper assistant.

I should say NO.

I need to say NO.

But YES is so much more delicious and fun.

**Total Pages (Source):** 83

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1

BYRON GRAHAM

When I'd first begun working as the executive assistant to Sebastian Courtland at Courtland Enterprises, I'd thought my boss was a god. Complete with a shining aura and inhuman good looks, full of benevolence and compassion.

After a few months, I'd discovered he was more like Loki—a being filled with chaos and mischief, out to make my life a nightmare.

Three years later, he was still Loki.

“Stick close to me.” Sebastian leaned in as we walked, his cologne dancing past my nose like a cool breeze. His warm, honey-brown eyes met mine, twinkling and bright with laughter, causing my heart to skip and my breath to catch. He whispered with an enormous grin, “My bodyguards are prepared to take us out of here by force. Just be ready to run the second I tell you to.”

And this was his response to the merger meeting we were marching into like a pair of avenging angels.

It wasn't a joke. He was serious. Shit was about to hit the fan in a huge way, and the maniacal lunatic who signed my paychecks looked like a kid who'd been sent on a shopping spree in a toy store.

For the past year, Courtland Enterprises and Bluepoint Industries had been in merger

negotiations. The companies were roughly the same size, but Courtland Enterprises would have a slight majority after all the paperwork was complete. The one thing that had been slowing everything up was the due diligence conducted by Courtland Enterprises' massive team of forensic accountants, managers, and God only knew who else Sebastian had hired to dig through Bluepoint's books, hoping to uncover all their dirty secrets. Sebastian's father had started Courtland Enterprises, and there was no way in hell Sebastian was going to allow it to be dragged under by someone who had a past with shady dealings. Sebastian might act as though he were insane, but he knew when to be cautious.

We arrived at Bluepoint's thirty-five-floor headquarters, and two members of the executive team met us. Their smiles stiffened a bit at the sight of the four enormous men in suits who accompanied us, but no one said anything. They might have if they'd realized that Sebastian had another two waiting in the underground garage with his two town cars.

After some excited chatter and glad-handing, they whisked us to the top floor, which offered a near panoramic view of downtown Cincinnati. It was a breathtaking symphony of glass, brushed nickel, and cold marble. As we walked, I caught peeks of Courtland Enterprises' tower just five blocks away. Ours was a beautiful glass-and-steel marvel with forty floors, a shining crown for our city.

But this was nice too.

At the top floor, more executives greeted us. It wasn't until we reached the massive boardroom that we faced Chairman Oliver Danvers, CEO Wallace Barnes, and the board of directors. It had been a while since I'd seen such a group of wrinkly, saggy-faced white men. There was only one woman on the board, and the way the others seemed to talk over her and ignore her made me think she was nothing more than a token to trot out in the name of "diversity" while never acknowledging her intelligence and experience.

Now that Sebastian had reached his target, the light in his bright eyes appeared more manic and his grin even wider. The second he sat with a glass of iced water at the head of the table, I moved out of the firing zone to a set of seats placed along the far wall with two of his bodyguards. The other two were waiting at the elevators to protect our escape.

Danvers stood with a broad, fatherly look. “I can’t begin to tell you how happy I am to have you here with us on this momentous day, Sebastian. I’ve known your father...”

Blah blah blah...

Danvers’s voice became a buzzing white noise under the grinding of my teeth. Pompous old egotistical asshole. I knew what was in the due-diligence report. I’d helped the various departments compile it. Listened as Sebastian had incredulously read parts of it out loud to me. Danvers wouldn’t be waxing poetic about the old days for much longer.

When the chairman of Bluepoint Industries was done, Barnes stood up and gave a similar speech about how this was going to create bigger and better opportunities for the combined company and how the employees were going to benefit. This was all overlooking the fact that the CEO’s proposal included laying off fifteen percent of his own workforce to “trim the fat.” Wouldn’t his newly unemployed workers love to know they were regarded as mere “fat”?

The entire time, I kept my head lowered as I typed on my phone. I sent messages to his bodyguards in the garage, keeping them updated on where we were in the meeting. There were also texts to Kaylan, who was technically my assistant, keeping him updated on what was happening. And, of course, there was the usual barrage of emails and reports that needed to be dealt with. Being away from my desk did not mean the chaos stopped for one second.

“Thank you so much for your warm and enthusiastic welcome,” Sebastian said, pulling my attention away from my phone. I finished up my last text and tucked my phone into the interior pocket of my suit jacket.

“When the idea of the Courtland Enterprises and Bluepoint Industries merger was first floated to me, I was skeptical. We’ve been in competition across several fields for a couple of decades. Sometimes, we came out on top. Sometimes, you did. But I saw the synergy that would result if we became one company. The efficiency we could achieve. The lowered costs that could be passed along to our loyal customers. It was all brilliant.”

I lifted my gaze to the boardroom table and watched as Sebastian smoothly pushed out of his seat to stand. Sebastian was a pacer, particularly as he talked. The man had to be moving constantly. It was his only way of burning off the endless amounts of energy he possessed. I bit the inside of my cheek as I watched him grow more animated about the merger while he threw out all the business buzzwords he hated.

He stopped behind the chairman’s seat, his hand resting on the back as he released an extravagant sigh. “But...we had to conduct our due diligence, for the safety of all our people.”

“Formality, formality,” Barnes said, waving a hand as if Sebastian shouldn’t worry about insulting him with such silly nonsense. “Both companies had to run their checks.”

“Yes, and I apologize for us taking so many months. It was my fault. I needed to be sure that all t’s were crossed and the i’s dotted.”

That was my cue.

I stood up, straightened my jacket, and walked to the box one bodyguard had carried

into the building for me. Within it were two large stacks of two-hundred-page binders. I grabbed as many as I could comfortably carry and began handing them out to the people seated around the table.

“My findings should not come as a shock to most of you. The surprise is likely that we found what your people tried so hard to hide.” Sebastian paused and flashed them a grin that would have befitted a great white shark. It was all I could do to maintain my stone-faced expression. A heady mix of fear and excitement was bubbling through my veins. He was going to drop the hammer.

Turn them into dust!

“In our six months of research, we found evidence of rampant embezzlement, fraud, trade violations, dangerous working conditions, and employee harassment. Your books are so cooked, they’re extra crispy. Not even the Colonel would touch your books. If Enron and Worldcom had a baby, Bluepoint would be that embezzle-baby.”

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Barnes launched to his feet, his entire body shaking as his face turned so red he looked as if he were about to explode. “How dare you!”

“How dareyou!” Sebastian shouted back. “Not only did you spearhead this illegal behavior, but the point of this merger was to bury all your secrets within Courtland Enterprises while you walked away with your oversized payoff and the marketing manager you’ve been sleeping with.” Sebastian lowered his voice to a fake whisper. “By the way, I forwarded the spicy video we came across of you and her ‘trapped’ in the elevator to your wife’s private investigator.”

Barnes fell into an apoplectic fit, hissing and gasping, his face looking more purple by the second. But it wasn’t just him. Everyone at the table was turning new and interesting shades of color, ranging from very pale to ghastly green to eye-popping red. I stepped away when I finished handing out the binders detailing all the information we’d uncovered.

A firm hand grabbed my elbow, and I glanced up to find Neil, one of Sebastian’s part-time bodyguards, pulling me a little farther from the table and closer to our exit. The entire time, his gaze never wavered from Sebastian, who had resumed his pacing. Unfortunately, the lunatic was on the far side of the room, the giant wooden board table between him and the bodyguard. Thankfully, he kept moving as he spoke, leaving the board of directors to flip frantically through the binders with horrified expressions.

“Oliver Danvers, Wallace Barnes, and probably other executives before you spent decades creating this house of cards, creating lie after lie to hide your shady dealings. As you reached a point where it was on the verge of toppling, you decided to sweep

all your dirt under the rug, and the rug you chose was Courtland Enterprises.”

At last, Sebastian worked his way around the table so that he was within feet of his bodyguards, and I could breathe again. Now we just had to get Loki Jr. out of the building.

Sebastian grinned and clapped his hands together. The sound was like a shot above the gasping and seething. “To show my appreciation for choosing Courtland Enterprises as the company you wanted to turn into a dumpster fire, I have shared all the information that I’ve uncovered with the SEC, IRS, FTC, and the federal Department of Labor. I’m sure you’ll be hearing from all of them shortly.”

There was a heartbeat of pristine silence. No one moved. Only the wind as it howled past the windows as it rose off the river.

And then the room exploded into outraged shouts, fervent denials, and even a couple of people desperately trying to strike bargains. It was too late for all that. I’d been there as Sebastian had made some of those phone calls. When he’d handed over that information, he’d made one request: let him drop the news on them prior to any of the agencies moving in. If there was any justice in the world, representatives from the IRS and SEC would be entering the lobby as we left.

“Go,” Neil snapped, giving me a push toward the double doors.

I wanted to drag my feet and make sure Sebastian was right behind me, but I couldn’t be a distraction today. Neil needed to have his full attention on Sebastian, to concern himself with his boss’s safety.

However, I took only two steps, and there was a light touch on my shoulder. I glanced to my left to find Sebastian walking beside me, a broad smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes. His hand was a warm weight, guiding me forward while also



reassuring me that he was right by my side.

“You okay?” he asked as if I freaking mattered in the middle of this insanity.

“I’m fine. Thank you. We should get going, sir.” It was a struggle to keep the incredulous horror out of my voice and maintain a professional tone, but I managed it.

Flanked by bodyguards Neil and Carl, we dashed to the elevators as hell continued to break out behind us. There were shouts for security, the police, lawyers, and more. Phones were ringing madly, and the few assistants and management who lingered on the top floor all looked lost and terrified. My heart went out to them. They’d started the day thinking that they were a step away from a new future with Courtland Enterprises, but tonight, they were all going to be updating their résumés while chugging their beers.

“Do you think that was over the top? Too much? It was too much, wasn’t it?” Sebastian inquired, his grin brighter than the sun glinting off the silver elevator doors.

It was over the top. So incredibly, ridiculously over the top.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” I inquired in return.

Carl jogged ahead of us and held open the final glass door that would take us to the elevators. Even with that door wide open, I still had to grab Sebastian’s arm and pull him toward me to keep him from walking into the clear glass wall. God help me, the man was a magnet for those walls. I felt like I spent a quarter of my time keeping him from smashing into them every time we visited a place that used them.

Sebastian sighed, not even blinking at the fact that I’d physically moved him out of harm’s way. “I did. I really did.”

“It wasn’t over the top, sir.”

When we reached the elevator without further incident, Sebastian leaned against the back wall and flashed me a smirk, as if the man knew what I was thinking. He closed his eyes, and some of the joy drained from his face. “It was over the top, but they deserved it for all the people they hurt and lied to. Because they planned to destroy Courtland Enterprises to hide their evil. Yep. No regrets.”

Silence fell over the elevators as we rode it to the garage. We were ushered into the sleek black town car with plush leather seats. God, I loved this car. I loved every second I got to ride in it with Sebastian. It was the most comfortable thing I’d ever sat in. Then it moved, and I was floating on a cloud.

But enough nonsense.

We were safely on the road, away from the Bluepoint Industries disaster with our integrity intact, but Courtland Enterprises was in danger.

“We’re screwed,” Sebastian mumbled beside me. He leaned his left elbow on the door and rested his head on his hand while stretching his long legs out in front of him. I had reached for my phone to check for any small fires that might have developed while I’d been escaping with my boss, but I returned it to my pocket. Sebastian looked at me and gave a half smile. “Sorry. I shouldn’t say that. It’s not fair of me to put that weight on your shoulders.”

“Sir, I see many of the same reports you do. I’ve sat in on your meetings with the CFO. You wouldn’t have hired me if I wasn’t smart enough to see that we’re losing money.”

“True. True. But I’m supposed to be upbeat and positive.”

“You are, but I appreciate that as a leader, you’re also realistic. No one would want to run to the helm after the Titanic has hit the iceberg to hear the captain say, ‘It’s fine. Everything is fine.’ ”

A surprised bark of laughter jumped from Sebastian’s throat, and I dutifully ignored how the sound warmed my heart. “Hell, Byron! I don’t know what I’d do without you. I don’t think we’re the Titanic yet, but you can’t abandon me. Not for a while, at least.”

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“Courtland Enterprises is not the Titanic, and I have zero plans to leave the company. Period.”

Sebastian’s smile returned, and I didn’t want to think about how powerful it made me feel. It was as though I’d ascended to the heavens and shoved aside those clouds so his light could shine through. What I did for him might not seem like much. Most people would have thought that I just balanced his calendar, fetched his coffee, and made sure he had all the papers he needed for each meeting, but it was more than that. I was a sounding board, a safe place for him to vent, and the person who kept him focused. He was the captain, and I was his navigator searching for the smoothest course through choppy waters.

The ride to the office was a short one. Normally, the extra bodyguards would have been released for the day, but after the splash Sebastian had made at Bluepoint, I’d asked them to stay at the office to keep their eyes out for trouble. I didn’t expect any of the executives or directors of Bluepoint to make physical threats, but it was always better to be safe than sorry.

On the way up to Sebastian’s office, we made four detours through different departments. Sebastian believed in showing his face to all the workers so that he felt more approachable. As a result, he got to sign a birthday card, sing “Happy Birthday,” and eat cake while he directed me to find two appropriate baby shower gifts and send flowers to the wife of Janitor Patrick for her post-foot-surgery recovery. I also helped him dodge two more walls.

“That helped,” Sebastian announced as he strolled into his palatial office with me on his heels. I took his suit jacket and hung it in his closet while he rolled up his sleeves.

“I am ready to get back to business. That merger was supposed to cut our supply chain costs. If things don’t improve from their current levels, we’re looking at layoffs by Christmas.”

Which I knew was the very last thing he wanted.

“Byron, how about an old-fashioned after-hours brainstorming session? We need one big new product to get us over the worst of the slump.”

As I turned toward his desk, he dropped into his swivel seat and spun to face me, his hands behind his head. I pulled out my phone and opened a blank page for notes.

“Of course, sir. Who would you like me to invite?”

“No, no!” He waved his hands. “I was thinking just the two of us. We can bring in others at a later date. Too many people in the early planning stage make it too noisy. I can’t think. My head is most clear when it’s only you.”

I wouldnotblush. I wouldnotblush.

He said crazy things like this all the time and didn’t mean a damn thing by it.

“We’ll order in some dinner. We haven’t tried that new Korean restaurant that opened up in OTR, and I know how much you lovebibimbap. I could go for somebulgogi. Good food, quiet atmosphere. We’ll get this all worked out.”

If only it could be so easy.

I opened my mouth to agree, but a call appeared on my screen that stopped my heart. Sheriff Dan Wheaton. This was never good.

“What’s wrong?”

Sebastian’s sharp question snapped my head up and for a second, I was tongue-tied. I wasn’t sure how to explain that it was likely that my mother had been arrested again or found dead. Those things didn’t seem good to drop on your boss’s head.

“Umm...I...personal call...I...” I stumbled and stammered as if I’d forgotten the English language.

“Oh. Don’t worry about it. Take the call, and we’ll make plans later this afternoon.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled as I nearly ran out of his office. I answered my phone, slipping into a nook where no one could overhear me.

“Hey, Brian,” the sheriff drawled in a thick accent, making my eye twitch. The man could not remember that my name was Byron, not Brian. I’d think he did it on purpose if I didn’t hear him regularly call his coworkers and other people by the wrong name. The only thing that saved me from losing my shit with this man was his compassion and patience.

“How bad is it?” I sighed.

“Whelp, I got her locked up in the drunk tank. She was arguing with the neighbors about them letting their dog crap in her yard.”

I rolled my eyes. Why she even cared was beyond me. Her yard was barely larger than a postage stamp and filled with dirt and crabgrass. She never went outside.

“I’m guessing she was swearing loud enough to disturb all the neighbors.”

“Yep. That and she dropped trou and took a shit in the neighbor’s yard.”

I lowered my phone, took two steps, spun, and walked back to where I'd been standing while clenching my fist hard enough to make the protective plastic case creak. Why? Why did she have to make my life a living hell? Why would she do this?

"How much?" I bit out when I could unclench my jaw enough to speak.

The sheriff huffed a breathless laugh. "Well, I talked her neighbors into cutting a deal. They picked up the poop in her yard and she picked up her own poop before I hauled her to jail to sleep it off. She's been with me for a couple of hours. I need you to come pick her up."

"Yeah, okay. I'll be there in about an hour. Maybe sooner."

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Nobibimbapfor me tonight.

2

BYRON GRAHAM

“Sharon Rogers is a cunt.”

This was one of my mother’s favorite complaints.

Mary Graham hated her neighbors. She’d hated them the day they’d moved in ten years ago, and she’d hated them every day since. I wasn’t even sure of the reason anymore. I thought she didn’t like their dog, who’d passed away more than five years ago. Not her doing. The dog was old, and I’d sent them a condolence fruit basket.

Of course, she’d found out and had hated me for about four months and then forgotten about it. She’d never stopped hating the Rogerses, and that hatred had taken on a new ferocity when Sharon had replaced her old dog with two yappy puppies.

As I drove her home from the jail, she went on rambling, a mostly incoherent tirade about neighbors, police, and ungrateful children who didn’t take proper care of their elders. Most of it went in one ear and out the other. I’d heard all her tirades before—they were part of her coming down from being drunk. She was going through withdrawal and hurting. I tried to have sympathy, but I was sorry to say that a lot of my sympathy had dried up from years of episodes like this. Alcoholism was an ugly disease.



I pulled my beat-up fifteen-year-old Toyota into her driveway and sighed. Everything seemed as it was the last time I'd been here four days ago. The tiny saltbox house with two bedrooms and a single bathroom was built in the fifties, and it didn't look like much had changed with it since then. Old, dingy white paint was fading and chipping thanks to age and weather. The windows were filthy and perpetually covered with heavy curtains to keep out the sun. A scattering of weeds grew in the yard and poked up between the cracks in the sidewalk.

After I slipped out of the car, I walked to the passenger side to help her. As soon as I got her to her feet, she slapped my hands and pushed me away, claiming she could do it herself. Except she struggled to do it on her own. I walked behind her, my hands extended to catch her if she fell. My mom was fifty-two, but she looked and moved as though she were in her seventies. Life had not been kind to her, and she'd chosen to deal with it the only way she knew how—with booze.

We stepped into the living room, and the smell of alcohol assaulted my nose. How? How did she manage it? I'd been here four days ago, and I'd cleaned out her stash. All the local stores knew they weren't allowed to sell to her. She'd lost her license and sold her car years ago. How was she getting it?

Forcing my gaze away from the empty bottles of hard liquor and beer on the table, I called out, "Mom, how about I make you something to eat before you lie down? You've got to be hungry and tired."

She grunted as she shuffled to the kitchen. "Ain't nothing to eat."

I bit my tongue as I followed her. That couldn't be right. I'd dropped off more than a week's worth of food not that long ago. She couldn't have gone through all of it. But as I pulled open the fridge, I found a bottle of vodka, eggs, and a bag of salad that was at the end of its lifespan. I snagged the bottle of vodka and marched to the sink, where I poured out its contents to the sound of her shouts and calling me every name

under the sun.

When she ran out of steam, she stomped off to the bathroom and slammed the door. I used the opportunity to ransack her room, where I found two unopened bottles under the bed and three opened bottles hidden in her closet. By the time she left the bathroom and stomped to her bedroom, where she slammed the door yet again, I was pouring the last of the booze down the sink.

For a moment, the weight of it all threatened to crush me. The endlessness of this endeavor: I'd find the bottles and empty them. I'd talk to all the nearby liquor vendors and tell them not to sell to her. She was on a strict budget. She didn't drive. After hours of searching and cleaning, I'd leave the house empty of booze and refilled with food. She would go a few days, maybe a few weeks, without alcohol, and then we'd be right back here. I'd tried getting her help, but she would give up too quickly or refuse the help completely.

What she needed was to be put in some kind of assisted living or even have a nurse checking on her, but I couldn't afford either option, so I was left with no choice but to make regular trips to check on her and dump out her booze.

Fuck this.

Enough of the pity party.

I shoved away from the sink, took off my suit jacket, and hung it on one of the kitchen chairs. After rolling up my sleeves, I submitted an Instacart order for some groceries to be delivered, and I set about cleaning her house. Carpets were vacuumed, surfaces were dusted, and floors were scrubbed. I opened windows to let in a cool spring breeze, hoping to push out some of the sour despair that clung to the house like black mold.

A peek into her bedroom revealed her asleep on the bed. I gathered up the clothes I could find tossed about the room and threw them into the wash. By the time I was moving them to the dryer, a delivery person had dropped the food on the front porch. I prepared a few meals that she needed only to heat in the microwave and wrote out some instructions for them.

It was after five when I was done, and she hadn't stirred. I peeked into her room to make sure she was still breathing. It wouldn't have been a surprise if she were pretending to sleep so she wouldn't have to deal with me.

As I walked to my car, my phone vibrated, and I almost cried at the name on the screen.

"Hello, Dr. Willard," I said, trying so hard not to clench my teeth as I leaned on the driver's side door. The quiet neighborhood had grown a little busier as people rushed home at the end of a long day. Overhead, the sky was a bright blue and the late-spring leaves rustled in the mild wind, but the happy May day did nothing to remove the growing knot in my stomach.

"Hello, Byron. How have you been?"

Shit, Dr. Willard. It's been a shit day, and I know you're calling to make it worse.

But I didn't say that, no matter how badly I wanted to. Because I knew he didn't care. He wasn't my doctor, and I wasn't his problem. Ronald Graham Jr. was.

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"Not too bad. I'm sorry to bother you today, but I'm calling to let you know we need to increase Ronnie's meds again. He had another violent episode with one of the orderlies."

My muscles tensed, and a chill swept across my skin. “Shit! Was anyone hurt?”

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“No, no. Just a chair. No people.”

I sagged, my head falling back to rest on the roof. “Thank God.”

“He’s sedated now. I’m going to make some changes that should help him stay calmer and keep him from getting agitated.”

“Thank you.”

“Byron...I know I don’t need to remind you that this isn’t the best situation for Ronnie. The facilities at the Holy Mother Hospital aren’t equipped to handle all Ronnie’s needs. I think you need to consider moving him to another facility that has more programs and can be more hands on with their care of him.”

The lump in my throat was making it impossible to swallow, but it was the only way I could squeeze out a few words. “I know, Dr. Willard. I appreciate you taking the time to call me.”

There was nothing to say after that. I knew Ronnie needed to be moved to another hospital that could help him, but the other option was nearly double the cost of his current location and I’d yet to find a way to pay for it. Between paying to support Mom and Ronnie, there was nothing left of my paycheck at the end of the day. I needed more money, and there was none to be had.

With a grunt, I shoved off the car and climbed inside. I couldn’t stay in this downward spiral of frustration and hopelessness. It would leave me curled up in the fetal position in the corner somewhere, and that wouldn’t solve a damn one of my

problems. The one thing that made sense was going back to work. At least there, I could be useful.

And if I were lucky, Sebastian would still be working. His smile could help me forget how shitty my life away from the office really was.

3

## SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

“How did you end up here, drinking with us?” Pierce’s voice was evil and sly, dragging a groan out of me while Rome cackled like a fucking hyena.

“To hell with you both. It’s been a hard day.” I sank lower in my chair and glared at two of my oldest friends as they snickered at me from the sofa in my lounge. The assholes had come to my house, intent on annoying me, and I’d made the mistake of allowing them to stay.

I’d met Pierce Sutton and Rome Ashbridge while away at college. Because I was the craftier manipulator, I’d convinced them to move to Cincinnati with me after we’d graduated. The only one missing from our usual quartet was Declan. We went all the way back to high school, and he now worked as CFO for Courtland Enterprises.

Pierce’s thin mouth twisted into a smirk as he stared into the amber whiskey in his crystal tumbler. “Rome got it out of your bodyguard Carl that you were in fine form today at Bluepoint Industries. That should have put you in a good mood.”

I opened my mouth, but Rome was faster.

“Except he had this romantic dinner for two planned with his assistant.” Rome sat up, placed his fingers to his lips, and faked looking around the room. “But...but where is

he? He didn't turn you down again, did he?"

"Asshole. You're both assholes and jackals. I'm sitting here with my heart in shreds, and you're laughing at my misery."

Naturally, my pity party earned me even more laughter, to the point of Rome falling into Pierce and nearly sloshing his drink out of his glass. Pierce snorted and shoved Rome off him.

"Really, Cor, how long have you been pining for this guy?" Pierce mocked.

"Well, he's worked for me for three years, so I'd say three years," I said while flipping him off.

It was sad. I was pathetic. And hopeless.

Byron Graham was adorable and perfect in every freaking way. From how he styled his dark-brown hair so that it had a perfect part and this little swoop to the way his suits exquisitely hugged his narrow frame to the way his lips twitched when he was trying so damn hard to hold in whatever inappropriate thing he wanted to say in response to my idiocy.

The first time I saw him had been like getting hit by a semi. For several critical seconds, I hadn't been able to remember my own name. I hadn't even been able to breathe. Thankfully, Janice from HR had been there to maneuver the bulk of the interview.

But just to add another incredible layer of ganache to his perfect pastry, Byron was also the most competent, brilliant, efficient assistant I'd ever had in my life. It was as though he could see into my mind and anticipate all the things I needed. He could read a room like no one else and say or do the perfect thing every damn time. It was

so fucking sexy.

That was exactly what made him off-limits. He was the perfect assistant, and I couldn't afford to lose him.

So, I'd learned to make do with sneaking smiles out of him, long lunches where we talked business, and the occasional after-hours meeting where we ordered dinner in and Byron loosened his tie enough to unbutton the top button of his shirt.

I was pathetic. There was no way past it. I was fantasizing about my assistant, and the vultures I called friends were carving up the remains of my heart for laughs.

What the hell was I supposed to do?

"I don't understand why you torture yourself like this? Just change the employee handbook, and get rid of that stupid rule stating managers can't date their direct reports," Rome stated before throwing back the last of his whiskey with a clink of ice in his glass.



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I rolled my eyes and did the same. The burn was exquisite and helped to push away the chill surrounding my heart. “Because that rule is there to protect my employees. How shitty would it look if I got rid of that rule and then asked Byron out? If I have some unscrupulous managers in my company, they’d pounce on their team members and think they had my approval.”

“Well,” Pierce said so slowly. “You could sneak around with him.”

I shoved out of my chair and grabbed Rome’s empty glass on my way to the wet bar for a refill. Since I couldn’t have a work meeting with Byron, I’d summoned over my friends for a night on the town. We were waiting for Declan to leave the office and meet up with us for a late dinner.

“Enough about Byron and my sad love life,” I grumbled because I was afraid of letting it slip how many times I’d considered Pierce’s suggestion. “Work was exhausting enough without rehashing it.” I paused for a second, wracking my brain for something else as I splashed more whiskey in our glasses. “Oh! I heard from Simon today.”

“Simon? Simon who?” Pierce inquired.

“Holy shit! Sawyer’s little brother,” Rome gasped as I handed him his glass.

“Yep.”

Rome chuckled and shook his head. “I haven’t thought about that squirt in years. What’s he up to?”

“That squirt just finished grad school, oldman,” I said, relishing any chance to make Rome wake up to his own aging body. He wasn’t twenty anymore. Hell, he wasn’t even thirty.

“Fuck.”

“What did he want?” Pierce demanded, his tone sharper than I would have expected.

“He’s moving to the area for a job, and he wanted to meet up with us.”

“Why?”

Pierce’s stubbornness and shit attitude left me wanting to chuck an ice cube at his head. Thankfully, Rome was sitting right next to him and could punch him in the shoulder for me.

“Because we were best friends with his big brother,” Rome snapped while Pierce scowled.

“We were all close with Sawyer, and I think he’d appreciate it if we looked out for his baby brother,” I said, which got that glare directed at me. Whatever. “It’s not like we have to chauffeur him to Little League and attend his recitals. He’s a fucking adult with a master’s degree. I think we need to invite him out for dinner. Answer any questions he might have about living here.”

A noncommittal grunt left Pierce, and I let it go. Pierce had always taken Sawyer’s death the hardest.

Sawyer had been the fifth member of our crew in college, but he’d died in a swimming accident prior to graduation. We’d met his brother Simon when he and his parents had come for a visit. It had taken all of two seconds to see that Simon idolized

his older brother and did everything he could to emulate him. Thankfully, Sawyer had doted on Simon as well, rather than being an asshole toward him as teenagers were prone to do. God knew I hadn't treated my younger sister the best while we were growing up.

However, in my defense, Aggie had been and always would be a pain in my ass.

"When's he get into town?" Rome asked.

"He didn't give me a specific date. Just sometime this summer. I told him to reach out to me as soon as he gets settled. We can arrange a dinner or something."

"Fine. Fine. I think we need to get back to this issue you're having with your executive assistant," Pierce countered in a brisk tone that left me sighing and Rome cackling maniacally.

"There's no need to tread that ground again," I grumbled. "I'm attracted to Byron, but I don't see any way around it."

"Except for sneaking," Pierce pointed out.

"And I'd be fine with that—to start. To see if we're a good match." I was confident in my heart, though, that he was the perfect match for me. "But we'd have to figure out something long term, so he didn't get hurt." With another groan, I waved my empty hand at those assholes because they'd sent my brain down that dead-end road. "All of this is useless talk. He would never go for it. Let's put aside the fact that he's not attracted to me. The man is straight as an arrow."

"He's straight?" Rome choked out. "I thought you said he was gay?"

"Straight as an arrow, meaning he's not the type to break the rules," I bit out. "While

he's never said the words, he has given me enough clues over the years to make me confident that he is gay."

"But he's never actually said it?" Pierce asked.

I was going to kill them both. This was not what I'd been looking for in a relaxing evening after a somewhat shit day.

Luck shone in my favor as my phone vibrated with a call from Declan. I put my glass of untouched whiskey on the table and rose to my feet as I answered the phone.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:21 am*

“Hey, Declan! What’s taking so long? You getting out of there? Your boss is a real asshole.”

Declan grunted. I wasn’t sure if he was agreeing with me or acknowledging my shitty joke. His grunts were much easier to read when I could see his face. “I finished compiling those new numbers you wanted. As I was leaving the report on your desk, I found your assistant passed out in your office.”

“What?” The single word leaped out of my mouth in a shout that I couldn’t stop. My heart tried to crawl into my throat, and my knees turned to water. “What happened? Is he hurt? Have you called an ambulance? Does it look like someone attacked him?” As I fired questions at him, Pierce and Rome rose to their feet as if they were preparing to jump into battle with me.

“You misunderstand,” Declan replied with his usual measured tone and patience. Nothing ruffled Declan’s feathers. “He is unconscious, seated at your board table, surrounded by papers and a bottle of your scotch. It appears he came in here to do some work and drank enough to pass out. He doesn’t appear harmed at all. Just sleeping off his alcohol.”

My relief dropped me back into my seat, my head resting in my empty hand. “You’re going to kill me one of these days, Dec,” I muttered.

“It wasn’t my intention to scare you. I thought you should know, since this seemed out of character for your assistant.”

“It is. He has my permission to use my office after hours, and I’ve invited him more

than once to have a drink so long as he promised me he wouldn't drive intoxicated. But getting drunk isn't his style." Something bad must have happened after he'd left the office to deal with that personal matter. "Do me a favor. Stay there. Don't wake him up. Keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn't try to drive home. I'll be there in less than an hour. After I relieve you, you can head out to dinner with Pierce and Rome."

"As you wish." Declan hung up, but I was used to his brevity.

When I pocketed my phone, I found Pierce and Rome staring at me in shock.

"Your unflappable assistant is drunk in the office?" Rome asked.

"In your office?" Pierce added.

"Yes, and you both need to forget you ever heard about that. Something is wrong. This is not like Byron, and he needs my help. You two assholes go meet Declan for dinner. I have other plans."

I needed to get to Byron.

My always perfect, stalwart, brilliant assistant was as Declan had described him—passed out, seated at the long shiny table off to one side of my office. The lights were turned low around most of the room. There was a glow over the table that glinted and danced along the crystal decanter and empty glass on Byron's right. The decanter was only half-empty, and I'd had a good bit out of it prior to Byron taking some. Either Byron had been drinking before he'd made it to the office, or he was a cheap date.

As soon as I spotted Byron, I got rid of Declan, sending him off to dinner with our friends. I stood beside Byron's sleeping form, my eyes skimming the scattered papers

in front of him. They were reports from all the different departments and subsidiary businesses. There was also a legal pad filled with his notes, but the farther I traveled down the page, the less legible they grew.

After whatever shit thing he'd gone through, he'd returned to work on Courtland Enterprises' problem of falling revenue. My heart simultaneously swelled and broke for him. If there was anyone in desperate need of a break, it was my poor assistant.

With Byron sleeping so soundly, I gave in to one of my greatest wishes. I reached out and lightly touched his hair, letting those fine silken threads brush along my fingertips. I shouldn't. It was wrong. But if I couldn't ever date him, I wanted to look back and have this tiny thing.

I rested my hand on his shoulder and shook him gently. "Byron? It's time to wake up. I'll take you home," I said in a low voice.

The young man jolted upright, a piece of paper stuck to his cheek. I swallowed the chuckle that rose and plucked away the paper. The movement drew his gaze up to me as he seemed to have taken zero notice of the fact that I was still holding his shoulder.

I'd expected horror when he saw me. What I got was the widest grin I'd ever seen on Byron's face.

"S'bastian!" he slurred. "What're you doin' 'ere? Oh, no! Is it Monday already?"

This time I laughed, ignoring the flutter in my chest at the sound of him saying my name for the first time. Well, almost saying it. "No, it's Friday night. I came to take you home. It's not good to sleep here."

"Oh! Then I gotta clean up my mess." He turned away from me and stretched his arms across the table, dragging the papers noisily to his body. I jumped forward and

snagged the decanter and glass as they moved with the papers, and I deposited them on the hidden wet bar.

“We can leave the papers to deal with on Monday. They’ll be fine,” I reassured him as I returned to his side.

“Okay.” It was the most affable tone I’d ever heard from him. He pushed to his feet and flopped into the chair again as if his legs refused to hold him. Byron directed a quizzical look at his legs, swaying in his seat as if he were also confused by what happened.

When he made another attempt, I grabbed his arm and held him upright, stopping him from falling a second time. As we made our way to the elevators, I wrapped an arm around him while Byron mimicked me, putting his arm behind my waist while he laid his head on my chest.

“You’re tall,” Byron declared with a lopsided grin. He wasn’t wrong. I had a solid six inches on him, and I appreciated that I had a considerable height and weight advantage over him since he couldn’t walk straight.

“And you are the happiest drunk I’ve ever met.”

Byron smiled, his eyes already drooping. I suspected he’d be asleep like a drowsy toddler within minutes of starting our journey.

We made it to the garage, where my bodyguard Carl jumped out to help me maneuver the noodle-legged Byron into the back seat.



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“Where to, sir?” Carl inquired before I could follow Byron inside.

I frowned at Byron, who was slumped very low in the seat. It was unlikely Carl knew his address, and I wasn’t all that thrilled with the idea of leaving him home alone like this.

“Take me home. He can sleep in one of the guest rooms.” I put my foot in the car and stopped, turning to Carl. “I’m going to tell him I picked him up alone. You were never here.”

“Of course, sir,” Carl agreed with a nod and a completely blank expression.

When Byron sobered up, he’d be embarrassed as hell. Right now, I was hoping to convince him I was the only one who’d seen him like this. He didn’t need to know about Carl and Declan. That would add to his misery.

I slipped into the car and scooted closer to Byron than I normally would, so I could help him sit up. He was one hard stop away from being on the floor.

“Iloooooovethis car,” Byron moaned as he rested his head on my shoulder. “This is the very best car.”

“Really? I didn’t know you were so fond of it.”

This was killing me. Everything out of his mouth was too adorable. I’d had no idea he was this cute. I found him excruciatingly adorable sober, but it was a different kind of adorable. It was like dressing a bunny rabbit in a suit adorable. Drunk Byron was

simply the bunny.

“The seats are so soft and comfy,” Byron continued. He ran his left hand along the side of his seat. He turned his face up to me and smiled. “The car also smells like you.”

“It smells like me?” That was not what I’d expected him to say.

Byron nodded, still giving me that charming, crooked smile. “Couple times, you had Carl drive me to run errands. I sat here, and the car still smelled like your cologne. S’ nice.”

A big red warning light flashed in my head, but I smacked that shit as if I were shutting off my morning alarm.

I shifted, so I was facing him better, and bent my head. “You like how I smell?”

“Sooooooo much,” Byron agreed. He dropped his voice to a whisper. “You smell so good. And yer sooooo sexy.” Just as my heart skipped at his declaration, a laugh burst out of Byron that ended in a snort. He slapped me on the chest. “But you know yer sexy.”

“The only thing that matters to me is if you think I’m sexy.”

Oh, I was a bad man. Such a bad, bad man.

But I’d been pining and longing for the tiniest hint that he thought of me as more than his boss. I couldn’t let this go.

Byron’s smile softened, and he raised his left hand to cradle my cheek. My pulse soared through the room, but I sat frozen, my eyes locked with his sleepy ones. “Yes,

I think yer very sexy.”

He pulled me forward with the slightest pressure, and I went so damn willingly. Our lips brushed lightly at first, a featherlight touch followed by his hot breath dancing across my damp mouth. I went in for a second kiss, loving the happy grunt that left him, the way his fingers slid to the nape of my neck. The kiss was hot and tender. So perfect.

But as quickly as it had started, that hand on my neck went limp and he stopped moving completely.

I lifted my head to find Byron’s head resting against the seat, his eyes closed, and his lips slack. A soft snore rose from him.

“Fuck.”

He’d passed out.

4

BYRON GRAHAM

Oh God, let me die.

My body ached, and my mouth tasted like envelope paste. My head hurt, but not as bad as I was expecting, which meant I could feel my stomach attempting to eat itself.

Why in all that was holy had I drunk so much on an empty stomach?

You would think that after dealing with an alcoholic mother, I wouldn’t want to touch a drop of alcohol, but I’d reached the end of my rope. I’d needed something to get

through the next second, and concentrating on work hadn't been enough. There had been only three options I could think of: drugs, sex, and alcohol.

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Drugs were never a choice.

I wasn't the one-night-stand type.

So, that left me with booze, and Sebastian had far too much of it at my fingertips in his office. I'd had only two glasses to calm my nerves and soothe the whirlpool in my head. I was just like my damn mother.

Fuck. I must have left an enormous mess in his office.

But...how...did...I...get...home?

My eyes popped open and even in the dim light sneaking in around the curtains, I could see that I was not in my apartment. This room looked as if it were double the size of my shoebox studio apartment.

With a strangled cry, I shoved into a sitting position, threw off the covers, and turned on the bedside lamp. Soft light caressed buttery warm walls, elegant pale-wood furniture, and dark, heavy curtains that were pulled across at least three windows to block out the light. This room was completely foreign to me. It was almost like a hotel room, but this was all too nice to be a hotel. I was in someone's house.

My fingers twisted in my hair, and I squeezed my eyes shut as I wracked my brain for what had happened last night. How had I gotten here? I refused to believe that I'd stumbled out of the office and down the street to some nightclub or bar, where my super-rich hookup had brought me home and taken care of me. It wasn't like Cincinnati was dripping with ultra-rich guardian angels searching for idiots to save

from themselves.

The only rich person I knew even a little was Se?—

Oh, fuck...

The fog covering my memories parted enough to spit out a hazy memory of Sebastian standing over me in his office, smiling. There was another of me plastered to the side of him while we were in the elevators. And then...kissinghim.

“No!” I gasped, slapping my hand to my mouth as my stomach twisted. That had to be a dream. I couldn’t have really kissed him. It was bad enough that I’d been discovered drunk onhisalcohol inhisoffice, but to havekissed him?

I was dead. Just stick a fork in me and sprinkle me with garnish, because I was fucking done. There was no coming back from this. I would need to move far away, change my name. Maybe even get a facelift so no one could ever recognize me.

But first, I had to get out of here before anyone noticed. My gaze dropped to my chest to find that I was wearing strange pajamas. They were pale blue with a darker blue piping. Certainly the softest things I’d ever worn in my life. But why the hell was I in someone else’s pajamas? Where were my clothes? And my phone? There was no clean escape without my phone to call for a ride.

A soft knock on the door tore me from my current panic attack to send me on a different spiraling panic attack.

“Yes?” I squeaked.

The door opened and a man in a dapper gray suit with salt-and-pepper hair entered, carrying a tray. I recognized the man in an instant. It was Wilkins, Sebastian’s butler.

He'd pop into the office to deliver things like suits and other items to Sebastian when he had to go from the office to some party or event.

I was definitely in Sebastian's house.

"Good morning, Mr. Graham. I hope you had a pleasant rest," he said as he entered the room. God love the man, he'd managed to say all that without letting even a hint of judginess enter his tone.

I swallowed hard twice to get my throat to let a few words out. "Yes. Thank you."

"I've brought you some breakfast. Nothing too heavy, sir. Master Sebastian warned me you might still be feeling under the weather."

My growing horror warred with two little warm spots forming in my chest. One was for Sebastian's thoughtfulness, and the other was for how Wilkins called his boss "Master Sebastian." He'd mentioned once that Wilkins had first come to work for Sebastian's parents, but he'd followed Sebastian when he'd set up his own house after college because he was concerned with Sebastian's ability to care for himself properly.

"Is Mr. Courtland awake?" I asked, still clinging to the hope that I'd be able to sneak out of the house before I had to face him.

"Awake and ready to start the day," Sebastian announced as he walked through the door.

Fuck. My. Life.

Wilkins finished setting up my breakfast tray on the small table with two chairs and darted to open the curtains to the windows, revealing a stunning view of a glittering

lake surrounded by trees. It was like a fairy tale.

Without another word, Wilkins offered me and Sebastian a tiny bow of his head and left the room, closing the door behind him. I was alone with Sebastian in what was likely a guest bedroom, wearing strange pajamas, after getting drunk in his office. There was no way to salvage this.

“S-sir...” I stammered.

“Are you feeling better? Do you need anything for your head or your stomach?”

I shook my head. All the earlier aches and pains had vaporized the moment I’d realized the true state of things. Now, all I could feel was cold, clammy dread that left me clinging to the warm blankets still draped over my lap.



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Fuck. I was talking to my boss while I was in bed.

I jumped to my feet and shoved my fingers through my hair, trying to tame what I knew to be the world's worst bedhead. "Sir, about yesterday. I know there's no way you can forgive my deplorable behavior. I?—"

"Are you hungry?" Sebastian interrupted. He motioned to the table and the spread of food. The plate was even under a clichéd silver dome cover to keep the heat from escaping. "Carol makes the best breakfast. Her eggs are the fluffiest. She's the reason I never eat breakfast outside of the house."

My traitorous stomach growled even as it roiled with nausea and panic, and Sebastian's smile widened in triumph. But there was no way I could sit and eat after last night.

"I can't, sir. Please, allow me to apologize for getting drunk in your office. That behavior is so unacceptable. I?—"

"It didn't look like you drank that much. Did you eat at all yesterday? I know you didn't have your usual bagel before our meeting. You were too busy gathering up what we needed and coordinating with the other departments."

No. I hadn't. I'd skipped breakfast, and then the thing with Mom had happened, keeping me busy through the afternoon and into the early evening. Then after the call with my brother's doctor, my stomach had soured on the idea of food. I'd only wanted something to forget about my life.

“That’s what I thought.” Sebastian read my expression like the genius he was, and his expression grew grim for the first time since stepping into the bedroom. “You can’t go on like that. I’m not letting you do another thing until I see you eat something.”

“But, sir!” I pressed harder, trying desperately to get my apology and resignation out past the tightness in my throat. Why did he have to make this so hard by being so nice?

Sebastian ambled across the room and put his hand on my tense shoulder. “Byron, stop. I’m not letting you apologize, and if you’ve got it in your head to quit, you give that notion up too. Yesterday, you had a terrible day and because of that, you tried to numb some of the pain you were in. The only thing I want you to do is reassure me you won’t hurt your body like that again. You need to take better care of yourself.”

My mouth uselessly flopped open and closed for several seconds as my brain tried to catch up with what was happening. How could he just shrug this off? He’d caught medrunk in his office. I’d hung all over him, babbling like a fucking idiot. Thathadhappened, hadn’t it?

“But didn’t I...” I swallowed hard and dropped my voice to a whisper. “Didn’t I kiss you?”

Sebastian’s handsome face morphed from one of worry to a devilish expression of pure glee. “So, you remember that?”

“Oh gawd,” I groaned, covering my face with my hands. It really had happened. “Sir, I need to leave. Where are my clothes?” My words were muffled as I continued to hide behind my hands. Getting out of here was the only thing that was going to save me from dying on the spot from embarrassment.

“Um...your clothes. I had to send your suit out for dry cleaning.”

I lowered my hands and narrowed my gaze at him. “Because I spilled alcohol on my clothes?”

Sebastian remained silent as he winced. Horror slammed down on my head.

“I got sick?” Sebastian’s expression didn’t change. “Did I get sick on you?” Sebastian’s wince grew, and his head ducked to his shoulders.

A loud, gut-twisting moan left me. My knees gave out, and I sank to the floor and curled up into a ball like a tiny gray pill bug. Not only had I gotten drunk in my boss’s office and kissed him, but to top it all off, I’d puked on him as well.

“Byron,” Sebastian said, and I swore I could hear laughter in his voice.

“Just leave me here to die,” I groaned into the thick, cream-colored carpet. “One bad day, and I’ve committed career suicide.”

“Byron.” Now he was definitely laughing. “It didn’t happen in the office, if that helps. I think the car ride upset your stomach. Most of it hit the lawn, and a little got on my shoes.”

“Don’t laugh at me. Just let me die here. You can toss my corpse out with the trash. Go eat my eggs, so your chef’s cooking doesn’t go to waste.”

Sebastian was still chuckling as he grabbed my biceps and helped me to my feet. “You’re not allowed to die. You had a very bad day, but you’re not allowed to die. I need you far too much to allow that to happen.”

“How are you not firing me?” I cried even as he ushered me to the table.

“I have a lot of reasons for not firing you, but the only one that matters right now is

that we've all had fucked-up days. Do you think I've never had a bad day and done stupid things? I'd be a real asshole for not letting you have one." He gave me a last nudge, and I sat in the cushy swivel seat in front of the delicious meal that had been prepared for me. To my left, I could stare out the window at the sparkling lake and the bright-blue sky decorated with thin wisps of clouds. My choices were to stare at the view or at my food, because I couldn't yet meet Sebastian's gaze as he sat across from me.

"I am sorry, sir. Yesterday, I hit a personal wall of sorts and...just broke a little," I admitted, as much as it killed me to do so. If anything, I owed him that much for my deplorable and unprofessional behavior.

"Okay. I accept, but that's the last one. No more apologies after that," Sebastian agreed, and it felt like some of the weight trying to crush my chest eased. "Now, do you think you could at least eat something?"

Despite having enough embarrassment to choke an elephant, I was still starving. Since sitting at the table, a steady stream of delicious scents had been assaulting my nose, teasing my stomach into singing a full, growling chorus of pleas. I grabbed the water and downed half of it to get the paste taste out of my mouth. I removed the cover to see the fluffiest scrambled eggs in existence, golden brown toast, bacon, sausage, and hash browns. There was also a small bowl of oatmeal and another bowl of fruit. A whimper escaped me.

Sebastian snagged the cover from my frozen fingers and set it next to him on the floor. "Eat. We can chat." My shoulders slumped, and Sebastian laughed in response. "I don't mean anything serious or heavy. Eat. Eat."

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Well, if I was going to die of embarrassment, I might as well do it with a full stomach. I picked up my fork and stabbed some of the eggs that appeared so enticing. Of course, Sebastian was right, and they were the best eggs I'd ever eaten. I worked my way around the tray, struggling to eat at a slow pace when I wanted to inhale everything in front of me.

Sebastian was kind enough to wait a couple of minutes, staring out the window, watching the birds fly across the sky and the trees sway in the breeze, prior to speaking again. "If you need time off to deal with personal or family matters, we can move things and make it happen. It's not a problem."

With food in my painfully empty stomach at last, I could feel common sense leaking into my brain. I shook my head and dared to lift my eyes up to Sebastian's face. Naturally, the man looked as handsome as ever in the morning light. The only difference from our usual everyday meetings was that his collared shirt was missing a tie. The top two buttons were undone, revealing an enticing expanse of throat. Why did this man always have to be so sexy? I was just a poor, weak human who couldn't withstand the awesome power of his beautiful smile and broad shoulders.

"No, sir. Time off is unnecessary. I settled things yesterday. There won't be any more disruptions."

But my words only pulled his mouth into a frown. He let out a soft sigh and pushed to his feet. "Okay. Promise me that if you have another bad day like yesterday or if you need a break, you will tell me."

"I will, sir. I promise." His concern made sense. If I were making myself sick with

work and my crappy personal life, I couldn't keep up with my daily tasks and he'd have to replace me. Sebastian Courtland was an incredibly busy man, and he needed someone who could keep up with him.

He still didn't seem happy, but he nodded and walked across the room. I thought he was leaving me alone to finish my breakfast, but he moved to the far bureau and picked up what appeared to be a random knickknack from a bowl.

"Did I ever tell you that I met Declan Foster in high school?" Sebastian asked rather out of the blue.

"No, sir."

"Mn," he grunted and strolled to the table. "Yeah, he was a hard nut to crack. Very reserved. Didn't show many emotions. Didn't like to talk. Took me forever to get him to open up."

His description of the company's CFO sounded spot on for the man I knew today. Declan Foster was polite and courteous, but he always spoke in an even tone, never showing any emotion. He also never said more than absolutely necessary. Small talk was not something he ever engaged in. But if anyone could get him to open up, I believed Sebastian could do it.

"Anyway, we've been close for years. He chose to go to the same colleges as me because he didn't want the trouble of needing to break in a new friend."

My lips twitched, and I shoved a piece of sausage into my mouth to keep from smiling. I was more inclined to believe the reverse of that.

"After he joined the company and I became the CEO, he stopped treating me as his friend, even as he was sitting in my house, drinking my scotch. He kept treating me

as his boss. I hated it. The whole thing put us both on edge. One night, I stood up, and I went searching around the lounge until I found this metal ruler that had been left out for some random reason or another, and I held it up to him. I said, 'We're friends, and you need to remember that. If you need help with that, I'm giving you this.' I shook the ruler in his face, and announced, 'This is our friend stick. When I'm holding this stick, you have to treat me like your friend and not like your boss.' "

Sebastian dropped into his abandoned chair and held up what turned out to be a shiny gray marble egg. After a lengthy pause, Sebastian continued in a softer, gentler voice. "Byron, I would like to be your friend. You're a smart, funny, interesting guy. And if you need it, I can make this our friend egg to help you remember you can talk to me as a friend, rather than as your boss."

Seconds ticked by, and I couldn't tear my eyes from that marble egg. My heart was pounding. Blood roared like a torrent past my ears. Was this real? How could Sebastian want to be my friend? This was insane. I was dreaming. No, I was dead. I'd died of alcohol poisoning, and now I'd gone to this weird heaven where things didn't quite make sense but were better than my reality.

"Can we be friends?" Sebastian asked.

"Sir—"

Sebastian held up one finger from the egg. "My friends don't call me sir. Sebastian, Cor, or even Courtland are pretty common. You called me Bastian last night, so that might be my new favorite."

I dropped my fork with a noisy clatter and sat there roasting in the fire spreading from the tips of my ears to my chest.

"I don't know," I mumbled. After sucking in a deep breath, I forcefully lowered my

walls a bit and blurted out, “I’ve already made such an ass of myself. I don’t even have friends who’ve seen me that drunk. However, the boss I greatly respect and admire has not only had to suffer through me kissing him, but I also managed to puke on him. Right now, all I want to do is curl up in bed and pretend I don’t have to deal with life for a littlewhile. Maybe pretend you don’t think I’m a complete idiot and a loser.”

“Byron, you are not an idiot or a loser. People have bad days and make bad decisions. Let yourself be human. Besides, do you think me and my friends haven’t gotten rip-roaring drunk and done stupid things?” Sebastian snorted, still grinning at me. “So much stupid, you’d think we were brain dead.”

The smile started slowly, pushing against the restraint I always locked on my mouth when I was with Sebastian. I didn’t let myself smile because I’d told myself showing too much emotion was unprofessional. He needed me reserved, competent, and efficient at all times. Smiling meant I was getting too relaxed.

But he was asking me to be his friend, so smiling would be allowed. Also, I might have liked the idea of having the freedom to be a bit more relaxed around him.

“Okay,” I agreed, shoving the word out with more force than necessary.

Sebastian’s grin spread wide across his face and glowed in his eyes. “Okay, what?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He wanted me to use his first name.

“No. I can’t do that. Not yet.” If we were going to be friends, I was going to draw some boundaries up early.

Sebastian’s smile never wavered. “Fair enough.”



“But keep the egg on the table. It’ll probably help.”

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A laugh jumped from him, and the grin I had been holding back broke free. I returned my eyes to the remains of my breakfast while he lounged across from me.

“So, what do you normally do on the weekend?” Sebastian inquired as he plucked a grape from my bowl of fruit and popped it into his mouth.

“Nothing exciting. Laundry. Read books. Sometimes I’ll go for a walk or pick up a few groceries for the week.” I huffed a soft laugh. “You’re going to discover that I’m the most boring friend you have.”

“Doubtful.” Sebastian grabbed another grape and ate it. “I think Declan is still going to claim that title. He likes to organize and reorganize things. He’ll alphabetize his books on Saturday and the next Saturday, he’ll reorganize them according to genre. After that, color. And then alphabetize them again, but this time by the second letter of the author’s last name.”

He went for my last strawberry, and I batted his hand away. “Nope. Those are my favorite.”

Sebastian chuckled and snagged a piece of melon instead. “Got it.” There was something about his lingering look that made me think he’d filed that bit of information away for later. We hadn’t discussed the kiss yet, and I wasn’t brave enough to tackle that subject. However, he hadn’t acted horrified, so I figured we were brushing it under the rug.

“How about I treat you to a relaxing day?” Sebastian announced.

“A relaxing day with my bo—” I stopped myself at the last moment, but Sebastian knew what I was going to say. He lifted his brows at me and smirked. “New friend,” I corrected with a tight smile.

“Yep. I know the things we should do. Have you ever been up to Chester’s?”

My eyes widened like a kid on Christmas. I’d heard of Chester’s. It was one of the biggest bookstores in the area. Located north of downtown in West Chester, Chester’s was a two-story bookstore with exposed red brick, iron works, acres of books, and a coffee shop that had a wide selection of coffees, teas, and snacks. I’d been wanting to go for months but had never found the time or scratched together enough money to treat myself. But an afternoon wandering around a quiet bookstore sounded like heaven.

Not to mention, browsing for books meant there was no pressure to make small talk. Silence was encouraged.

“I’ve never been to Chester’s. I would love to go.”

The look of pure joy that filled Sebastian’s face threatened to stop my heart. Being friends with my boss was going to be very dangerous.

5

SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

A bookstore.

I was taking him to a bookstore.

I was worth billions, and I was taking the guy who’d stolen my heart with all his tiny

grins and hidden smirks to a freaking bookstore.

Now to be fair, it was an amazing bookstore, but I wanted to sweep Byron away on my private jet to Paris, where we'd wander the streets, munch on pastries, and cuddle together at the top of the Eiffel Tower. I wanted to take him to Venice, where we'd lazily glide down the canals in a private boat and eat pounds of pasta by candlelight.

I wanted to be the one who showed Byron the world and indulge his every fantasy.

And no, I wasn't about to break into a Disney song.

However, this wasn't a date, I bitterly reminded myself. This was two new friends hanging out at a bookstore on a lazy Saturday afternoon. It had seemed like a good idea when I'd initially proposed it. Byron had lit up like a Christmas tree, and I thought I'd scored a brilliant coup.

Until we walked into the place, and I realized I couldn't hover at his elbow the entire time while we perused books. Normal people went off in different directions to follow their own unique interests.

Except my only interest right now was Byron Graham.

My clenched teeth hidden behind a closed-lipped smile, I dragged my sorry ass off to new releases while Byron wandered wide-eyed toward nonfiction.

Chester's was a magical store, and I was glad to make it our first non-date outing. The delicious scent of coffee, chocolate, and yeast drifted through the air, accompanied by soft music and even softer conversation. People milled through the various aisles of books. The first floor specialized in nonfiction, calendars, periodicals, and children's books, while the second floor overflowed with the glories of fiction.

When I was here alone, I would normally make a pass through nonfiction to see if there were any new biographies or business tomes I needed to pick up, but most of my visit was spent in equal amounts of time in general fiction, fantasy, and romance.

But I didn't want to go upstairs while Byron was on the first floor, so I gave in to stalking while texting my friends for help.

Rome: Fuck. You're a disaster.

Pierce: If he catches you, there's no way you're smoothing it over. You're going to blow it before you get the chance to fuck him.

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Rome: Totally.

Declan: Can you pick up the new Stephen King for me while you're there?

Me: Yes, D. And you're all useless. What do I say to get him to relax more around me?

Rome: Ummm...you don't fucking follow him in a bookstore.

Pierce: That.

Declan: Dating your assistant is dangerous.

Rome: They're not dating.

Pierce: They're just friends.

Rome: With a little light stalking.

Pierce: So harmless. So reassuring. Not threatening at all.

I rolled my eyes and turned away from my phone for a second. Even without them in the store, I could hear the two hyenas howling with laughter at my dilemma. When I spotted Byron moving away from the bargain bookshelves to the business section, I turned my attention to my phone.

Me: I hate you both.

Rome: You love us because we're all that remains of your common sense.

Declan: You're doomed.

A snort jumped out of me. It wasn't often that Declan sneaked in a burn on Pierce and Rome. That was a good one, too.

Me: What should I do?

Pierce: Go upstairs and look at the fantasy books, just like you do every damn time you're in the store. You want him to feel safe and relax? Give. Him. Space.

Deep down, I knew Pierce was right, but I didn't want him to be right. I might want to wrap myself around Byron, cover us in a blanket, and listen to him tell me all his problems, dreams, and hopes, but we were so far off from that day.

Besides, he'd clearly had a shit day on Friday, and the best thing I could do was give him some space to breathe and get his bearings.

Me: Fine.

Pierce: I don't believe you. Send a pic of the fantasy aisle as soon as you get there.

With an irritated grunt, I headed to the escalator, leaving Byron on the first floor. This was what I got for taking Pierce along on my trips to the bookstore. The man knew my reading habits. The moment I reached the second floor, I snapped a quick picture of the great expanse, knowing Pierce would recognize it, and sent it to the group.

Afterward, I tucked my phone away and let myself get lost in books. It might have taken a little while, but I forgot about my crush on the first floor.

I didn't know how much time passed before I caught sight of slacks and a familiar shiny shoe in my peripheral vision. My head snapped up, and I found Byron standing over me, wearing borrowed clothes. Sadly, he was too small to fit in my clothes and he'd had to settle for a pair of slacks and a dark-blue collared shirt Rome had forgotten at my house.

"I was beginning to think someone had kidnapped you," Byron teased.

"Huh?" My brain had stopped. I was incapable of thought. Byron was smiling at me.

In fact, all the lines of tension that had pulled his lips tight, furrowed his brow, and surrounded his eyes were now gone. He appeared so much better than he had this morning. Space combined with quiet and books was a wonderful thing.

"I've been searching everywhere for you. I didn't expect to see you sitting in the middle of the fantasy aisle with a stack of books."

"Oh! Yeah. Kind of got lost in these." I shoved to my feet with only a soft groan from stiff muscles and creaking knees. I picked up my stack of books and paused when I saw just one book tucked under his arm. "Are you done, or are you still looking?"

"I'm done. I'm good," Byron answered quickly, hugging the book to his chest.



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“You sure? Because I’m happy to find a chair and read for another hour.”

“Nah. I’m good.”

“Do you read only nonfiction?” I inquired as I led the way to the first floor and the checkout counter.

“Mostly. I used to read fantasy, but I haven’t in years. I’m so behind on all my favorite authors.”

“Well, if you ever want to start again, you can always raid my library. I’ve been collecting since high school, and my collection has gotten out of control.”

“Thanks.”

I bit my tongue to hold in my babbling. It was a good thing the line was short and the young woman ringing me up wanted to chat as she worked, giving me a chance to recover my self-control and collect my thoughts. As it was, I had to use all the self-control I’d gathered to keep myself from offering to buy his book. Byron was a self-sufficient, independent man. He didn’t need a sugar daddy buying all his things. Even though I wanted to be that sugar daddy with every fiber of my fucking being.

As we stepped outside, my stomach growled.

“Lunch!” I shouted and then inwardly cursed myself. That was supposed to be the silent part. “Um. You hungry? It’s...shit!” I glanced at my watch to find that we’d lost hours in that store. “How about a late lunch before I take you home?”

Byron opened his mouth, looking as if he were planning to turn me down, but his expression shifted at the last second and he nodded. “Okay. That sounds nice.”

“Great. I know this place not far from here. My treat.”

And to my even greater shock, Byron didn’t argue.

We climbed into my two-seat convertible Jag—the one thing I could use to show off a bit and treat Byron, since I wasn’t allowed to stick him on a private jet at this very early stage of things. In less than twenty minutes, we’d zipped across town to this restaurant that was always crowded because the dining room was so tiny. However, since I was a key investor, Lisa and Ray always had a table waiting for me.

Amid lots of hugs and excited greetings, we were shown to a secluded table on the back patio that overlooked a pond where the dragonflies zipped through the air and a couple of weeping willows dipped branches into the water. There was a steady buzz of conversation from the other diners but out here, the noise dropped to a dull murmur.

“Of course you can get right into The Dragonfly’s Wing,” Byron murmured with a smile after the server left us with water and menus.

“Well, I did give them a good chunk of start-up cash, and I try to eat here at least twice a month. Their T-bone is amazing, and on Sunday, they have the best prime rib in the city.”

Byron’s smile grew even wider. “They also have one of the longest waitlists to get a reservation in the city.”

“Then you’ll have to return with me for another meal.”

My companion said nothing. He just dipped his head behind his menu, directing his attention to finding food. Our conversation meandered as we talked about food preferences and my deep abiding hatred for anything to do with a sweet potato in all its forms.

By the time the server returned and took our orders, we were relaxed once again. A comfortable silence settled between us, and I had a moment to admire his profile as he stared out at the lake. Sometimes we felt like old friends. I'd known Byron for three years. We'd interacted five days a week with few exceptions. Even when one of us took vacation time, we found a reason to sneak into each other's texts or emails. Going more than a weekend without talking to Byron felt wrong.

"Ronnie would have loved this place," Byron said suddenly in a voice so soft I almost didn't hear him.

"Ronnie? An ex?"

Byron gave his head a shake. "My older brother. He loved to fish. Got out on a lake or pond or river any chance he could."

My heart squeezed for Byron, and I fought the urge to reach across the table to cover his hand with mine. "When did he pass away?"

Byron's head snapped around and he blinked at me for a second as if he were waking from a trance. "Oh. Sorry. God, I'm an ass. Ronnie didn't die." There was a slight redness to the tips of his ears as he gazed at the lake. "Ronnie was involved in a car accident when he was seventeen, and he suffered severe brain damage as a result. He...struggles with memory, speech, and has extremely violent outbursts. There's only three years' difference between us, but he's stuck with the mind of a child in the body of an adult."

“There must be times where it feels like he died in that accident, because he’s no longer the brother you remember.”

Byron grunted in agreement, his eyes still locked on the lake as if he were lost in thought.

“Would you like to leave? We can find somewhere?—”

“No!” Byron jerked in his seat, his eyes wide. “Absolutely not. I’ve been dying to eat here. Plus, if Ronnie no longer has the chance to visit a restaurant like this, I can at least do it for him.” Byron swallowed hard, and his smile was brittle. “He lives in a hospital now. Long-term care facility. He doesn’t get outside much, but it’s an excellent facility and they take excellent care of him. As best they can...”

“What’s wrong? Is there something wrong with the care he’s receiving?”

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“No. I—” He stopped himself and turned toward me, but he kept his head lowered, his glare directed at his water glass.

“We’re friends, Byron. You can talk to me. Do I need to take out the egg?”

A half smile curled up one side of his mouth. “You don’t have that with you.”

I reached into my pocket, took out the marble egg, and positioned it in front of him, earning me the best surprised laugh.

“The Friend Egg says talk,” I said.

“That’s not always going to work,” he replied as he wiped one corner of his eye. “But yesterday, the topper on my already shit day was a call from Ronnie’s doctor. They needed to increase and adjust his meds because of a violent outburst. No one was hurt, thankfully, but the doctor reminded me that Ronnie needs to be moved to another facility. The current place can manage, but it’s always a strain for them if he has a bad day. Their top answer for problems is to dose him with more drugs, but the doc thinks that this other hospital would help him more because they have more programs that can work with Ronnie.”

“Is the other location full? Can they not take him?”

Byron shook his head. “The other facility is twice as expensive.” When he lifted his lips this time, it was frail and bitter as he tossed his hands up. “You know healthcare in America. It’s always ridiculously expensive.”

I had to bite on my tongue until I could taste blood to keep from blurting out a hundred things I knew were the wrong thing to say.

How much do you need? Let me pay for it. How about I give you a giant raise?

Before any of that could tumble from my mouth, my eye caught on the marble egg resting between us. We were brand-new friends, and throwing money at Byron's problems was more likely to insult him than make him happy. Right now, I was supposed to be listening and offering emotional support.

"But you know, it's been almost two years since I went digging through all the databases and websites for grants and subsidies to help pay for care like that. There might be newstuff out there that I've overlooked," Byron continued, seemingly oblivious to my struggles.

"I know some people who are experts in healthcare costs and things like that. I could reach out to them and see if they have any advice or ideas that might help," I offered.

That was a lie. I didn't know anyone who was an expert in that tangled mess, but I had lawyers and other teams at my disposal who could wade through that morass and find answers for me and Byron. If I couldn't give Byron my money, I could at least secretly spend it on him to help him find the answers he needed.

"Really? That-that would be amazing." Byron stared at me with wide, shining eyes. The relief rising off the younger man was a palpable thing. I hadn't offered a dime to him, but Byron acted as if I'd taken out an entire army of worries for him and given him his very first taste of hope in years. "Trudging through all those websites and forms can be so soul-sucking at times. And finding anyone who knows this world and has the time to help is just as hard."

"Don't worry about it. I'll make some phone calls on Monday, get some wheels

turning for you. I promise. We'll find some answers."

Yes. I was going to move this mountain for Byron, and it was only the start.

6

SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

Yesterday was an amazing day!

Books and a late lunch at a great restaurant. By the time we'd walked back to the car, Byron had been laughing and even cracking jokes. I hadn't wanted it to end, but I'd known better than to press my luck. I'd dropped him off at his apartment after lunch.

So, naturally, I was on his doorstep early Sunday morning with a bag of his favorite bagels and cream cheese.

"What are you doing here?" Byron demanded as soon as he opened the door. Today, he wore a pair of old gray sweat pants that hung so deliciously low on his hips and a baggy T-shirt from the local Labor Day fireworks celebration, except the T-shirt was about eight years old and had a hole at the shoulder seam. But the best part—he was wearing glasses. Thin, gold wire-rimmed glasses that made his eyes appear even bigger. He never wore them to the office. I'd had no idea he needed them.

"You wear glasses."

The words popped out of my mouth before I could stop them. I was lucky I had any filter at all when he was looking so relaxed and adorable. The entire picture made me want to pick him up, carry him to the nearest bed, and cuddle him while stripping off all the worn, slouchy clothes.

“I haven’t bothered to put in my contacts yet. Why are you here?”

“I brought bagels and your suit,” I said, shoving both things toward him. I had debated holding on to his suit and giving it to him in the office, but if someone saw me do that, it would raise questions. Even if no one saw me, it was likely to put Byron in a panic, and that wasn’t what I wanted at all.

“Oh.” Byron took the suit and frowned at the bag of bagels as he continued to stand in the doorway, blocking my entrance. In fact, he had the door pulled against his body, keeping me from seeing into his apartment. Was there someone with him he didn’t want me to see?

Fuck...was he seeing someone?

As the thought dug its claws into my brain, I could hardly breathe. He’d never said whether he was dating someone. I’d always assumed he was single based on the ridiculous number of hours he spent at the office. But I could be so fucking wrong.



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“Did I stop by at a bad time? Do you have company?”

“Company?” Lines of confusion streaked across his forehead, and his lips dipped into a deep frown, as if the idea of someone being there was utterly foreign to him. “No. No one is here.”

“So, you just don’t want me to see your place.” I may have added an exaggerated pout in my voice, and Byron definitely heard it because he gave me the “You’ve gotta be shitting me” look. I had been on the receiving end of that glare long before he’d agreed to be friends with me.

But I couldn’t help it. I wanted to see his apartment. I was also worried about him. This was a terrible neighborhood, and the exterior of this building didn’t make it appear to be a rare haven within the dangerous cesspool. It was one of the manythings that had been on my mind since we’d parted ways on Saturday.

“There’s been a lot of car thefts and break-ins recently. It’s not a good idea to park your car here.”

“Carl drove me.”

Byron rolled his eyes and sighed as he stepped back so he could motion for me to enter. “Try to rein in your enthusiasm. My place isn’t as nice as yours.”

I opened my mouth to say that I didn’t expect his apartment to be some ritzy palace, but the words died on my tongue as I stepped inside. It was a shoebox of a studio apartment. The kitchen ran along one wall, and it comprised a two-burner stove, a

sink, and a mini fridge. He had a futon that was likely his bed and sofa, a folding camping chair, and an overturned cardboard box that served as a table. The only nice things in the entire room were his laptop, which was supplied by the company, and the closet full of suits.

I thought I'd been paying Byron well. I couldn't think of the exact number off the top of my head, but I knew it was six figures. Why was he living so poorly? Did he feel like he had to spend all his money on suits for work? Maybe I needed to include an extra stipend in his annual paycheck for suits, ties, and shoes.

"Does your boss not give you raises to keep up with the rising cost of living?" I tried to make it sound like a joke, but worry was gnawing deep at my gut. Had I failed him and my other employees this badly?

Byron growled as he walked past me to hang the suit in the closet. "He does."

When he strode past me, going in the opposite direction, he snagged the bag of bagels from my hand and closed the door. "But it's like I explained yesterday, healthcare in America is expensive. My paycheck goes to pay for my brother's medicalcare. I also support my mother." That last part was added in such a growly, angry tone that I stuck a big red flag in the topic of Byron's mother.

Do not ask about his mother! Do not poke.

I watched as Byron put the bag of bagels on the counter, then grabbed a cutting board to lie across the sink, expanding his counter space. He pulled out the small tubs of cream cheese and the plastic knives they'd tossed inside.

"Are you going to have one too?" he inquired.

"Well, I think I will stay for breakfast, since you asked so nicely."

Byron snagged one of the plastic knives and pointed the tip at me. “Fine. But no more questions about my apartment or money.”

“Of course. Did you start reading your book yet?” I inquired to prove that I’d forgotten about his living situation.

I hadn’t. Not in the slightest, but poking at Byron’s tender spots would not soften him toward me.

“No, not yet. I slept and caught up on emails last night. You?”

“Finished one. Trying to decide what to read next,” I replied, as I selected a cinnamon swirl bagel. Byron peered into the bag before turning his sharp gaze on me, the anger on his face replaced by a look of wonder and surprise. “You got all my favorites. How did you even know?”

“What? It’s not weird that I noticed which are your favorites. You’ve been eating bagels with me for three years. I bet you know my favorites.”

“Everything bagel if you don’t have early morning meetings and can brush your teeth. Cinnamon swirl is your second favorite,” Byron answered. “Yes, but I order your food most days. I’m supposed to know.”

“You like the raisin cinnamon swirl, but your favorite is the chocolate chip paired with the strawberry cream cheese. You also like the orange-cranberry one, but I think you tend to forget it exists because you can only get it at the store several blocks from the office.”

“I...” Byron looked away from me, but I could still see the blush staining his cheekbone as he focused on spreading strawberry cream cheese on his chocolate chip bagel. “You’re crazy,” he grumbled.

I smirked as I fixed my bagel. When we were both done, Byron snagged two bottles of water from his fridge, and we carried our breakfast to his living room. He dropped onto his futon with the lumpy black cushion, and I sat in the camping chair that creaked under my weight.

“So...I was thinking...” I began after we’d eaten in silence for a couple of minutes.

“This scares me,” Byron muttered between bites, but there was a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“You should have dinner with me...as a date.”

Byron sucked in a breath and started coughing as he choked on the chunk of bread in his throat. I dropped my bagel on the box table and snatched up his bottle of water. Wonderful. Just wonderful. I’d asked him out on a date and killed him. I cracked the plastic seal and unscrewed the lid. As soon as it was opened, I handed it over and pounded him on the back.

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Within a minute, the coughing lessened enough for him to take a drink and drag in a few ragged gasps of air. I'd traded thumping for rubbing. To help him. It was totally to help him and had nothing to do with me wanting to touch him.

"Are you crazy?" Byron demanded in a rough voice when he could speak. "Of course I'm not going to date you. You're my boss. It's expressly forbidden in the employee handbook. If anyone found out, I'd lose my job."

Okay. That was the answer I'd expected. I was prepared for this.

"Sure, but what if I wasn't your boss?"

"Huh?"

I leaned forward, my forearms resting on my knees. "What if I was some guy who'd walked up to you at Chester's yesterday and flirted with you? Would you join me for coffee?"

Byron glared for a second before shaking his head and chuckling. "You're crazy. Nobody does that."

"I would have. What would you have said if I weren't your boss?"

I'd expected him to keep his face lowered in embarrassment, but that little minx looked me straight in the face with a smirk tilting one corner of his mouth higher. "I don't know. Depends on how cheesy the flirting was."

“Top. Notch. You’re worthy of only my Grade-A, best flirting.”

Byron looked at me for a heartbeat, then broke our stare to make a soft noise like a giggle. “I probably would have agreed.” His wide eyes jumped up to my face. “To coffee. Just coffee. But this is all nonsense, because you are my boss, and dating isn’t permitted. The risk is too big.”

Oh, that last sentence. Did he even know how dangerous that sentence was?

“In our world, risks are taken every day if there is a big enough potential reward to help mitigate those risks.”

“It’s not only about the risk-reward ratio. You have to take into account the person considering the particular move. For instance, you’re an aggressive risk-taker. You’ll take bigger risks—not because of the rewards, but because you have a larger protective cushion than most people.”

I grinned at Byron, resting my chin on my hand. Was it wrong that I got so turned-on by the man’s big analytical brain? “Go ahead. Say it. I’m rich.”

Byron didn’t say it, but he did roll his eyes at me. “Whereas I am not much of a risk-taker because my protective cushion, should things go disastrously wrong for me, is nonexistent.”

“So, what you’re saying is that the potential reward has to be life-changing.”

“Oh yeah,” he muttered as he picked up his bagel.

There was no planning it better than this. All the pieces were falling into place. This idea had been spinning in my head for most of yesterday and had kept me up well into the night. A door had opened in life to let me have a shot at this amazing man,

and there was no way in hell I wasn't going to take it.

"I have a unique bargain that I'm willing to strike with you."

"I shouldn't even be listening to this," he grumbled before taking a bite of his bagel. Mine lay forgotten on the box table. My stomach was tying and untying itself in knots of excitement and nerves. The solution to getting him to agree to a dating trial had solidified late last night as I'd replayed our conversation at the restaurant in my head. Either he was going to consider it, or he was going to be so insulted that he'd throw me out and start searching for another job.

This time, I waited until he'd finished chewing and had swallowed his bagel. "Go on ten dates with me in exchange for ten years of your brother's care."

"What?"

"Ten dates. For each date, I'll pay for one year of your brother's care in the new facility that he needs to move to. I'll pay for all of it. Everything related to your brother Ronnie. Let's say, two hundred and fifty thousand a year to cover it all."

Byron's mouth opened and closed several times as he stared at me. At last, he shut his mouth and shot to his feet. He paced his apartment, but there wasn't a lot of space for him to move. It didn't seem to bother him as he shoved both hands into his messy hair.

"You've lost your mind."

"I haven't. I like you."

"Yeah, I've kind of picked up on that." His voice was a little high-pitched and incredulous as he spoke.

“I hope you’ll consider it. This is life-changing money, right? It will give you some much-needed breathing room. The chance to build your cushion. You’re still young. It will give you a chance to enjoy your life.” There was a lot more I wanted to say about how he could take care of himself better, but I didn’t want to piss him off. Besides, I wanted the job of caring for him.

“I know. Trust me, I know what kind of difference it would make. Do you understand how much money we’re talking?”



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“Ten dates at an agreed sum of a quarter of a million per date. That comes out to two and a half million,” I answered calmly, but it did not help to calm Byron in the slightest.

“A lot. A fucking lot. No. I-I can’t. Absolutely not.”

“Why?”

Byron stopped his pacing and stared at me as though I’d started speaking a foreign language. “Because I’m not worth that kind of money. Not just for ten dates.”

“You are to me.”

Byron grunted but didn’t look happy about it.

I pushed out of my seat and walked to him. With infinite care, I extracted his fingers from his hair and put my hands on his shoulders. I squeezed the tense muscles there, trying to get him to relax before he gave himself a heart attack.

“Why are you doing this?” he whispered.

“Because I want to get to know you better. That’s why people date.”

“I thought that was why you wanted to be friends.”

My face wrinkled up in a wince. “Yeah, but I want to flirt with you, and I don’t flirt with my friends. Also, hold your hand, if you’ll let me.” I released his shoulders and

took a step back. “But this bargain does not include the expectation of any kind of physical intimacy at all. You don’t have to hold my hand or kiss me or anything if you don’t want to.”

That was going to be the hard part. I was drawn to him, ached to touch him in a hundred tiny ways. If I were to go out on dates with him, I’d want to hold his hand, cuddle him, kiss him until our lips were sore. But I’d have to behave.

“What if we go out on two dates and discover that this whole thing was a bad idea? That we’re horrible as a couple.”

My heart skipped around my chest. The fact that he was looking for a hole in my bargain meant he was at least considering it. This was an excellent sign.

“Then I pay for two years of Ronnie’s care.”

“What if, after ten dates, I don’t want to date you ever again? Won’t you think I used you for the money?”

His question only made me smile wider. He sounded so insulted and outraged at just saying the question. “No, I trust you. You have integrity. You would never use someone like that.”

Byron scoffed and paced away from me, but his movements were slower and more thoughtful, as if he were still searching for loopholes and problems. God, I loved his brain. It was the sexiest thing about him after his mouth. And chin. And his dexterous, slender fingers.

Never mind. All of him was sexy, especially his brain.

“If we don’t want to continue dating after the agreed-upon ten dates, we part as

friends. No harm, no foul. No one has any hold on the other person. I pay for the ten years.”

“What if...” Byron looked at me from the corner of his eye and I swore the tip of his ear got redder.

“What?” I prodded.

Byron hesitated, chewing on his bottom lip. “What if we wanted to keep dating after those ten? If someone were to find out, I’d lose my job. I don’t know about you, but I like my job. I need my job. People finding out we’re dating would ruin my reputation.”

“That would be the risk in the beginning, but if we want to keep dating, I could swap you with another executive assistant.”

He stared at me for a second. “You’re shitting me.”

I shook my head. I reached for his hand to pull him close, but I stopped myself, letting my hand fall to my side. “Declan is constantly in need of help. He scares them all away, but you’ve handled him countless times without a single problem. He’s made offers for you several times. I’ve shut him down because I couldn’t stand the idea of losing you. But...if I were dating you, I’d have you as my boyfriend, and I could sacrifice not having you as my assistant during the day.”

Because I would have him every night and weekend.

That was the part I was smart enough to not say out loud. This time, he didn’t seem to notice as he paced. This had to be overwhelming for him. It was a lot to take in. My idea was insane, but after having a crush on his cute ass for so long, I didn’t want to lose this opportunity to draw him closer. The best part was that not only would I get to date him, but I’d get the chance to help him with his financial problems.

“It’s okay to say yes for the money,” I stated in a low voice.

He swung to face me, a look of horror on his face twisting up his handsome features.

“Sebastian! Absolutely not! You’re not some walking piggy bank for other people to take advantage of.”

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Yeah, there was no way I was letting this man go.

“Say yes because you’re attracted to me.”

That at least got the horror to disappear. “Whatever. Who isn’t attracted to you?” he muttered as he glared. “I don’t understand why you want this.”

Talking wouldn’t settle this.

I took two strides to close the distance between us. He didn’t have a chance to retreat. I wrapped one arm around his waist while I cupped his cheek with my other hand, tilting his face up toward me. He gasped as my mouth descended onto his in a blistering kiss. It was hard and brutal, all take and no give. Mentally, I prepared myself for him to push me away. Maybe even kick me square in the balls.

For a couple of heartbeats, he was frozen, his body stiff and unyielding. A shudder ran through him like the great cracking of a glacier before it fell into the ocean. In the next instant, he was wrapping his arms behind my neck, pressing even closer as he returned the kiss with the same heat and desperate need. My tongue plunged into his mouth, tangling with his as I tasted his sweetness. He moaned, and I was lost.

I started blindly walking, pushing him back until he hit something with a dull thud. My gaze flicked up enough to see he was pinned against the door. Perfect.

Byron seemed to think so as well, because he leaned on it while tightening his arms, pulling me in even closer. The arm I had on his waist slipped lower and my wandering hand located what felt like the most perfect ass in all the world. I groaned

into his mouth as I lifted him higher. Wave after wave of melting heat blazed through me, while all his soft whimpers and growls reduced my self-control to dust.

And those gray sweat pants. Thank God and whoever invented gray sweat pants, because I could now feel his hard cock pressed right into my hip. I wanted to bend Byron over and fuck him so hard. I wanted to fuck him pinned to the door. Then on his hands and knees in the middle of this tiny apartment. Then I wanted him to ride me on his futon. After we covered every inch of this place, I wanted to take him home with me and fuck him in every room of my mansion. Never had I wanted anyone as badly as I wanted him.

Which was why it was so painful to end that damn kiss.

I dragged my mouth away from his, kissing up his jaw to feather one last light kiss to his temple. “That’s why I want this. I want to kiss you and fuck you. But I also want to spend time with you, to date you and discover all the things that make you happy, like strawberries and good books. I want to know if we can be happy together.”

Yes, I’d kind of immediately broken my own rule about not pressuring him with physical intimacy, but I didn’t want him believing the differences between us were insurmountable. There were plenty of things that were so right, starting with the heat I just knew was bubbling under the surface.

“Fuck.” Byron dropped his forehead to rest on my shoulder, his chest heaving as he sucked in great gulps of air. “That’s not fair. There is no blood in my brain right now. I can’t...I can’t think.”

“Think about it for the rest of today, and give me an answer on Monday.”

He nodded against me before lifting his head up. “Okay. Tomorrow.”

I dove in for one last kiss, just in case I never had a chance to do it again. I didn't know if he had the same thought, but Byron was right there, lighting me up like he wanted to drive me insane. The man had a wicked tongue and knew how to use it. I kept the kiss short because I was nearing my breaking point.

When I stepped away, a tiny sound left him, and I almost cracked. He stared at me with the hungriest eyes I'd ever seen. There was no way he could deny it—the heat and hunger were right there for us to see. The question was whether all the other pieces of who we were could fit together.

With a lopsided grin, I reached down and adjusted myself, trying to find a comfortable position now that he had me painfully hard. Byron snorted and pulled on his shirt as he stepped away from the door. The attempt to hide the erection tenting his sweats failed miserably.

“Tomorrow,” I gritted out as I slipped out the door.

This was going to be the longest twenty-four hours of my life.

7

BYRON GRAHAM

I had never been so happy to be at work in all my life.

The office represented a predictable routine, even when Sebastian was in one of his unpredictable moods and wanted to shake things up. My morning began with coffee and emails. By the time I finished my coffee, Kaylan would be arriving. He would bring some pleasant chitchat and an eagerness to dive into the day that matched my own.

As soon as we had our schedule worked out, Sebastian would arrive. At that point, I'd give him a rundown of his first meetings of the day, calls that needed to be made, and reports that needed his attention. From there, he would either roll with things or completely blow all our plans out of the water.

Routine was what I needed after spending Sunday alternating between denial and panic. Of course, that didn't include the time I'd needed to jerk off because my insane boss had left me with such a state of blue balls that I couldn't remember my goddamn name.

So yeah, Sunday was jerking off, panic, anger, temptation, more jerking off, followed by more panic.

What was I supposed to say to him?

Putting aside the fact that it was billboard-on-the-side-of-the-road obvious that I was attracted to him, could I really date him? Even though he'd said it was okay that I accept the bargain simply for the money, wouldn't that always be in the back of his mind? Would he ever believe me if I professed to care for him?

Who would turn down that kind of life-changing money? I might have integrity, but I wasn't stupid. It wasn't just a better life for me, but it would improve things for Ronnie and my mom. The money I would have been spending on Ronnie could be used to get my mom better help. She could finally break free of her alcoholism and live a happier life. Maybe even get a new job or at least volunteer. Something that made her happier than sitting around the house doing nothing other than watching TV and getting drunk.



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But what would happen after the ten years were up? How would I pay for Ronnie's new facility and my mom's assistance?

Well, if I were still with Sebastian...

No!

I would not think like that. Sebastian was not my personal fix-it-all.

I could do this on my own. Ten years was plenty of time to make improvements in my life, so I could afford Ronnie's new facility and my mom's improved support system.

Was I truly considering this?

I was.

God help me, I was.

If I were honest with myself, it wasn't only about the money. Sebastian was right. If he wasn't my boss and he had hit on me in the bookstore, I would have been on him in an instant.

But if I did this, no one could ever find out. My reputation would be ruined. People in the business world gossiped. Even after I found a new job, people would find out that I'd fucked the boss.

Plus, I loved working for Courtland Enterprises. I didn't want to leave. The idea of being the CFO's assistant didn't exactly thrill me, but Declan Foster was a good, patient man who worked hard and was dedicated to Courtland Enterprises. I loved being Sebastian's assistant, but if we were dating, I would still get to see him frequently.

I jerked my head up at a sudden knock on the doorframe of my office to find Kaylan standing in the open doorway, a smile on his lips. Shit! He was here.

"Good morning. Everything okay? You looked pretty lost in thought," he said.

"Oh, yes. I...yes. Lost in thought." I wasn't making any sense. Time had flown by me. I'd managed to get only a fraction of my usual work done prior to Kaylan's arrival. I hadn't even gotten my coffee yet or finished compiling my notes for Sebastian's meetings.

Shaking off my temporary brain fog, I got up from my desk and followed Kaylan to the coffee station in our small break room.

The top floor of the Courtland Enterprises building held a luxurious lobby filled with green leafy plants, colorful bouquets that changed with the seasons, and large comfortable sofas and chairs around coffee tables. At the end nearest the elevators was a large conference room that seated twenty-five people comfortably and two huge flat-screen TVs on the walls for presentations and web conferencing.

At the opposite end, after you walked through the lobby seating, you reached Kaylan's desk. His job—other than assisting me with various tasks—was to greet anyone who tried to see Sebastian during the day. Even if they had a scheduled meeting or appointment, they had to get through Kaylan first.

Past Kaylan were two large offices—one for Sebastian as the CEO and the other for

John Courtland, Sebastian's father and the company's chairman.

Just outside of Sebastian's office, there were two smaller offices. To the left was mine. It was a modest size, but unlike Kaylan's area, I had walls and a door, which allowed me to make private calls without anyone overhearing me.

To the right was a partially hidden office for Sebastian's on-duty bodyguard, which was Carl most days. A push of a button could summon him instantly. There was an emergency call switch that alerted him hidden under my desk, Kaylan's desk, and Sebastian's. During my time in Sebastian's employ, I'd needed to push it only once, and that was when a former employee had lost his shit after being fired for corporate espionage. It had been an ugly scene, and I prayed I'd never have to push it again.

We took turns making coffee at the Keurig machine and doctoring them up with creamer and sugar.

"Did you have a good weekend?" I asked, while wondering if adding more caffeine to my anxious jitters was wise.

Before he even answered, a broad, dreamy smile spread across Kaylan's lips. Obviously, Kaylan had spent the weekend with his new boyfriend, Arden. "Yeah, Arden and I drove down to Red River Gorge and rented one of those cabins near the Daniel Boone National Forest. We spent our time hiking and checking out the different arches."

"I'm surprised. From your expression, I thought maybe you spent the weekend in bed."

"Well..." Kaylan cleared his throat, his smirk returning. "There was plenty of that, too."

Kaylan had met Arden through a dating app that Sebastian had signed him up for without his knowledge. It was lucky that Kaylan had matched with Arden for Valentine's Day. The two had been together for just over three months and were still in the hearts-and-rainbows phase of their relationship.

Was I jealous? Maybe a little. I'd gotten to meet Arden once when he'd popped by one afternoon to take Kaylan out to lunch. He was a sweet man who obviously thought Kaylan hung the moon, and I was happy for them both.

But did I have a shot at some of that same happiness with Sebastian?

The idea of dating someone as rich, handsome, and dynamic as Sebastian was mind-boggling. I'd always thought that rich people dated other rich people. They didn't notice people like me who were scraping by, one bad day away from complete ruin.

"What about you?" Kaylan inquired, breaking into my wandering thoughts. "Do anything exciting this past weekend?"

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I'd lifted my coffee to my lips to take a sip as he asked and I was grateful I'd stopped, because I would have choked on the hot beverage.

Oh, nothing too exciting. Just got ripped in the boss's office, kissed him, puked on him, and then went on a pseudo-date before he proposed this insane bargain that could both fix and destroy my life. You know, nothing too out of the ordinary.

"Umm...no, not really. Slept a lot. Read some."

"Sounds like a nice, quiet weekend." Kaylan's smile was tight and polite. I could almost feel his pity. Yeah, that was a pathetic weekend—not because it was a total lie, but because it was an answer I'd given more than once. I rarely did anything on the weekends besides sleep, read, and prepare for the coming workweek.

What he didn't know was that my weekends were usually spent checking on my mother, cleaning her house, getting her groceries, and running to Louisville to see my brother. When it was all over, I was glad to be at work because it was less stressful than my weekends.

"We should get to our desks. I'm sure Sebastian will be walking in soon."

"Yep," Kaylan said with a nod. He strolled out of our break room ahead of me. "He's got a long list of meetings today. It's going to be a busy one. I'll be ready if you need me to jump on something."

"Thank you."

After my chat with Kaylan and a few sips of coffee, my brain was ready to attack the day. I breezed through a stack of emails and sorted through the reports and contracts that were ready to hit Sebastian's desk. Despite nearly everything going digital, he preferred to read all major reports and contracts on paper. He said it was easier to write on the paper when a thought or concern hit him. It was my responsibility to decipher his handwriting and add the notes to the digital copies for the various departments.

Sebastian breezed through the office as I was getting the last of my notes together. There was no need for Kaylan's warning text that Sebastian had arrived, because I could hear my boss's cheery voice echoing across the entire floor.

"Happy Monday, Kaylan! You look like you had a great weekend," Sebastian called out.

"So do you, sir," Kaylan replied.

"It was fantastic. Best weekend I've had in a long time."

I steeled myself, fighting the urge to bury my face in my hands even as heat crept into my cheeks. There was no way he was talking about me and our time together. He was insane.

As the clack of his hard-soled shoes grew louder across the black marble floor, I gathered up the papers and my tablet, which had a list of all the things he needed to review. Just like every day, I rose from my desk and moved to meet him at the door to his office.

"There's my Byron. The man I would be utterly lost without," Sebastian greeted with more exuberance than usual. He was a chipper person, but this was taking it to the extreme, even for him. Carl walked two steps behind him and gave a wordless shrug,

as if to say he had no idea what had put him in such a good mood.

“Good morning, sir,” I greeted and pushed both of the doors open for him.

The first thing I’d done upon returning to Courtland Enterprises this morning was to clean up my paper mess, scrub away all signs that I’d ever had a drop of alcohol in that room, and freshen the air with his favorite scents. While I knew he’d seen the disaster I’d made, I’d wanted to make sure there was not even a shadow of it for his arrival on Monday. We needed to forget about that embarrassing incident.

Carl followed Sebastian in and made a quick check of the office to make sure everything was secure, then retreated to his own space. We wouldn’t see him until Sebastian stepped out for lunch.

As Sebastian dropped into his high-back leather swivel chair, I took up my usual position on his right. My too-handsome boss was dressed in my favorite suit—a dark-navy plaid material with a lighter-blue collared shirt and tie. There was something about the way the jacket hugged his shoulders that made it so hard to look away from him.

Did he know that was my favorite? I wouldn’t put it past him to wear it in hopes of swaying my final decision on the bargain he proposed, but how did he know it was my favorite?

It was only when I noticed Sebastian had his left elbow resting on the top of his desk and his cheek leaning against his fist as he gazed up at me with a grin that I realized I had been staring instead of talking.

“Sir, you have a long list of meetings today. The first is at nine—a briefing about the numbers Mr. Foster provided from the finance department on Friday. At nine thirty, the head of marketing for Courtland Comfort will be stopping by to discuss the last

changes to the summer campaigns. Ten thirty?—”

“Did you do anything fun yesterday?” Sebastian interrupted.

“Sir,” I gritted out, trying to get him on task. I would not talk about how I’d alternated between anger and masturbating after he’d left my place.

“Would you like to hear what I did with my Sunday?” Sebastian waggled his eyebrows at me, and I got the impression that there were some distinct similarities between our Sundays.

“I think it would be best if we focused on work. We have a very busy day ahead of us if we hope to protect the jobs of everyone who works at Courtland Enterprises.”

Sebastian flopped back into his seat, his right hand rested on his heart. “Ugh. That was cold. How could you be so mean to me first thing in the morning?”

Sadly, this was not the first time he’d ever said that to me. It was a refrain I’d heard frequently when I scheduled meetings for him prior to nine a.m. My boss always came in at eight, so he could have a minimum of a full hour to go through messages and notes before his first meeting. I was usually in between six and seven to prepare for my day, but he didn’t need to know that.

“You promised me an answer today,” he pressed, dropping his voice to a whisper.



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“We’re at work. We need to focus on work,” I gritted out between clenched teeth.

Sebastian’s grin turned wicked as he reached into his pocket and pulled something out. My gaze followed his hand to the center of his desk, where he set the marble egg. The Friend Egg.

“That is not going to work.” I didn’t think anyone could overhear us, but there was no way I was taking any chances. “If I were to agree to your bargain, we would need to set up some ground rules about what’s not allowed in the office. The first thing would be that egg.”

Sebastian flashed me a wounded expression, complete with his bottom lip jutting out. “You can’t ban the Friend Egg. You have personal conversations with Kaylan.”

“But they still fall within the bounds of good taste for work. I doubt that would happen with you.”

Wisely, Sebastian didn’t debate that.

“You take private phone calls.”

“Only in an emergency.”

Sebastian pressed his index finger to the narrow top of the egg and slightly rolled it on its wider base. His thumb stroked up the flawless side, making my horrible brain wander to places it shouldn’t. Like, what would it be like to feel his massive hands running up and down my bare skin? On Sunday, the heat of those hands had burned

through my clothes, and still I ached to strip so I could feel him skin to skin.

No! Work thoughts!

“This needs to be negotiable. Emergency and lunch.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, trying to think of any loopholes that he might try to create. “Lunch included, but just if it’s the two of us.”

Sebastian’s grin returned in a flash. “Does this mean you’re saying yes?”

Did it?

When I’d fallen asleep last night, I’d been leaning that way but wobbled over to saying no while in my morning shower.

It all returned to what he’d asked me in my apartment—what if he wasn’t my boss and he’d hit on me in that bookstore? I knew my answer would be yes. Even without knowing he was stupidly rich. The man was handsome, fun, and too sweet. Dating someone like him was a dream for anyone. Was I really too scared to take a chance?

I dragged in a deep breath, all the muscles in my body tensing. “Yes. Yes, I agree to the bargain that you laid out.” Sebastian made a fist and appeared as though he were going to punch the air, but I stopped it with a word. “However!”

“Crap,” he muttered and dropped his hand to his lap.

“We need to set up some ground rules.”

“Have dinner with me tonight. We can discuss them over dinner. I know the perfect restaurant.”

My lips twisted to stop my smile. “Would you like me to book it for you, sir?”

Sebastian snorted and reached out, hooking his index finger through my left pinky as my hand hung limp at my side. “Enough of your sass. You’ve never booked dates for me in the past, and you’re not about to start now.”

I knew I should pull my hand free, but his warm touch was sending tingles up my arm. It was so tempting to just open my hand and thread the rest of our fingers together.

A knock on Sebastian’s door had me jerking my hand free of his. I stiffened and jumped a step away from him before I even looked up to find the CFO standing in the doorway.

“Sorry. I know I’m early, but it’s going to take longer than the thirty minutes we’ve allotted for this meeting,” Declan said as he walked in.

“Yeah, yeah. Come on in.” Sebastian waved him in as he sat up in his chair properly.

“Good morning, Mr. Foster. Can I get you some coffee or hot tea?” I inquired, slipping easily into my role as Sebastian’s assistant.

“No, thank you. Are you feeling better today?” Declan asked.

I stared at him for a moment, confused as to why he would ask that. Had Sebastian told him I’d left early on Friday because of illness? I was about to assume it was that, but I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Sebastian was making faces at him and motioning for him to be quiet.

It hit me like a truck.

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Sebastian had said he'd returned to the office for some paperwork and had found me on Friday. But that wasn't the case. Declan had found me when he'd dropped those financial numbers off on his desk. The CFO had found me passed out drunk in the CEO's office.

Holy. Fuck.

"Mr. Foster," I choked, my voice trembling as the horror of my reality sank in. "I am so sorry that you found me like that. It was completely inexcusable. I-I-I?—"

Sebastian grabbed my ice-cold fingers and squeezed them tight enough to hurt, trying to capture my attention, but I couldn't look away from Declan. "Byron, don't. You don't owe him an apology."

"He's correct. You don't need to apologize. Sebastian explained you were dealing with a family issue and that you had his permission to work in his office after hours. Like Sebastian, I just want to be sure that you don't hurt yourself. You're very valuable to Courtland Enterprises."

"Thank you, Mr. Foster. I don't feel worthy of your kind words, but they are appreciated. I promise it will never happen again."

Sebastian squeezed my hand, and I finally glanced at him. He was smiling, but there was worry still filling his honey-brown eyes. "After my meeting with Declan, I'll come find you so we can finish the rundown of the day."

"Yes, sir." Sebastian's calm words about work put me on even footing and allowed

me to escape with no further embarrassment.

But I still didn't know if Friday's debacle was going to prove to be a disaster for my career or a stepping-stone to the best decision of my life. Thankfully, I had a very busy day of work ahead of me.

8

## SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

Opal's, across the Ohio River in Northern Kentucky, was one of my favorite restaurants to hit when I was leaving the office. I'd secured a reservation—without Byron's help—for a table on their patio, which provided an excellent view of downtown Cincinnati as the sun was setting. The food was also superb, and the vibe was classy but relaxed.

The only problem was that there was a slight chance of someone recognizing us, so I had to behave and keep my hands to myself. Byron and I had gone out plenty of times for meals during work hours, and we could easily say this was yet another working-late meal between colleagues.

Not that I wanted to talk about work.

Nor could my thoughts about him be described as professional.

"Nice choice," Byron praised after the hostess left us with menus. "This has been on my list of places to try since it opened."

There was no stopping my grin at his words. I might have even wiggled in my seat a bit, but I didn't think he noticed, because his eyes were taking in the view.

God, he was sexy. A few strands of his dark-brown hair fell forward as he bent his head to peruse his menu. He tugged on his bottom lip with his teeth, and part of me wanted to steal that lip from him. Really show him how to take care of it properly with my teeth and my tongue. As I watched him, his pale skin was turning a rosy shade, and he stopped playing with his lip.

“You’re staring at me,” he mumbled without looking directly at me.

“I can’t help it. I can’t do it in the office because you sit too far away.”

Byron snorted and lifted his eyes to my face. “I suspect if my desk was next to yours, neither of us would get anything done during the day.”

I gasped, pressing one hand to my chest. “Are you saying that I would be a distraction?”

“An enormous one. You were the kid in school who couldn’t stop talking and drove the teacher crazy.”

A laugh jumped past my lips. It was almost scary how well he could read me—but then, that was part of his job and why he was so successful at it. Byron could anticipate my needs before I even realized what they were. The only thing I’d surprised him with was my attraction to him.

“How did your meeting go with Marsha?” he inquired, referring to my final meeting of the day with the marketing director for our home goods division. As I opened my mouth to answer, Byron’s face scrunched up, and he seemed to curse himself. “Sorry. You don’t want to talk about work now. This is supposed to be our time off.”

“It’s okay. Work is common ground for us,” I said. There was no way I could fault him. My first three ideas for conversation starters had all been about work. “I know

you like to read nonfiction books about business. What about movies? What kind of movies are you into?"

Our server appeared a second later with a rundown of the specials. When she left, Byron offered a small smile and answered, "I don't watch a lot of movies, but I am a fan of anything with a lot of action or drama. I'm not much into comedies, because most of them I find stupid rather than funny."

"Sci-fi or fantasy?"

"Both."

"Horror?"

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His nose scrunched up slightly, and I wanted to run the tip of my finger along it. “More thriller than horror. Not much for the gore and slasher movies, though I do like the old Michael Meyers and Jason movies. What about you?”

“I’m like you. Prefer action over drama, and I will happily watch sci-fi and fantasy so long as they are well written. The only time I’ll watch a comedy is with my friends. Also, I love a good war documentary.”

“Ancient history,” Byron volunteered. I made a face that said I wasn’t following. He huffed a laugh and continued, “I like war documentaries too, but my favorite are the ones about ancient civilizations. I’ve seen dozens about ancient Egypt and the different dynasties of China.”

“So, grabbing some takeout and pulling up the PBS app for a documentary would be considered a good date to you?” I teased.

“Well...I don’t know.” The smile forming on his mouth looked so fucking kissable. He was lucky we were in public. “As the second date with someone? Not unless I know them fairly well and would feel comfortable in their house. If it were someone I’ve been dating for a while, then yes, I think that would be an excellent date.”

The server returned to take our orders. Thankfully, I was familiar with their menu, because I’d barely glanced at it since I sat down with Byron. Of course, he had all my attention. How could food be more important than his smirk or the laughter twinkling in his eyes? Impossible.

Except my stomach was grumbling, and lunch had been far too long ago. I needed



food.

When Byron was finished, I picked something with red meat and handed over the menu, ready for the server to be gone so I could focus on my date.

“Sebastian...”

A shiver ran through me at the sound of my name on his tongue. After hearing an unsexy “sir” all day, my name falling from his lips was heaven.

“Your hand keeps inching closer to mine,” Byron observed.

My gaze darted across the table to where my right hand was resting, and he was correct. My fingers had inched closer to his while we talked about our movie preferences. It was just that his hand was sitting there, so tantalizing. It would take so little effort to slide my hand those last few inches to run the tips of my fingers down his, to thread our fingers together.

“I take it you like to hold hands,” Byron said.

I blinked at him. The spell he had me under was broken temporarily. “Actually, no.”

He chortled. “I don’t believe you.”

Who could blame him? “I’m serious. I have never been a fan of holding hands or even felt the desire to hold hands. Or rather, until you...I didn’t.” His brow furrowed. I hadn’t even noticed the difference. He’d had to call attention to it, but it was the truth.

“I’ve never been one of those cuddly, touchy-feely guys. There’s never been someone in my life that I wanted to curl up with, to hold their hand or keep my hand on their

knee. In fact, I dated someone like that once, and we didn't get more than two dates before I ended it. Every time we were together, I felt like I had zero personal space."

"He made you feel claustrophobic," he supplied.

"Yes!" I threw my hands up in the air. When I brought them back down, the fingers on my right hand brushed his. "But it's different with you. I want to touch you constantly. There's never enough."

Byron gave his head a tiny shake. "Don't you think it might be because it's forbidden to touch me during the day? Maybe that's your entire infatuation with me? It's got nothing to do with me, per se, but just that you want something you're not supposed to have."

"Yes. And no. Yes, I think being around you all day but not allowed to touch makes me want to touch you more, but I'm not sure that's going to disappear even if I could touch you all the time. You look very huggable."

Byron's entire body shook with suppressed laughter. "I do not. Every guy I've dated has said I'm all hard angles, like a triangle. There's nothing huggable about me."

"I can't wait to prove them all wrong. Also, I don't think the forbidden is linked to my infatuation. The day you came to interview at Courtland, I spotted you sitting in Fountain Square, reading over some papers as I was returning from lunch. I thought you were adorable then, and I think you're adorable now."

"You can't help it, can you?" he asked.

"What?"

"Flirting." The word drifted from his lips, and Byron's fingers caressed mine. My

entire body froze as I soaked in that phantom-light touch as it sent a spark along my arm and across my chest. “Every word out of your mouth is flirty.”

“Do you mind?”

Byron paused for a second, and I hung there like a worm speared on a hook, dangling above a fish as it debated whether to bite.

A heartbeat later, his smile widened, and his fingers threaded with mine. “No, I don’t. It’s been far too long since someone flirted with me.”

Oh yes, he was all mine.

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“You know, you don’t have to walk me up to my apartment,” Byron said, his voice full of laughter.

I caught his hand as I joined him on the sidewalk after giving some instructions to my driver. “Of course I do. I’m your date, and it’s my responsibility to make sure that you arrive safely home. There’s no way I’d be able to sleep at night if I didn’t know for a fact that you’d made it inside your apartment unmolested.”

Byron grunted as he pulled open the door to his building. “You mean unmolested by any strangers. By my date? That’s an entirely different matter.”

“I like to believe that is negotiable.”

We held hands on the way up to his floor, and I loved every second of it. I’d loved our entire date. The food had been great, the conversation even better. Ground rules for our dating had come up briefly, but for now, we settled on not acting inappropriately in the office and no kissing in public. That did not rule out kissing in private locations.

As the night wore on, Byron relaxed more and more. At the office, he rarely made a witty quip or teasing remark, but when it was just the two of us after hours, he was full of snarky comments and jokes.

There was only one thing that was going to make this evening perfect—a kiss good night.

Byron knew what I wanted. I could tell by the smirk resting on his lips. But he was

determined to make me beg and work for it. Just the idea of him teasing me like this had left me with a semi-hard cock pressing against the front of my underwear.

His apartment was right off the second-floor landing, which made our walk far too short. His keys and briefcase clutched in his left hand, he stuck out his right for me to shake. “Well, it has been a wonderful evening. Thank you so much for dinner.”

Instead of taking it, I placed my right hand on the doorjamb next to his head and leaned in. “Really? A handshake? When I know your kisses can scramble my brain?”

“I think you should hurry to your car. It’s been a long day for Carl, and I’m sure he’d like to get home to relax,” Byron replied, still holding out his hand.

“I told Carl to drive around the block for the next fifteen minutes.”

“Fifteen minutes, huh?”

“I didn’t think negotiating a good-night kiss with you would be a quick thing.”

I fully expected him to continue to argue with me, using up all of those fifteen minutes, but he didn’t.

Byron hooked his right hand across the nape of my neck while he rose on the tips of his toes. He didn’t kiss me. Those perfect lips grazed my cheek as he went in for my ear and whispered, “Fifteen minutes should be more than enough time for you to show me how good of a cocksucker you are.”

My semi went to raging hard-on in the blink of an eye. For a moment, I wondered if he was teasing me, but as he drew back, the fire in his eyes told the story of a man desperate to have his cock in my mouth, and I was more than happy to oblige.

“Inside. Now.”

Byron nodded and released me to swing around to his door. He fumbled with his keys, trying to get the right key into the hole. The keys hit the ground with a loud metallic clatter and Byron swore. When he bent to pick them up, he presented me with too tempting of an opportunity to pass up. I grabbed his hips, lined his ass up with my groin, and pressed my dick right into the seam of his cheeks. There. I wanted my cock nestled right therein all that heat before I slid into his tight little hole.

A soft whimper escaped him, and the keys hit the floor again. Byron remained bent over and wiggled his ass, fitting it even tighter against me.

My hands tightened on his hips. “In the apartment.”

“Yes,” Byron panted and pawed his way up the door. It took him two tries to get the damn thing open. The moment it stopped blocking our path, I moved with him, practically attached to his body.

The door slammed shut. Byron’s briefcase and keys hit the floor, and I shoved him back into the door as I seized his mouth in a good-night kiss to end all kisses.

God, he tasted and felt like heaven. How could it have been only yesterday since we’d last done this? If we continued in this fashion, I’d need to kiss him at least once an hour to survive.

Teeth clacked together as we ate at each other’s mouths. My hands were frantic, pulling at his clothes, searching for any bare patch of skin. Some part of my brain kept shouting, Hurry! Hurry! Before he comes to his senses!

Instead, Byron pulled on a lock of my hair as he tore his mouth away. “Be careful. Don’t rip anything. I can’t afford to replace any clothes you ruin.”

A grin spread on my tender lips and my hand tightened on his tie while still being cautious not to wrinkle it. "I'll buy you a whole new wardrobe."

Byron pulled my hair again. "No. I like my wardrobe. Be careful."

Bossy Byron made me hard and stupid. All I could do was attack his mouth, wringing out more moans and needy noises. But my hands remained gentle as they pulled away his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. I dragged my mouth from his when I opened his collared shirt and pushed up his undershirt to reveal a pale chest with a light dusting of hair and lean, ropey muscles. Perfect skin. Warm and soft under my lips like velvet.

I kissed my way down, dropping to my knees as I licked across his stomach while my fingers fumbled with his belt. As soon as I got it unbuckled and his pants open, I shoved them aside to find he was wearing a pair of silky navy boxers with little white diamonds. His hard cock stretched out the front, pulling the waistband away from his stomach. There was even a small damp spot from the leaking head.

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“Not what you were expecting?”

I stared up at him, admiring his flushed face, swollen lips, and sweat-slicked temples. “I think I’ve imagined you in everything and nothing. Not one fantasy could hold a candle to the reality.”

Loosely wrapping my fingers around his cock, I stroked him through the fabric of his boxers. He keened, arching his entire body into my touch so that his head thudded on the door.

“Is this your fantasy?” I asked as I pulled his boxers low enough for his dick to spring free. “Your boss on his knees, getting ready to suck your dick?”

Byron lifted a hand, and trembling fingers grazed my cheek. “More than just my boss. The sexiest man I’ve ever seen is about to suck my cock. I’ll be lucky to last more than a minute.”

That was fine with me. My dick was making demands, and I was in danger of coming in my pants like a fucking teenager if I didn’t get this shit under control. A quickie for our first time would mean I got to torture him for hours on our second date.

I stroked him slowly, loving the heat and silken weight of him in my hand. Fingers threaded through my messy hair and pulled slightly, creating tiny pinpricks of pain that urged me forward. With one last stroke, I took him in my mouth, but only the sensitive head. Holding him tight with my lips, I sucked him and played with his slit, using the tip of my tongue.



“Sebastian!” Byron howled. The needy sound echoed through the room. His hips punched forward, and his legs trembled. “Suck me. Suck my dick!”

With one last teasing lick, I took all of him. He cried out again in a mix of what sounded like relief and ecstasy. I almost gagged when he hit the back of my throat, but I recovered as I focused on creating that sweet, hot suction as I bobbed on his dick.

It was like a dam had broken inside of him, letting loose a flood of swearing and filthy talk that nearly sent me over the edge. I would never have guessed my tightly wound little assistant had such a mouth on him, and I loved it because that side of him was all mine.

He swelled on my tongue as he inched closer and closer to climax. My cock was leaking and throbbing in time with my racing heart. I opened my pants and shoved my hand in to wrap around the base of my dick, staving off my looming orgasm.

“Harder. God, Bastian. I’m close. Tell me you’re gonna swallow. Please swallow for me. Take it. Take it. Ahhhh!”

He didn’t get the chance to finish what he was saying. Byron came hard and fast down my throat. I barely tasted any of him before I was reflexively swallowing it.

I licked every last drop from his cock and let him slide from my mouth. With a smirk, I tipped my head up to find the sexiest man leaning against the door with sweaty hair and a crooked grin, looking as if I’d just sucked all his brains out through the end of his dick.

“Hope you don’t mind,” I panted as I started to stroke myself off to the debauched sight of him.

Byron licked his lips. “Want me to return the favor?”

“Too close. It’s enough to have you watching.”

His smile grew a little more wicked. “Then lower you pants more so I’ve got a better view of the show.”

Why argue? He’d already had so many other brilliant ideas. I released my dick and shoved my pants and briefs away as much as I could so he could have a clear view of my cock.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “That is a thick dick. I should have told you to fuck me instead. You are going to break my ass with that thing, and I can’t wait. I want to ride you until I can’t move.” As he spoke, his hand dropped to fondle his softening cock.

I was on edge, but the images he was putting in my head as he stood over me with those hot, hungry eyes destroyed what restraint I had left. My orgasm ripped through me as if I were made of tissue paper. A shout tore from my throat, and I covered his floor in splatters of cum.

As soon as I finished, Byron dropped to his hands and knees and took my cock deep into his mouth. A moan of pleasure and pain tumbled from me as he sucked the last of my cum from me like my dick was a straw. My cock was so sensitive I wanted to stop him, but it was in Byron fucking Graham’s mouth, and I didn’t ever want that to end.

When he lifted his head a moment later, there was a smear of my cum on his bottom lip. I grabbed the back of his head and pulled him in close before licking it off and kissing the shit out of him.

Chirp.

Ring.

Buzz.

The little sounds broke through my bliss, and Byron huffed a breathless laugh.

“That’s your phone. Carl’s probably checking up on you.”

“Shit.” I tried to find my phone in my rumpled state of undress and nearly fell.

In the end, I had to stand, my knees aching and protesting, as I pulled up my pants and located where my phone had fallen. There were three messages from Carl as he’d become more worried about me.

Be down in five, I texted him.

Not that I wanted to leave, but sleeping over on the first date was a bit pushy. Plus, I didn't think we'd both fit on his futon.

"Mind if I use your bathroom?"

"Go for it. You need it," he said as he pointed to the one other door in the apartment.

"Such sass!" I teased, but he wasn't wrong. My hair was standing up in every direction, my face was flushed, and my clothes were wrinkled and askew. I splashed some water on my face, trying to dispel the worst of the fog. His bathroom was tiny, but everything was neat. Not an unnecessary thing cluttering up the space and everything in its place. My head now clear, I ran my fingers through my hair and fixed my clothes. Byron had already changed from his suit to a pair of sweat pants and a T-shirt when I joined him. I strolled to him and loosely wrapped my arms around his waist.

"I wasn't expecting that," I murmured as I nuzzled his neck.

A low chuckle shook Byron as he cuddled me. "What? That I like sex?" He turned his face and pressed a soft kiss to the spot behind my ear and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I love sex."

Yeah, I could believe that.

Byron loosened his hold on me so he could pull away enough and look me in the eye.

“But I’m smart enough not to confuse sexual compatibility with being in a relationship. We can be hot as hell in bed, but be horrible together. I can enjoy getting fucked, but not want to be romantically involved with the person.”

“Agreed.” We had proved tonight that we were sexually compatible. No question. But what about the other? “Was this date good enough to earn me a second?”

He let out a near silent laugh and grinned. “You know it was. Let me recover from this one before you make plans.”

“Deal.”

I stole one last lingering kiss, wanting to savor every moment I could of finally having this man in my arms.

The memory of his laughter and his taste followed me all the way home. This was an excellent start.

9

BYRON GRAHAM

It was weird being in the office the next day. I should have been able to put our date and late-night activities to the back of my mind, but every place within the building made me think of Sebastian, and every thought of Sebastian led me right to that image of him on his knees with my cock in his mouth.

Maybe dating was a bad idea.

How was I supposed to work with him after kissing him? After watching him come all over my floor?

Which was the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my life. I'd thought the man screamed sex appeal before. After seeing that, it was a wonder I didn't melt whenever I was near him.

It took me a few tries to get through all the emails waiting for me, but the haze created by last night's orgasm finally faded. As I finished my initial barrage of emails—mostly to request agendas for meetings people wanted Sebastian to attend—Kaylan arrived, wearing what appeared to be the same suit he'd worn the previous day and deep shadows under his eyes. Not a good sign.

I grabbed my mug and followed him into the break room, where he stared at the coffeemaker as though he couldn't understand what it was. After putting my mug on the counter, I reached out and plucked his out of his hand to keep it from falling and shattering.

“What can I do to help?” I asked as gently as possible.

Kaylan sucked in a wet, ragged breath and forced his eyes to open wide. “What? Nothing. Everything is fine. I'm fine.”

“You're not fine. You're wearing the exact clothes you wore yesterday, and there are bags under your eyes. What happened? Did someone in your family pass away? Is Arden all right?”

A sharp gasp cut through the room and every muscle in Kaylan's body locked up, bracing itself.

“We had a fight.”

Okay. That was something better than death. Kaylan didn't look like he'd been through a physical confrontation—just looked emotionally hurt and like he'd gone

without sleep.

“Did Arden punch you or physically threaten you?”

Kaylan stared at me as though I’d lost my mind. He shook his head and dropped into the plastic chair I’d maneuvered him to. “No. Of course not. Arden would never.”

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“Good. What happened?”

“We got into this big argument last night. I was telling him about how the merger fell through and I’m worried about people losing their jobs. And he began on about how I’d be better off creating my own business, and that I’m wasting my talent on being Sebastian’s secretary. He called me a secretary!”

Mr. Arden was on the fast track to getting my foot lodged in his balls. Kaylan was not a secretary. I wasn’t a fucking secretary. We’d gained skills working for Sebastian that Arden wished he had.

“There are times when he can be so insufferable. Like because he’s his own boss and runs his own company, he’s smarter than the rest of us,” Kaylan raged. But the fire that blazed brightly one second went out in the next. His entire body slumped, and he hung his head. “At the end, we were both shouting and saying things we didn’t mean. I stormed out and started driving. I was almost to Columbus when I realized if I didn’t turn around, I’d be late for work.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and held in my sigh. Columbus was two hours north of Cincinnati. It was a lucky thing he’d come to his senses prior to reaching Cleveland.

“You need to go home and get some sleep,” I stated, squeezing his shoulder.

His head popped up in an instant. “I can’t. Sebastian said it’s all hands on deck for our recovery planning meetings. You’re going to need help compiling the reports, and Kate in design asked for my input on some Japanese packaging she has to get over to



legal for review.”

“You need sleep first. I can tell Sebastian you’re taking a sick day.”

Before I could continue, the sound of footsteps stopped the words in my throat. That wasn’t Sebastian’s cadence, and no one bothered to come up to this floor this early without an appointment except for the CFO. Yet, that didn’t sound like Declan Foster either.

“Kaylan?” It was a loud whisper, as if the person were trying to be quiet but still needed his voice to carry to the hidden nooks and crannies.

“Arden?” Kaylan shot to his feet and was out of the break room faster than I could offer to talk to Arden for him. I followed right on his heels, prepared to stomp a mudhole in Arden’s ass if he continued to hurt Kaylan.

To his credit, Arden didn’t look any better than Kaylan. His hair and clothes were a rumpled mess, and his eyes carried the same dark circles. He was also carrying a gigantic bouquet of white daisies and a bag of food from Kaylan’s favorite breakfast restaurant.

“Oh, thank God you’re here!” Arden exclaimed when he caught sight of Kaylan.

“What are you doing here?” Kaylan stopped several feet away, his arms folded over his chest.

“Looking for you so I could apologize for being a giant asshole. I went to your place last night, but you never came home. I tried calling you, but you turned off your phone. Honey, I’ve been worried sick about you.”

“Why? Afraid Sebastian’s secretary can’t take care of himself?” Kaylan shot back, and

I winced. That was a solid hit.

Arden hung his head and even dropped to his knees in front of Kaylan, making the man gasp as the paper bag of food crinkled and the flowers rustled against his jacket.

“I’m sorry. I should never have said that. It was wrong and so fucking out of line. You are so much more than I implied. Besides, even if you were a secretary, there’s nothing wrong with that. I have no right to criticize your life. The only thing that matters is your happiness, and I know working here makes you very happy.”

Damn. Arden was very good at apologizing.

Unfortunately, I didn’t get to stay and enjoy the show. As Arden finished speaking, the elevator doors opened, and Sebastian stepped off with his bodyguard Neil. Not good timing. Nothing killed a mood like your boss showing up.

I slipped past the couple and briskly walked toward Sebastian, whose breezy smile turned into a confused frown as he stared past me. I held up one hand and made a spinning motion with my finger, indicating that he should turn around.

“What’s going on?” Sebastian whispered as I reached him at the bank of elevators. “I thought proposals were on one knee, not two.”

“That’s not a proposal. It’s an apology,” I corrected as I gave both Sebastian and Neil a little shove into the elevatorcar. “We’re going to the café at Fountain Square to give them a moment of privacy.” Thankfully, I had my phone on me and could access my notes for the day.

“What happened?” Sebastian asked as soon as the doors closed and we started to descend.

“They had an argument, and Arden said some unwise things, such as calling Kaylan your secretary.”

“Bullshit. I need to go up there and set him straight.” Sebastian stepped forward and reached out to punch the button for the top floor, but I caught his hand, stopping him.

“No.”

“What?”

“No. Kaylan is more than capable of handling Arden without your help.”

Sebastian huffed and dropped back against the wall. “How dare he not properly appreciate Kaylan! Does he not realize how critical that man is to our day-to-day operations? How many departments he’s coordinating to make sure everything is running smoothly? Does he not know how hard it is to manage me? Arden has no idea how fucking lucky he is to have found Kaylan.”

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I reluctantly released his hand and studiously ignored the butterflies in my stomach taking flight, but it wasn't working. Hearing him angrily defend Kaylan only made my heart race and dance in my chest. It wasn't that he was a good, thoughtful boss. He was a good, thoughtful person. He cared about those around him. How could I not want to swoon?

"I don't think you have to worry," I said. "Arden delivered a rather astute and heartfelt apology just as you arrived. It sounded like he'd realized that he was talking out of his ass last night and was properly begging for forgiveness."

"Good. Kaylan was happy with Arden. I don't want to see him hurt."

"Arguments are a normal part of a relationship. I think they'll be able to get past this bump in the road," I murmured as I pulled my phone from my jacket pocket.

"True. True." Sebastian was silent for all of two floors before his shoulder bumped mine. "How many relationships have you ended because of an argument?"

I slid him a repressive look, but it had no effect on him. While Neil was the only one in the elevator with us and he likely heard stories from Carl, we still needed to act like professionals during work hours.

"Very few, sir," I said stiffly. I'd been in very few relationships, and most of those had ended because I was cheap and boring. I wouldn't be surprised if Sebastian came to the same conclusion.

We were leaving the office and crossing Fountain Square when Kaylan called me.

“You can return now. Arden and I patched things up,” he announced as soon as I answered.

“You’re happy with his apology? He was sincere?”

“Yes, yes. We both overreacted, but we talked it out and we’re good now. Arden is leaving.”

“I want you to go home as well,” I ordered. Sebastian stopped beside me in front of the tall bronze Tyler Davidson fountain and lifted one questioning eyebrow. I nodded to him and gave a thumbs-up.

“No, I’m fine. There’s work?—”

“There will always be work. You’re exhausted and won’t be able to concentrate. Go home, get some sleep, and take a shower. Be back by one to help me with the summary reports for the board of directors.”

There was a moment of silence before Kaylan more hesitantly asked, “Are you sure?”

“Very sure. Sebastian is nodding in agreement as well. We’re going to grab some coffee and then be up. I’ll see you at one.”

Sebastian was chuckling at me when I ended the call. I narrowed my eyes at him and stated in my sternest voice, “He needs sleep. He and Arden are fine now, but Kaylan needs sleep or he’ll be useless all day.”

My boss straightened and gave me a sharp salute. “Yes, sir.”

I ignored his nonsense and stepped inside the coffee shop, thanking Neil as he held the door open for us. As Sebastian followed, I grabbed his arm and gave him a small

pull to the left. The lunatic had his eyes locked on me instead of watching where he was going. One more step and his shoulder would have slammed into the doorframe. He didn't even blink in reaction. I doubted he'd even noticed.

Sebastian leaned in close as we stood in line. "I love how you take such good care of the Courtland Enterprises employees. It's incredibly sexy."

I kept my eyes on my phone, praying he couldn't tell that my ears were burning and that my embarrassment was threatening to stain my cheeks.

We spent a somewhat lazy hour in the café, sipping coffee and nibbling breakfast sandwiches as we discussed his schedule. Sebastian might have sat closer than necessary so he could look at my phone. And his thigh might have been pressed to mine, but it was purely innocent. There was no way he was doing it to torment me with his heat and gentle whiffs of his intoxicating cologne.

Regardless, I was grateful when we returned to the office and separated so I could catch my breath and clear my head in time for Justine Overland's arrival. Of the various executives at Courtland Enterprises, she was one of my favorites.

Justine was the company's Chief Innovation Officer, and she worked on creating new products for the company's different divisions.

"There's the hardest-working man at Courtland," she greeted me like she always did.

"Just trying to keep up with the hardest-working woman," I replied with a smile. Everything about her screamed free spirit, from her colorful clothes to her eclectic, orange-rimmed glasses to her jangly jewelry. It was barely nine in the morning, but her hair was already twisted into a messy bun as if she'd been in the office for five or six hours. And knowing her, it was entirely possible.

“Is he ready for me?” she whispered.

“Two minutes. We had our morning meeting in a coffee shop and returned only a short time ago.”

“Got it.” She rocked back and forth on her heels, trying for nonchalant, but I wasn’t fooled. They all tried to get gossip out of me because they knew I was privy to the best dirt.

“So...I heard the merger was squashed officially,” she began and then added in a low voice. “Rat bastards.”

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“Mr. Courtland is planning to make an announcement to the entire company later this week, after the new plan for 2025 is nailed down.”

“Mn. Good. Good. I know a lot of people are worried.”

Another long pause.

“Were...you...there?” she inquired haltingly.

“Yes. I handed out the due diligence report.”

Justine squealed and jumped to my desk, her bracelets clacking together. She rested her elbows on the corner of my desk and put her chin in her hands. “Tell me, was it glorious? Did they lose their minds? Was the CEO really shouting for Sebastian to be arrested?”

I tried to hold in my smile as I gave her the tiniest nod possible.

Justine’s laugh would have put to shame a Disney villain in its evilness. “I knew we should have sneaked one of those micro cameras on you. I would have paid half a year’s salary to see that debacle unfold.”

“Ridiculous,” I muttered even as my smile sneaked out. Justine was too fun.

“I take it that this is the beginning of the ‘Go Big or Go Home’ push,” she stated as she straightened and tilted her head toward Sebastian’s office. “We need one big best seller to carry us through the year.”



“Do you mind if I ask—is that a normal operating procedure for companies of our size?”

She nodded immediately. “Some stodgy conservative firms who can’t bang out new ideas will begin with cutting costs, layoffs, and hiring freezes, but Courtland is nimble despite its size, and we have a long history of exciting new products and innovations. It’s our bread and butter.”

“But isn’t it risky? To have everything riding on a single product launch?”

Justine shrugged, sending her earrings swinging. “It is to a degree, but in Courtland’s history, we’ve had only two products bomb and since then, we’ve implemented more focus groups, reviews, and quality controls. The more likely thing is for a product to do well, but not be the best seller we hoped.”

“Sorry. I don’t mean to pry.”

She immediately waved off my apology. “It’s not prying. These are excellent questions. Sharing knowledge makes the whole team stronger.”

Someone clearing their throat jerked our attention to Sebastian’s office. The boss was standing in the doorway with an amused look on his face.

“If you’re done flirting with my assistant, I’m ready to start our meeting,” he drawled.

Justine snorted and strolled into his office. “You should count yourself lucky I’ve never tried to steal that brilliant man from you.”

Sebastian paused to stare at me before closing his doors. “Never,” he growled.

My heart fluttered at that growl, but a little knot tightened in my stomach. That was the grand plan, right? He'd win me over, thanks to this dating bargain, and I'd get moved to another department so we could date without me losing my job.

I shoved the thought aside. Sebastian was being silly. My brain returned to what Justine had told me about new products and the nugget of an idea that was forming in my mind. It could be something. Something that could be big, but I needed more research and numbers to help me.

10

SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

“You’re fucking him, aren’t you?”

Declan had to ask that just as I was taking a drink of whiskey. The amber liquid burned the back of my throat and sinus cavity as I choked. I put down the glass with a loud thunk and picked up my water as I wheezed and coughed. Tears clogged my eyes, and I was pretty sure I’d lost nose hair.

“What the hell?” I rasped at Declan as he sat opposite me in the restaurant, looking unperturbed by his blatant attempt to kill me.

“I’m just saying that you’re being more obvious than usual if I’ve caught on that things have changed between you,” Declan continued. Having been my friend since high school, you would have thought he could show at least a modicum of concern for my well-being, but that wasn’t his style. The icy blond giant frowned at me like a snowman missing his top hat.

After clearing my throat for a second time and taking a cleansing sip of water, I reclined in my chair. “Fucking? No.” My voice still sounded like a seventy-year-old

pack-a-day smoker, but it was improving.

Declan's frown deepened, and he continued to stare wordlessly at me.

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“Fine. Fine. Semantics. We haven’t had sex yet, but I like to think that we will soon. We have started dating. It’s been about a week now, and we’ve been out on two so far. This Friday, he’s agreed to come to my house. I’m cooking dinner for date number three.”

Our second date had been on Saturday when I’d taken him to see a movie. I remembered very little of the movie now, but that was because I’d spent most of those two hours in the dark trying to sneak my hand into his lap or under his shirt.

My friend’s expression did not brighten. If anything, it grew cloudier. He shifted forward in his seat, resting his forearms on the table. “Did you warn him that you can’t cook? Or is your chef preparing the meal ahead of his arrival?”

I waved a hand at him. “No, no. She’s not involved in this. I want to make it for him. Even hoping to give Wilkins the night off...if he’ll let me. Just the two of us in the house. No interruptions, and no one to make him feel uncomfortable.”

Declan glanced around the restaurant as if to make sure that no one was listening before he continued. Not that anyone was paying us the slightest bit of attention. The Avenue was an old-school steak house in the heart of downtown that was a call back to London’s gentlemen’s social clubs with lots of old leather, dark wood, dull brass, and a hint of cigar smoke for ambience. Everything on the menu was slabs of meat and roasted vegetables served with a side of whiskey. While the place might take its decor from old men’s clubs, there were still plenty of women filling the tables, chatting over pints of Guinness and eating thick cuts of pork chops bigger than their fists.

“Maybe you should consider why he’s feeling uncomfortable. He could lose his job if someone discovers he’s screwing his boss. Or have you both forgotten about that company rule?”

Now it was my turn to frown, but I directed it at my forsaken whiskey rather than my friend. “We haven’t forgotten. It’s why we’re being careful.”

“I doubt you’re being careful enough. You’re going to find yourself at the end of a lawsuit.”

I sat up. “Byron wouldn’t sue me or the company. He’s not like that, and you know it.”

Declan paused, and several seconds ticked by before he nodded once. “You’re right. I don’t think he would sue you. He doesn’t seem the type. But if the news got out, his reputation would be ruined. Practically nothing would happen to you. How is that fair? Do you care so little for him that you don’t worry about his future and well-being?”

“God, Dec! I’m not that much of a rat bastard, am I? Of course, I’m worried about him. And if this came out, and he lost his job, I would be devastated for him. He’d probably also leave me, which is the last thing in the world I want. I have a plan. Where’s your faith?”

Our server swept over and snatched up our empty plates while inquiring whether we would like to see a dessert menu. Declan briskly ordered an espresso, and I asked for a coffee. The caffeine wouldn’t do much to make Declan livelier, and I probably didn’t need the caffeine after the scare my friend had given me. However, the meal didn’t seem complete without it.

When we were alone, I released a sigh. “I don’t want anything horrible to happen to

Byron. He means a lot to me. Not just as an exceptional employee, but as a person—a person I want to get to know better.”

“You mean in bed.”

“I mean in all the parts of life. Yes, I want to screw his brains out, but I also want to hang out with him. I want to pamper the shit out of him.” I leaned forward, pinned him with a hard stare. “Haven’t you ever met someone you’ve wanted to spoil rotten? You want to hand the world to them on a silver platter. To give them anything their heart could desire. To make anything possible.”

“No.”

I flopped back in my chair with a huff. To tell the truth, neither had I. At least, I hadn’t until I’d met Byron. There had been someone when I started college that I dated who’d used me for my money, but that had been different. Thomas had constantly asked for things or taken for granted that I would just pay for everything. What was worse was that I hadn’t even seen it happening until it was too late. But even with all that, there’d been no grand urge to spoil him.

When I was with Byron, I wanted to spoil him. To give him things that would make him light up. Yet, he didn’t seem like a “things” person. He struck me as more of an “experiences” kind of person. Byron was the one who would want to go to the top of the Eiffel Tower at sunset to see the golden glow settling over the magical city. He’d want to wander through all the winding streets of Florence, marveling at the ancient city and seeing every piece of Renaissance art. He’d want to cuddle every panda we could find in Chengdu. And I wanted to make each of those things happen for him.

“Well, I have. It’s just unfortunate that the guy I want to date and get to know works for me.”

“What’s your plan?”

“We’re going on ten dates. That’s ten chances for us to get to know each other and figure out if we want to be in a relationship. At the end of those ten dates, if we want to be together, I will move him to a new department so that he’s not directly under me?—”

“At work,” Declan cut in.

I smirked at my friend’s lame attempt at a joke. “Yes, at work.” At home, I’d keep Byron’s sexy ass under me all nightlong. “Right now, my first choice is to make him your assistant.” As I expected, that got Declan’s eyes to light up. He desperately needed a new assistant. He kept scaring off all his assistants. Something about him being gruff, cold, and scary, which made it an uncomfortable work environment.

“Why can’t I have him now?”

“No.”

“But he’ll be safer if we move him now.”

Something like panic twisted in my stomach, and I grabbed my whiskey despite the earlier debacle with it. “It’s too early.”

“Okay. Fine,” Declan said even though it didn’t sound like he’d accepted my plan. “You date and things don’t work out. Will you still be able to maintain a working relationship?”

“Of course.”

Declan seemed even less convinced. “You’ve been infatuated with him for three

years. You're going to actually be fine if he doesn't want to date?"



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“I know it’ll hurt, but I believe he will examine this fairly. Besides, I don’t think it’s going to happen. We’re extremely compatible. We know each other, and we’re comfortable together. This is about taking the next step in our relationship.”

His friend sighed. “I don’t want to see either of you hurt. Please, be careful. Try to tone down the flirting in the office.”

“Fine. Fine. I’ll be careful.” I hadn’t thought I was being flirty, but Declan was probably right. He wasn’t the type of person to notice these things, but if he had, it was likely that I was being more over the top than usual.

And I didn’t want Byron to be hurt by any of this.

“Have you heard from Simon recently?” Declan inquired, and I was grateful for the change of subject. I didn’t want to contemplate a world in which Byron didn’t want to date me, where we couldn’t make a relationship work.

“He’s apartment hunting still,” I replied. The server returned with our espresso and coffee, and I asked for the check. This lunch had stretched long enough, and it was time to get back to work. “I offered to let him stay at my house if he wanted. That would give him time to get to know the area and figure out where he wanted to live, but he said no. Wants to do this on his own.”

“I think you need to talk to Pierce,” Declan stated as he picked up the small cup with the dark liquid.

“Why?”

“He’s being an ass.”

I snorted as I lifted my cup to my lips. “Pierce is always an ass. It’s what he does best.”

“He’s worse than usual, and it started when Simon began contacting you about moving to Cincinnati. What does he have against Simon?”

Closing my eyes, I savored the heat and rich flavor of my coffee, using the moment to mellow old, painful memories. “It’s not about Simon. It’s about Sawyer.” I opened my eyes and offered Declan a half smile. “Out of all of us, Pierce was closest to Sawyer. I don’t know if it was more than friendship, and that’s not a land mine I’m stupid enough to step on out of curiosity. Pierce hasn’t recovered from Sawyer’s death. And I’m sure Sawyer’s brother moving here is threatening to dredge up all those old feelings.”

“What should we do?”

I shrugged. It had been thirteen years since Sawyer’s death. I could only guess that Pierce had been closer to Sawyer than we all understood, and that was why it was a continued sore spot for him. As far as I knew, they’d only been friends. They hadn’t dated. Hadn’t even grown up together. They’d met at college, like the rest of us. The one exception was Declan and me.

“I’ll try talking to him next time I see him.” But I hated that I didn’t have high hopes for that effort. In the time I’d known him, Pierce had always been the one most reluctant to open up about things that were troubling him, and anything to do with Sawyer had a giant red flag on it.

Pierce was a good guy at heart and definitely cared about his friends, but he was also about as cuddly as a porcupine fucking a cactus. The man was all snark and bite. No

fluff. Sadly, Sawyer's accident hadn't made him that way. According to his parents, Pierce was born grumpy and had never grown out of it.

"You could always see if Rome will do it."

I immediately shook my head. Rome had zero delicacy. No finesse. He was all sledgehammer. "Nope. Last time I tried that, Rome ended up with a black eye and took a baseball bat to Pierce's new Porsche. They refused to speak for almost six months. It's better if I try."

While Pierce might be a grumpy asshole, I still believed that Simon moving to Cincinnati was a good thing. Sawyer would have wanted us looking out for his little brother, and this might also be a chance for Pierce to get past old wounds.

11

BYRON GRAHAM

Sebastian's house was overwhelming.

Yes, I'd been there before, but I had zero memory of entering the house, and leaving the next day had been about getting out of there as quickly as possible with as much pride as I could scrape together. There had been no grand tour or time to gawk at the beauty.

Wilkins was at the front door to welcome me as I exited my crappy car and walked up the wide main staircase, even though I felt like I should come in via the back or side entrance reserved for servants and deliveries. Regardless of my insecurities, Wilkins never gave a hint that I was less than worthy of being in such a beautiful home.

Everywhere I looked, the place was all clean lines and calming colors. It was rather spartan in its decorations, but that only seemed to lend to the overall elegance. The main foyer was perfect for greeting rich people coming for magnificent parties, where guests wore tuxedos and extravagant gowns as they dripped diamonds and sapphires.

Wilkins led me to a room with huge two-story windows that faced a lawn dotted with expertly manicured trees and shrubs, ending in what appeared to be a vast lake. Really, this house felt as if it should be owned by Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*. Just on the edge of the room, Wilkins paused, his brow furrowing.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, Mr. Graham. Master Sebastian asked me to bring you here and see if you’d enjoy a beverage prior to dinner, however...”

My brain was kind enough to supply a hundred different problems that could have arisen in the past hour since I’d last texted him. Most of them involved work and were threatening to cancel our dinner.

“A work problem?”

“No, sir. It’s...dinner...”

That sounded ominous.

“What’s wrong with dinner?” I asked when Wilkins seemed reluctant to continue.

The old butler’s frown deepened, drawing even more wrinkles across his face. His voice dipped to a whisper, as if he were afraid of Sebastian overhearing him. “It’s just that the master wanted to cook dinner himself as a surprise for you, but I don’t believe he’s attempted to cook anything in at least ten years. I don’t think things are going well in the kitchen. He’s already sent the cook away for a night out, and he’s banned me from meddling directly.”

“Ahhhh...” As problems went, this one was at least cute, and one that I thought I could solve with minimal fuss.

“He’s also said that I have the rest of the night off after I get you settled. I think he is determined to have the house to himself.”

I could imagine the dirty things that were running through that deviant’s mind.

“Got it. Why don’t you point me toward the kitchen, and you make a hasty retreat?” I suggested. I’d either be able to help Sebastian cook, or we’d end up ordering a pizza. Both options were fine with me.

“Are you sure, Mr. Graham?”

“Definitely. I’m quite experienced at getting Sebastian out of trouble. This will be nothing new.”

Except this was a lot more trouble than I had been expecting.

At least the kitchen wasn’t on fire when I arrived, just filled with smoke.

“Oh...wow...” might have slipped out as I stepped into the kitchen. It was a glorious thing of broad marble countertops, white cabinets, and shining appliances, but I barely noticed it as smoke clogged the air, something bubbled over in a large pot, and there was something black in a pan on the counter.

“Hey! What are you doing in here?” Sebastian cried out.

“Hoping to save you from a visit from the fire department.”

Sebastian’s wide shoulders slumped, and he hung his head. “This...this is harder than I’d thought it would be.”

“I can see that.”

I swooped in and started turning off burners as I attempted to assess what he’d been trying to make. It looked like spaghetti, but the meatballs in the frying pan were tiny black balls, and the pot he’d selected for the spaghetti made it appear as if he were planning to feed an entire army. There was an empty box of noodles next to the stove.

Sebastian groaned and leaned against the center island, glaring at the stove as if it were to blame for his cooking fail. “I don’t understand how this went so wrong.”

“Did you follow the instructions?”

“I tried, but things were getting done slower or faster than they were supposed to, so I had to tweak the temperature on the other things to get them to speed up, and then there was all this smoke, and the meatballs turned black on the outside but were raw on the inside.”

There was something adorable about this so-called titan of industry standing in the kitchen in his black apron, hair askew and a lost expression on his face. Sebastian walked into every situation with this unshakable air of confidence and control, but right now, this man was shook, and I couldn’t take it.

He glanced at me, and a crooked smile formed. “I guess I’m not selling myself too well right now as someone who can take care of you.”

“No, dearest. You are not a cook.” I crossed the distance between us and wrapped my arms around his waist. “But thankfully, you are very good at taking care of people in other ways.”

Sebastian’s face lit up. My heart skipped, and my fingers twisted in his shirt. “You called me dearest,” he whispered.

Oh, shit! I had. The word had slipped out. My cheeks burned, and I ducked my head. “Sorry. I didn’t mean?—”

“No, no. You can’t take it back. I love it.” His arms closed, pulling me. He dipped his head, brushing a little kiss to my temple, then cheek, working his way to my lips. When our mouths met, it was in a series of small kisses, as if he were taking tiny sips, savoring the taste of me.

As his tongue slipped inside, I pulled away with a smirk. If we went down this route, he’d just end up fucking me on the counter amidst the burned food. We needed to at least have the pretense of a proper date.

“So, how about we see what we can salvage of this dinner?” I announced, turning to the stove. The answer to my question was...none of it.

Sebastian stood next to me with his hands on his hips. “I should have let Carol cook. She warned me I was in over my head, but I wanted to impress you. At least I was smart enough to let her make dessert.”



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“You do amazing things every day that impress me at work. Why would you think spaghetti would impress me?”

Sebastian looked at me for a second in wonder and then his eyes closed, and all his features scrunched up as if he'd thought about his master plan and said “Duh.”

I patted him on the stomach. “It's a good thing you're cute.”

“Hey!” But even that came out with a laugh.

“Show me to your pantry. Let's see if you used all your cook's spaghetti.” At least he'd known to boil the noodles in water and hadn't just started by throwing them into the sauce.

Sebastian pointed to a door on the other side of the kitchen with a fancy frosted window. It was a surprisingly large closet with floor-to-ceiling shelves and not those basic wire shelves but wood ones. There was so much food and in packages I'd never seen. Was Sebastian having specialty foods flown in from overseas? I wanted to examine everything, but being in there was making my stomach growl.

“Ha! Perfect!” I snatched up a box of spaghetti and a jar of sauce. Those items appeared out of place among all the other fancy wrappers and glass jars as if she'd gotten them for Sebastian's master plan. On my way out of the pantry, I spotted a loaf of Italian bread that probably had been delivered from the bakery that day. I snagged that as well, along with some olive oil.

“The point of having you over was not to have you cook for me,” Sebastian continued

to mope.

“I’m not cooking for you. We’re cooking together. You get to throw out all the stuff you’ve made. I’m going to raid your fridge to see what you have in the way of fixings for salad.”

Once Sebastian cleaned away his first attempt, we got to work. Sebastian followed each of my instructions and asked dozens of questions about why I was doing what I was doing, as if he wanted to learn. The man was going to return to meals professionally cooked by a chef tomorrow. Why would he need to know any of this? But that was Sebastian in a nutshell. He wanted to understand anything he saw.

“Does this mean you grew up having a cook working for your family?” I asked as I prepared the garlic butter that would go on the bread before I toasted it in the oven.

“Actually, no. Not at all.” Sebastian paused in his tearing of the lettuce to gaze at me. “When I was a kid, my family existed right there on the edge of middle class. My parents took turns cooking our family meals. My family wouldn’t be considered rich until I was a senior in high school. Even then, my parents were reluctant to hire a cook. They enjoyed making meals for our little family. Plus, I always had a friend or two over to bum a meal. It was only later, after my sister and I moved out, that they hired a cook to come in and prepare meals four days out of the week.”

“Why didn’t you learn to cook while you were in college?”

Sebastian’s smile turned crooked, and he shrugged one shoulder. “My first year in college, I was on the meal plan, so I was eating out of the cafeteria or takeout every day. From my second year on to graduation, I was living in a house with four other friends. Rome’s parents were paying for the house, and Pierce’s family paid for food as well as the live-in chef and housekeeper.”

I stumbled to him, cackling. “Oh, my God! Can you get more spoiled?”

“It might sound nice, but they were fucking spies! Every time any of us did something even a little questionable or brought anyone back to the house for some fun, a parent was calling or showing up on our doorstep the next damn day. We couldn’t get away with anything!”

I was laughing so hard, I was wheezing. My eyes watered, blurring my vision. “You’re killin’ me!”

“How did you learn to cook? Did one of your parents teach you?”

My laughter died in my throat, and I coughed to clear it again. “No. Not really. I picked up a few things watching my dad when I was young, but most of it I learned from videos or trial and error. Ate a lot of burned meals for a while.”

I glanced over at him out of the corner of my eye as I smeared the butter on the bread, and it looked like he wanted to ask more, but nothing came out and I could breathe easier even as guilt knotted in my stomach. He was so free with the information about his past and his family. Everything about my life after Ronnie’s accident was a mess, and I wasn’t ready to talk about it. It would only destroy the cozy atmosphere. Was it wrong that I wanted to use this time together to escape my life? To pretend that I wasn’t one disaster away from shattering into a million pieces?

These nights with Sebastian were like stepping into a dream, and I wanted to protect this bubble of happiness for as long as I could.

Conversation remained relaxed and easy as I finished up the spaghetti. Sadly, he was out of defrosted meat for meatballs, but the bread and salad helped to make the meal filling enough. We continued our conversation as we ate at a small round table in a sunny breakfast nook off the kitchen. Sebastian dug out a bottle of red wine that was

the best I'd ever tasted. It might have been a simple meal I'd cooked a thousand times, but everything about it seemed better because of the company smiling at me from across the table. Not to mention, the strawberry cake that Sebastian's chef had made for dessert was positively divine.

Thankfully, Sebastian did know how to load a dishwasher. I'd tried to help him clean up when we were done, but he'd ordered me to sit on the stool at the island and sip my wine as he worked.

"And we will not be telling Carol how badly I fucked up dinner," Sebastian announced as he dried off his hands on a dish towel.

"Your secret is safe with me," I said, tipping my nearly empty glass at him.

"What would you like to do now? A movie?"

"Actually, I would love a tour of your home, if you don't mind." I stood and patted my belly full of delicious carbs. "It would give me a chance to walk off dinner and dessert."

"I would love to."

Sebastian hurried around the island and took my hand, threading our fingers together as he led me through his enormous house. Sebastian had us backtrack to the foyer so I could see the front parlor, the formal parlor, the lounge, the billiards room complete with two pool tables, the formal dining room, his home office, and then the most glorious room—the library. And yes, the gorgeous beauty had a rolling ladder. I had to use every scrap of willpower to keep from pulling a Belle and riding that thing down the wall. But beyond the ladder, I loved that his library wasn't about fancy leather-bound collectibles that couldn't ever be touched, let alone read.

Sebastian's shelves contained classics and genre fiction, well-worn and loved paperbacks nestled in with hardbacks. This was a library that was more than a showpiece. It was a place that Sebastian frequently used.

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In truth, I really didn't want to move on from the library, but there was still so much of the house to see. We ventured to the lower level, where he had a home theater with three descending rows of plush reclining leather seats and one big leather couch in the center of it all. The air had a hint of popcorn, as if he and some friends had used the room not long ago. This had all the beauty of going to the theater but with the bonus of privacy and the ability to pause the movie for bathroom breaks.

"Hey! Why didn't we use your theater for our second date?" I demanded, as he led me out of the room.

One corner of Sebastian's mouth tipped higher. "I wanted to make sure you felt safe with me, and a public place is more likely to do that than my secret theater room in the basement of my home. And going out to a movie theater makes it feel like a more traditional, real date."

Sebastian's thoughtfulness made my heart speed up. I didn't mind falling for this amazing man, but why did I have to fall so damn fast?

He jerked his head toward the theater room. "Do you want to watch a movie?"

I quickly shook my head. "No, I want to see the rest of your house." Besides, I had other plans for this sexy man.

With a tiny smirk, he continued on our tour, showing me the indoor pool, which led to the outdoor pool and flower gardens.

We paused outside as the sky turned dark and the lights around the garden popped on.

There was a heavy silence in the area. Not a single siren or car horn to be heard. Just the croak of frogs and crickets beginning their nightly chorus. It was peaceful in a way I hadn't been able to experience in a while.

But I knew we hadn't seen everything. In fact, there was an entire second floor he'd not shown off yet. That was where the guest room I had slept in was. And it was definitely where his bedroom was. Had he avoided it to not put any pressure on me?

So sweet. So chivalrous.

So silly.

"Are there any other rooms we haven't seen yet?" I inquired, giving his hand a squeeze.

A grin toyed with those perfect lips as he stared at me. "Well, there are a couple of rooms you haven't seen. Do you want to check them out?"

I turned toward him, sliding my hand up his chest to rest over his heart. "I would love to see them. And in case you think I'm being too subtle, I want to know where you sleep."

Sebastian caught my hand and lifted it to his lips, where he pressed a kiss to my palm. "I think I can arrange that."

The pace became faster as we entered the house and headed upstairs. Within a minute, Sebastian was pushing open the double doors that led into a vast room with immense windows that faced the rear lawn and pool. Everything was decorated in shades of blue and gray, giving the room a cool feel. It took me a moment to locate the bed, but once I did, I couldn't turn away.

This was where Sebastian slept against soft, silken sheets. Did he sleep naked? In briefs? Did he actually own pajamas? What did he look like when he was sleeping?

These questions and so many more were buzzing through my brain. I needed to know the answers.

I wasn't sure what tore my eyes away from that bed, but I finally found Sebastian standing several feet away. Everything about him had become a single taut muscle, clenched and frozen. A look of hunger was etched into his face, giving him a harsh edge that made my mouth dry and my skin tingle. I could feel his desire hammering me in hot waves, but he didn't move.

In the three years I'd known the man, Sebastian Courtland had done a million little things to wear down my resistance. And over the course of a week, he'd doubled that number. Yet, this shimmering second right here was when I knew I didn't stand a chance. I was going to fall in love with him.

He was waiting for me to make the first move. No pressure. No teasing. No cajoling or enticing. I could choose to turn around and walk out of this room, and he wouldn't try to stop me. I knew it like I knew the world was round. He wouldn't hold it against me. We'd move on as though this moment had never happened.

How could I not fall for someone who respected and valued me so much?

I took a step toward him and then another. He didn't move. He might have even stopped breathing. It was only as I reached up to cup his face with my hands that his frozen state finally shattered. His arms closed on me like a pair of steel bands and pulled me as his mouth descended onto mine in a blistering kiss. I melted into him, every inch of my body pressing into his, setting me on fire.

The kiss went on and on, our tongues sliding along one another as he explored my



mouth as if he were trying to taste every bit of me. My left fingers threaded through the silky soft hair at the back of his head while my right hand slipped down his chest, where his heart thundered. I plucked at the buttons on his shirt, fumbling with them as I fought to get to bare skin.

One of the hands pressed to my spine dropped to grab one ass cheek. Sebastian squeezed and kneaded that mound of flesh, and I moaned into his mouth. He lifted me almost off my toes, rubbing my aching cock with his through our clothes.

“Dearest,” I panted, breaking off the kiss. “Your clothes are beautiful, but right now I need them fucking gone.”

“I love when you get bossy,” Sebastian growled. “You gonna tell me how to fuck you, too? How fast? How hard? How deep?” With each question, he thrust his hips, scrambling what was left of my brain. How was I going to be bossy? I couldn’t even form words. For Sebastian, I’d try.

After stealing one last searing kiss, I pushed out of his arms. I backpedaled while tugging at my shirt, pulling it from where it was tucked into my pants. “Strip,” I barked.

A cocky grin spread across his lips. “I don’t know if I can do it without music.”

I threw my head back and laughed. Sadly, I’d been toeing out of my shoes at the time and almost fell.

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As I regained my balance and glanced at him, Sebastian had lost his shirt, revealing a broad chest with a nice fur of blond hair I instantly itched to touch. He was gorgeous.

My gaze followed his hands to his belt, and my heart picked up. I'd seen the equipment he kept hidden there, gotten a taste of it, but this time would be so much more.

Except he stopped moving. My eyes snapped to his face to find him smirking at me with one eyebrow raised.

“If you're just going to watch, I'm definitely going to need music.”

Watch?

Oh, shit! I was supposed to be undressing, too.

I attacked my clothes with renewed vigor and purpose. Shirt, pants, boxers, socks—all of it went flying to the sounds of Sebastian's chuckles.

But all that stopped when I marched to him, and our bare bodies collided in a rush of heat. A hiss escaped me as we touched for the first time. It was like being scalded, and I wanted more.

Sebastian's massive hands wandered my body, caressing and massaging any bit he could reach, while steadily inching me back. It was only as the mattress hit my legs that I even noticed we'd been moving across the room.

With a grin, Sebastian bent, grabbed me behind the knees, and lifted, dumping me onto the bed.

I laughed and stretched out my hands toward him, wanting to pull him on top of me. “Is sex with you always like this?”

Sebastian pressed one knee into the mattress and paused, his smile softening. “No. I’ve never laughed like this with someone in bed. Not until you.”

Everything he said and did was a shot straight at my heart. I had no defense against him. “How the hell are you still single?”

“I’m hoping that I won’t be for much longer. There’s this sexy guy that I’ve got my eye on, and?—”

“Enough!” I laughed, waving my hands at him. “You’ve already got me naked and in your bed. Do something about it.”

Sebastian caught my hands and pinned them to the blankets above my head as he leaned close to steal a deep kiss. I raised my legs and wrapped them around his waist, pulling him in even closer.

All the laughter fell away, and the heat rushed in. His chest hair scraped deliciously across my skin and teased my nipples. Sebastian slid his mouth from mine to skim along my jaw and down my neck.

“I need to worship all of you,” he mumbled against my skin.

What he meant was that he intended to lick, suck, nibble, and kiss every inch of my body. My job was to lie there and wallow in the onslaught of his very thorough affection that left my cock aching and my ass empty.

It was only when I was begging for relief that he finally stopped long enough to fetch a condom and lube.

I moved to the center of the bed and flopped onto a massive pile of pillows. Sebastian crawled across the mattress to me, his hard muscles undulating under golden skin. He was a powerful god, and I was his very willing sacrificial offering just begging to be devoured.

“How do you prefer it?” Sebastian inquired, pressing his sweet lips to my collarbone.

“Usually on my knees from behind. But not tonight...” Something about Sebastian made me feel daring.

Sebastian lifted his head a little, waiting for me to continue.

“I want to face you like this, so I can see your expression as you’re coming.”

That devilish man licked his lips, the fire burning brighter in his eyes. “Guess I better do a good job of prepping you.”

Unfortunately, I was not prepared for Sebastian’s brand of prepping. He tongued my ass and then sucked my cock while working his fingers inside of me. I was balanced on the very edge of orgasm for what felt like an eternity. Just as I was sure I’d crack, Sebastian would pull me back again. My legs trembled, and my entire body was slick with sweat.

When Sebastian finally stopped to slip on the condom, a relieved sob nearly broke from my throat. His feverish gaze roasted me as the fat head of his cock brushed against my hole.

He pushed in slowly, and my body stiffened at the intrusion. No matter how well he’d

prepared me, he was still large, and it had been a while since I'd last been penetrated.

“Should I stop?” Sebastian demanded after he'd already stopped. His voice was low and rough, as though he'd been gargling gravel. Muscles strained and twitched as he fought to remain perfectly still.

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“No. Don’t stop. Just go slow.”

Sebastian’s grin was tight as he put one hand under my left knee and pressed my leg up toward my chest. At the same time, he continued to push forward, filling me with his phenomenal thickness. My eyes rolled into my head, and I moaned loud enough to be heard by all of Sebastian’s very distant neighbors.

“Fuck, baby,” Sebastian swore. My eyes flicked open to focus on the lines of strain cutting across his face and the beads of sweat gathering on his brow. “You feel so good.”

With a trembling hand, I gripped my rock-hard cock. I gathered up the cum leaking from the head and smeared it down the shaft. As I stroked myself, my hips raised, and I took in more of him, causing us both to gasp.

“Yes,” I hissed. My body adjusted to his girth, and I shoved aside the lingering bite of pain to wallow in the ecstasy of this moment. “More. I want all of you.”

Sebastian delivered.

He steadily filled me up, giving me every sweet inch of his dick. When he was completely inside of me, the most beautiful look of bliss filled his face. I wanted to keep staring at him, but it became too difficult as he moved. Each thrust tried to knock the breath out of my lungs. My hips lifted to meet his while my hand shuttled on my cock faster and faster. As my pleasure built, my eyes fell shut and my head pressed into the pillows, allowing me to soak in everything I was feeling. My orgasm was so close now. I didn’t want to fall off that cliff yet, but the combination of tender

torment with the incredible pounding into my body was driving me insane.

“Fuck,” Sebastian growled, and my eyes popped open to see his gaze glued on the spot where our bodies met, as if it hypnotized him.

“That’s it, dearest,” I purred. “Fuck me harder. I want everything you’ve got. Show me how much you want me.”

A snarl left my lover as he gripped my hip with his free hand and tilted my body just right so that on the next long, deep stroke he punched my prostate, leaving me seeing stars. An electric current shot along my nerve endings, and I was done. Two more hard thrusts, and I shouted as the ecstasy I’d been reaching for finally slammed through me. Hot, sticky cum splashed across my hand and over my stomach. My ass muscles clenched tight, but Sebastian didn’t stop. The little devil even sped up, fucking me through my orgasm and straight into his. I barely managed to focus on him as he shouted his release. His expression twisted up in a way that almost looked as if he were in pain, but he finished with a loose, sloppy smile that squeezed my heart.

With a final exhale, that giant man collapsed on top of me, his face nuzzled against my neck. We both panted like we’d run a marathon.

“That was amazing,” Sebastian said in a rush of hot breath on my sweaty skin.

“Uh-huh. Definitely need to do that again.”

“Yes.” Sebastian’s head popped up. His hair was a sweaty mess, but his grin was a bright, shining star. I’d seen him in Saville Row suits and elegant tuxedos, but in this moment, right here, I swore he’d never appeared more handsome to me. “Frequently. Anytime you want.”

I wanted to tease him, but as I opened my mouth, the only thing that came out was a yawn. Of course, Sebastian was full of energy, as if the orgasm had revived him. He carefully withdrew from my body and disappeared into the bathroom to deal with the condom. When he returned, he had a warm damp washcloth he used to clean me up. After drying me off with a fluffy white towel, Sebastian climbed into bed with me and bundled us up in his silk sheets.

I could feel myself drifting, my eyes growing heavy as I lay stretched out in his bed, his arm wrapped around my stomach. Sebastian was an oven next to me, but I didn't mind. Everything in me was so relaxed, I didn't want to stir, but I knew I had to.

With as much effort as I could muster, I cracked one eye open and my gaze landed on the digital clock on his nightstand. It was such a relic. Why would he need one? He probably always had his phone on his nightstand? Except there was no need to grab my phone with that clock. That was why he had it.

It was late, but not ridiculously so. If I left now, I wouldn't be in danger of falling asleep on my way home.

"I need to get going," I mumbled, still trying to find the energy to get my ass up.

Sebastian's arm tightened on my waist to the point of dragging me across the bed so that I was flush with his body from head to toe. "No," Sebastian growled into my hair.

My body shook with silent laughter. "I have to go. It's late."

"You don't have to go. You can sleep right here. There's plenty of room. I'll even let you have your own side of the bed...for part of the night."

"So generous," I teased. And it was tempting. His bed was ridiculously comfortable,



the right balance of soft and firm. Not to mention, staying would mean more amazing sex. “I can’t. I need to get up early tomorrow.”

“Nope. Tomorrow’s Saturday. I checked. You can sleep in. Carol will make you another delicious breakfast. I haven’t even shown you my shower yet. It has four showerheads. We can shower at the same time, and I’ll wash your back.”

Evil. This man was pure temptation.

“Can I take a rain check? I was planning to drive down to see Ronnie tomorrow, and his hospital is near Louisville.” It wasn’t a long drive. Just a little more than an hour for me, but sometimes seeing Ronnie meant waiting for a few hours to make sure he was medicated properly and in a good head space for visitors. Plus, I thought I’d pop in to check on my mom after seeing Ronnie. At best, it was going to be an exhausting day. It was better to start early so I could spend the rest of the evening recovering.

“Of course. No need for a rain check.” Sebastian pressed kisses along the nape of my neck and across my shoulder. Each one stole away some of the tension that had entered my body at the thought of my plans for tomorrow. “This spot is reserved for you permanently. Anytime you want to sleep right here—day or night, weekday or weekend—it’s yours.”

“That sounds really nice.”

“Would you like me to go with you tomorrow? Not to meet your brother. To be there. Maybe drive if you need a break.”

I squeezed my eyes shut against the sudden, unexpected sting of tears. My throat tightened and for several seconds, I could only lie there, soaking in the warmth of his offer. I shook my head and swallowed so I could speak. “No, it’s okay.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:21 am*

I didn't deserve Sebastian Courtland. There probably wasn't anyone in the world who did. Even if he was simply on loan to me for a short time, I was going to enjoy this warmth and support while I could.

12

### BYRON GRAHAM

I arrived at the Holy Mother treatment facility at ten a.m. on Saturday, exactly when I wanted to. It was just after breakfast and late enough for Ronnie's morning meds to have kicked in properly. After snagging the box of cookies from the front passenger seat of my car, I strolled into the building that resembled pretty much every hospital I'd ever visited in my life—off-white walls, fake plants, pastel landscapes, and durable neutral-colored tile.

With practiced ease, I strolled up to the reception desk and signed in. Jenny smiled and greeted me by name, not even bothering to look at the driver's license I'd pulled out for her. The older volunteer was a regular and knew me from my many visits over the years. She wrapped the bright-green paper visitor band around my wrist while I broke the seal on the cookies. They were just a box of iced sugar cookies made by a local bakery that I'd picked up at the grocery this morning. Each time I came, I tried to bring something for the nursing staff on Ronnie's floor to show my appreciation for all their hard work.

"It's like you know exactly when I need a little treat for my day," Jenny giggled as she selected a cookie with bright-yellow icing and a smiley face.

“I think we can all use a treat every day,” I murmured as I closed the box.

From the reception area, it was a short walk to the elevators and then a quick ride up to the third floor. As the doors closed, my heart rate picked up and my stomach knotted. I’d been coming to visit Ronnie for as long as he’d lived here, for roughly four years, and the same old anxieties continued to creep in. Most of the time, I was here alone. Mom accompanied me a few times a year, even though I called her the day before each trip to give her a heads-up that I’d be leaving for my next visit. She rarely returned my calls.

It was horrible of me to think about it, but it hurt them both each time she came here. Her worst benders were always after a visit to see Ronnie, and my brother always had bad days following her visits. Maybe too many reminders of what should have been.

At the third floor, I stepped out and turned to the right, following the long hallway to another small reception area that sat outside a pair of locked double doors. I grinned easily at the familiar face behind the desk.

“Byron! I should have known I’d see you today,” the nurse greeted.

“Hi, Elaine. What are you doing here today? I thought you were off Saturdays.”

The thirtysomething with bright-red hair sighed heavily. “Kevin had his first orthodontist appointment last week. Poor kid needs to have two teeth pulled and braces. So, I’m here trying to work some overtime for braces.”

I winced. “And you thought you were done with braces after Kristin got hers off.”

“I should have known better,” she muttered as she picked up the phone. “Let me call back to see if Ronnie’s ready for guests. Just have a seat for a sec, hon.”

I placed the box of cookies on the reception desk. “For you and the rest of the team, if you don’t mind passing them along.”

She clicked her tongue at me. “I know you’ve been told you don’t need to do that,” she said, even as she pulled the box off to the side.

“I do it because I want to.”

While she chatted with a nurse in Ronnie’s ward, I sat in one of the plastic chairs with a thin cushion, trying to refrain from pulling out my phone to check for work emails. This was the one time I needed to be fully present, no thoughts about work or anything else.

Except maybe Sebastian.

For the first time in my life, I wished I’d brought someone else. I wished Sebastian were sitting next to me in one of these uncomfortable chairs, holding my hand as we waited to be shown back. He would have filled my ear with silly talk about a bunch of nonsense or even work talk. Anything to keep my mind from worrying about things I had no control over.

Sebastian would like Ronnie. He’d know how to talk to Ronnie. The man could talk to anyone and everyone with complete ease. Without a doubt, he and Ronnie would be fast friends inside of five minutes.

And maybe that was the problem. What if Ronnie saw Sebastian as a friend, and we didn’t work out? Ronnie wouldn’t be able to understand why Sebastian wasn’t coming to visit him any longer. He would be crushed, feeling utterly abandoned by Sebastian, through no fault of his own.

As much as I now wanted to introduce Sebastian to Ronnie, it was better to wait. If

we actually made a relationship work, if we were truly boyfriends and we had a future together, I would bring Sebastian here. But not yet. It was far too soon.

Still, it would have been nice to have him here, holding my hand.

“Byron?” Elaine said, breaking into my wandering thoughts. I instantly leaped to my feet, my heart freezing until I saw her smile. “You can go on in. He’s in the dayroom. He’s having a good day.”

The tension that had seized my chest released, and I felt like I could breathe again. With a nod, I walked to the doors that buzzed as I approached them, signaling that she’d unlocked them for my entry.

Stepping inside Ronnie’s ward was like stepping into a magical world. The walls were painted more colors, even though the palette remained soft and comforting. There were more pictures of animated characters, and the furniture was more comfortable. A round nurses’ station sat in the center of the main hallway while large open rooms sat on the left and right. The dayrooms where the residents could mingle with each other, watch TV, or take part in various planned activities. Past the dayrooms were two long hallways that contained some other therapy rooms, along with the residents’ private quarters.

A couple of the nurses waved to me in greeting and pointed me toward the right, where I located Ronnie sitting at a table with the jumbled pieces of a puzzle.

“Hey, Ronnie!” I said, infusing a boatload of excitement and joy into my voice while part of me ached to see him like this, even after all this time.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:21 am*

Ronnie was now thirty-three, but there were already gray hairs showing in his short, dark-brown hair. He was pudgy and so damn tall. Probably even taller than Sebastian. My brain kept screaming that he was supposed to be married with kids by now. I'd have seen him on weekends between his fishing trips, and he'd have complained about his job or his wife wanting a new car.

Instead, he stared at me for a second with a vacant look, and I worried he didn't recognize me. It wouldn't be the first time. If he didn't, I was preparing to play it off that I was an old friend. Trying to explain that I was his little brother was too stressful for him.

But a heartbeat later, his face split into a wide grin and he threw out his arms. "Byron!"

When I hugged him, he pulled me in tight, nearly cracking two of my ribs and lifting me off my feet, but I didn't fucking care. He remembered me and loved me. That was enough. He could break all the ribs he wanted so long as he remembered me.

"Byron! I have a puzzle! Help me do the puzzle!"

With a smile spreading from ear to ear, I grabbed an empty chair and pulled it over so that I was right beside him. It was the same puzzle I'd helped him put together a few dozen times, of a boy sitting in a boat fishing while some ducks swam by. It was only a hundred pieces, and I'd tried to get him some other ones, but this was his favorite. If he was happy, what did it matter?

My job was to find the next piece that he wanted, and he would fit it into place, then

lock it with a slam of his fist. It was the same process we always used, and I loved it. As we worked, he told me about his breakfast and what he watched on TV yesterday, and a bunch of other rambling stories. I couldn't follow it completely. Since his accident, Ronnie had developed a way of speaking where everything sort of ran together. It was like reading a book with no punctuation or paragraph breaks. He would slam two different stories together, and it was on me to realize that he'd changed subjects.

Thankfully, he just needed me to make occasional noises of agreement or sometimes ask a question to prod him along.

The moment the puzzle was done at last, we threw our hands up in the air and cheered. For a time, I forgot about my pain and frustration on Ronnie's behalf and just enjoyed our time together. Even if his life hadn't worked out how we'd all thought it would, Ronnie was still happy. He was still alive and enjoying the things around him. He had friends in the hospital. Nurses and doctors he cared about. I needed to stop being so brokenhearted for him and embrace his life the way it was.

"Byron, when is Dad gonna come take me fishing again?" Ronnie suddenly inquired, demolishing the positive thoughts I'd cobbled together.

A knot formed in my throat, and my brain scrambled for something to say. Our father had died of a heart attack more than five years ago. He'd been living at home with my parents at the time. He knew Dad was dead, but for some reason, it seemed to slip away from him constantly. Not that I could blame him. Dad had been a lot of the glue that held our family together. He was the one who'd kept my mother's drinking under control and had corralled Ronnie while I was attending undergraduate and then graduate school. Dad had kept us feeling like a family.

Oddly enough, he almost never asked about our mother. As if he'd swapped in his mind which of them had passed away.

“I don’t know,” I forced out while desperately holding on to my smile. “I’ll have to talk to him about it.” My voice cracked, but I didn’t think he noticed. “Have you drawn anything new in art class?”

“Yes! Come see!” Ronnie jumped to his feet and pulled me along with him.

“Wait, we need to clean up the puzzle first.”

“Did you take a picture of it? You have to take a picture on your phone.”

It was our tradition. I always took a picture of the finished puzzle with my phone, which was why I now had over a hundred pictures of this same puzzle on my phone. I’d tried to take some with Ronnie in the frame, but he always demanded that I erase those. The picture could be only the puzzle.

Once it was taken, Ronnie pulled my phone close so he could double-check it. From there, I showed him some new filters that changed his face or put bunny ears on our heads. We passed a solid hour that way, laughing and staring at the little screen on my phone.

When the nurses called lunchtime, I said my good-byes. It was always easier to leave then because he had the distraction of food. A planned activity always followed lunch, helped him forget that I’d left for the day. We hugged, and he tried to crack another rib.

I stood alone, watching as Ronnie walked with a nurse, excitedly chatting her up about how he’d had floppy dog ears in a picture on my phone. The world had a bittersweet sharpness to it now, as I desperately clung to the reminder that he was happy. That was all that mattered. Ronnie was happy.

Except I needed to move him from Holy Mother, because Ronnie wasn’t always



happy and he was a strain on their system. Ronnie was comfortable here, and the staff loved him. They took great care of him, but the extra time and care needed to handle him meant time they were spending away from other patients who needed their attention.

Giving Hope Long-Term Care Facility was fifty miles down the road, and they could more than manage Ronnie's needs without the strain. Dr. Willard had suggested it more than once, and I trusted his opinion. The best part was that he could still be part of Ronnie's care team, since he worked at both locations.

After sucking in a deep breath, I steeled myself for the long walk to my car. The tears that I'd held back were kind enough to wait until I was sitting in the driver's seat. Seeing Ronnie still hurt. I wanted the best for him. I wanted him to have the life he'd dreamed about. The football star with the hot girlfriend. He'd had plans to attend a technical school after he graduated high school. He'd still been deciding between being an auto mechanic and an electrician when he was in that accident. Maybe he wouldn't have been a billionaire, but he would have had a damn good life.

If not for that stupid accident...

With a shuddering breath, I roughly wiped away my ridiculous tears. Ronnie didn't need my tears or someone feeling bad for him. He needed someone to look out for his best interests, someone to make sure he could live the best life possible. That was my fucking job.

And thanks to my bargain with Sebastian, I had three years banked for Ronnie at Giving Hope. Maybe I could talk to Sebastian about getting an advance on that first year. There was a lot of planning to be done, but if we started now, we could get Ronnie moved to his new home and improved care within the next month.

Yes, this was a good first step.

## SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

Monday arrived far too quickly. I never got the chance to see Byron again during the weekend. He'd texted me once in the early evening on Saturday to say that he'd arrived home from visiting his family and that he was going to bed. But he'd at least ended the day with three amazing words.

I miss you.

On Sunday, I had a few of my own obligations to deal with—namely visiting with my sister and her family. It was good to see my niece, but I couldn't deny that I very much wanted to escape to see Byron.

But in the blink of an eye, the weekend was over, and I was back to being the boss. Normally, that wasn't a bad thing. I enjoyed being the CEO of Courtland Enterprises, leading us to bigger and better things. The problem was that I couldn't be the boss and Byron's boyfriend. Or rather, I couldn't be his boss and his boyfriend.

Things appeared to be progressing in the right direction. It wasn't just me initiating things. He'd taken the time to text me first on Sunday, sending along some playful, non-work-related memes. Maybe Declan was right in that I needed to start taking steps to protect Byron in the event we decided that dating and being in an actual relationship was in the cards for us.

Unfortunately, that next step was preparing for him to no longer be my assistant, which I dreaded both personally and professionally. He was my rock. He was the one who steadied me on those crazy, frantic days. Byron was the one who made me smile first thing in the morning, and it wasn't just because I was hopelessly infatuated with him.

Not to mention, the man was a mind reader. He always seemed to know what I wanted before I asked for it. He was fast, efficient, and professional. As far as I knew, all the managers and executives loved him. He'd be a rock star no matter where in the company he ended up.

“You don’t have any managers scheduled for a lunch meeting. Is there anyone you’d like me to reach out to and see if they’re available?” Byron’s gentle but firm voice broke through my mental meandering, pulling me back to what we were doing.

My schedule. Meetings. Planning.

“Can’t I have you for lunch?”

Byron narrowed his eyes at me over the edge of his tablet in a look that was half warning and half hunger, like he couldn’t decide whether to punish or devour me. I was happy to enjoy either option. “I need to run a brief errand during my lunch hour today. If you don’t want to have a specific lunch meeting, is there something you’d like me to have delivered today?”

I waved my hand, my gaze wandering to my calendar on one screen. “Nah. I’ll figure it out later.”

“You have a lengthy break following lunch, and I’ve marked that as time to review the Paris contracts.”

“Already done. I have one more thing to check; then they’ll be ready to be turned in to legal.”

“The leisure division’s cost-cutting plan?”

I nodded. “Yes, that’ll be this afternoon, along with the Canadian marketing plan for the new winter gear.”

“Got it.” Byron stood, tucking his tablet under his arm. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll go finish my final preparations for this morning’s meetings and?”

“Actually, I was thinking,” I said, as an idea formed. “I want Kaylan to accompany me to the meetings during the first half of my day and handle the note-taking.”

I glanced up to see Byron wobble and reach back as if to catch himself on the chair he’d risen from, but he remained standing. His eyes were wide, and new lines of strain snaked across his brow and bracketed his mouth.

“I’m sorry, sir. Is there a problem?”

“No problem.”

Byron swallowed hard, and I frowned. “But if I’ve done something to make you dissatisfied with my performance...”

“I didn’t say that. I think that it’s time we gave Kaylan some more experience in tackling other tasks. This will also give him a better understanding of the company. Besides, I’m sure you have plenty of other tasks that are demanding your attention. The break from meetings will be nice for you.”

Except Byron didn’t look grateful for the break. I couldn’t quite explain what his mood was. Strangled? Confused? That had to be it. Byron wasn’t a fan of changing the schedule, but Kaylan needed more experience. Especially if he was going to one day replace Byron as my assistant. There was no time like the present to get that training in.

“Of-of course, I...I will talk to him?—”

“Wait a second.” I held up my hand, cutting him off. I didn’t want to, but I also didn’t want to brush this under the rug. Something was wrong. Was it that I was including Kaylan, or was there something else that was bothering him? “Talk to me. You have a problem with this, but I don’t understand. We talked about it, right? If we’re going to

date, you'll need to move to another position within the company. I'm still going to need an assistant. Kaylan would be the best choice to slide into that role, right?"

Byron's eyes became so wide while his pale cheeks turned pink. "That's what you're thinking?" he demanded in a harsh whisper.

"Yes, what were you thinking?"

"That you were mad at me. That you were disappointed in my work and wanted Kaylan to handle it because you had more confidence in his work."

My mouth just hung open. The thought had never crossed my mind. "Never. The quality of your work has never wavered. And if it did, I'd talk to you about it. I wouldn't just replace you."

Byron scrubbed a hand across his face before just staring down at his tablet. "I'm sorry, sir. I-I don't know what's come over me."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:21 am*

“Byron,” I murmured and then pulled the Friend Egg out of my pocket. As I held it up to him, he shot me a dark look, but I wasn’t deterred. “Seriously, are you okay?”

“You can’t keep pulling that out at work,” he growled.

I wagged my eyebrows at him. “It’s better than me pulling out other things.”

Byron hissed and glanced across the room at the open door. “Sebastian, behave yourself. You promised.”

“Fine, but are you okay?” I repeated, holding the egg in front of me. I wasn’t putting it away until I got a proper answer.

He huffed. “I’m fine. Just...distracted, I think. It was a hectic weekend.”

That wasn’t a great answer, but I knew there was no point in trying to pursue this in the office. Thankfully, we were supposed to have a dinner date tonight. I could get to the bottom of what had happened over the weekend and try to help him feel better.

“Okay, we’ll talk later,” I murmured, wondering if we could chat prior to lunch even as I stuffed the egg into my pocket. I hadn’t expected to use it today, but it was a good thing I’d brought it.

Byron cleared his throat and turned his attention back to his tablet. “I’ll give Kaylan a heads-up about the meeting. Also, the agenda for the ten thirty meeting states that various departments will give brief proposals for new products. There was an idea that I wanted to present, if there was time.”

That was unexpected. Byron had never made a proposal before. I wasn't even sure how the other managers would take that. Would they think he'd get preferential treatment because he was my assistant?

"Is there a specific department or division you've been working with?"

"No, sir. This is an independent idea that stretches across several divisions."

"Send me the proposal. I'll review it. If I think it's good enough, I'll move it along to the final decision stage for discussion."

"Oh." That didn't sound like a good "Oh," but I wasn't sure how to explain that I was trying to save him some pain. He seemed so fragile from our other misunderstanding that I didn't want to stomp on his sensitive feelings. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance because Byron nodded once. "I'll go inform Kaylan that he needs to prepare for the meetings and what he needs to do."

My assistant turned sharply on his heel and left my office, but there was a sinking feeling in my stomach that things were still off between us.

My eyes burned, and my neck was stiff. After the meetings, there was endless report reading and making notes for suggestions. I was ready for it to be done. To head home?—

No! Dinner. I had dinner plans with Byron tonight. Date number four.

How could I have forgotten? It should have been the thing to keep me buzzing all day, but it had slipped my mind. Byron hadn't been there to remind me about it, though. In fact, I'd barely seen him all day.

Kaylan and I shuffled to the top floor after the morning meetings to find that Byron



had already left for his lunch-break errand. I had only a brief message waiting to remind me to eat, along with his proposal. When I returned from my lunch, he was back at his desk, but on the phone with someone and I couldn't interrupt him. That seemed to go on for the rest of the day, with me constantly missing him.

But the day was finished, and we could catch up during a quiet dinner.

As I was getting the chance to shut down my computer for the night, there was a knock on my door. Byron stepped in, looking as tired as I felt with a new stack of contracts for me to review.

"Legal department dropped these off. I've marked the places where the changes were made per your instructions," Byron announced as he brought over the papers and sat them on the edge of my desk.

"Thank you." The smile that had been missing from my lips returned as I watched him. "I feel like I haven't seen you all day."

"It's been a busy day, sir."

"Kaylan did fantastic this morning. You've done a great job training him."

The little wrinkle between his brows smoothed. "I'm pleased to hear that you're happy with his performance, but I can't take credit. Kaylan is very intelligent and eager to learn everything he can about Courtland Enterprises."

"We're lucky to have him. Are you done for the day? Ready for dinner?"

Byron stared at me, and I got the impression that he'd forgotten we had a dinner date planned. His eyelids widened a heartbeat later, and I swore I could almost hear the memory clicking in his brain.

“Um...I have a few things left I need to see to before I can leave for the evening. Did...did you have a chance to review my proposal this afternoon?”

I sat back in my chair and spun it toward my monitor, as I turned over the best way to give him my thoughts. Straightforward had to be the best way. This was work, and I'd always been honest with Byron.

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“I don’t think it’s the best option,” I stated, looking him dead in the eye. A muscle in Byron’s jaw ticked, and the silence stretched between us for several seconds until Byron nodded once.

“Could you please elaborate on where my proposal falls short?” he asked, and there was no missing the tightness in his voice.

“It’s not the direction that we want to go. While I think your proposal has some merits, I don’t believe that it’s going to provide the results we need in order to salvage the company without us needing to institute a hiring freeze and layoffs.” I held out my open hands to Byron, keeping my tone firm but gentle. “We need to hit a home run. Base hits won’t cut it.”

“But base hits are easier to get than a home run. If you put together enough base hits, you can still score. That’s how the game is won. With your proposal, it’s an all-or-nothing endeavor that possesses much higher risks for everyone. My way offers lower risks.”

“Your proposal also comes with lower reward potential,” I replied.

“It doesn’t have to. If we mobilize quickly to capitalize on an obvious winner, the rewards stand to be as great as with your home run.”

“No. I appreciate your proposal, but I don’t believe it will work.”

Something flashed in Byron’s eyes, like the world was crashing down and it was all my fault. I didn’t know what to do. As his boyfriend, I wanted to fix everything, but

as his boss, I couldn't waver on this. Right?

"Excuse me, sir," he said in a rough voice. "Thank you for your time."

"Byron..."

"If you don't mind, I need to cancel our plans this evening. I'm not feeling too well. I'll be leaving for the night."

With my heart in my throat, I jumped out of my seat and came around my desk, darting in front of him to block his path to the door. Pinching the marble egg between two fingers, I held it in front of his face. "Please, talk to me. You've been off all day. I just want to understand so I can help."

Byron stared at the egg and released a long, low sigh. His shoulders slumped ever farther. "I appreciate what you're trying to do. The egg can remind me to treat you as a friend, but it can't force me to talk about things I don't wish to discuss. Some things I just need to work out on my own."

He stepped past me and continued to the door, but he didn't get more than a step before he stopped again. I looked past him to see Declan standing in the opening watching us.

"Forgive me, Mr. Foster. Is there anything I can get you?" Byron asked, snapping into perfect assistant mode.

"No, thank you. I just needed to talk to Sebastian."

Byron nodded. "Have a good evening." He slipped past Declan and closed the door behind my friend.

The moment we were alone, Declan turned his glare full force onto me. “What did you do?”

“What the hell! Why do you assume I did something? I haven’t done anything.” At least, I didn’t think I’d done anything to him. Fuck, I hope I hadn’t. “This has nothing to do with us dating,” I added, because I was sure it was exactly what he was thinking.

Declan stood in front of me, his arms folded over his chest as he continued to glare. “What’s wrong?”

“We had a small misunderstanding this morning when I chose to have Kaylan in the meetings instead of him, but I explained it was to train Kaylan ahead of moving Byron to another position because we’re dating. He said he understood, but he’s been distracted. I’m guessing something happened this past weekend that he’s not telling me about.”

“That’s it?”

I shrugged one shoulder as I walked to my desk and dropped into his chair. “I turned down his proposal.”

“The proposal about focusing on mini blockbuster, limited edition products for each of our divisions?” Declan inquired.

That question jolted me upright in my chair. “He showed it to you?” Byron had made it sound like he’d not showed any of the other members of the executive team.

“We discussed it. He came to me to get some specific financial numbers to make sure his idea was workable to match our needs.”

“And it’s not,” I stated, relaxing again.

“It is, but it wouldn’t be easy. There are risks.”

“Exactly!” I said, waving a hand at Declan. I’d known my CFO would back me on this. Declan was all logic and common sense.

“However, there are fewer risks involved than with your plan.”

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I lunged forward in my chair, almost coming out of my seat as I shrieked, “What?”

Declan shrugged and raised a hand. “Your plan of putting everything on a single home-run product comes with inherent problems. If it bombs, if we misread the market, we’re in a worse position than we are in now. If it wins, we win big, which will help carry us comfortably into the new year.”

My friend then lifted his other hand, holding it next to the other like a set of scales. “By contrast, Byron’s plan hinges on modifications to existing, successful products. It’s a lower-cost investment for the company. If his plan fails, we don’t have the cushion to carry us into the new year, but we will still finish in a better position than we are in now. If his plan wins, it can be easily expanded, and our marketing departments can mobilize fast enough to turn it into a home run.”

“So, you agree with him?”

My friend glared at me, his frown deepening. “I didn’t say that.”

I tried not to snarl at my oldest friend. Sometimes getting him to spit out what he was thinking was exhausting. Byron already wasn’t talking to me. Declan’s reticence was not helping.

“Two things. First, maybe part of the reason Byron came up with the proposal was to prove that he is capable of holding a more important position in the company than just being your executive assistant. You do recall that he has a master’s degree, correct? You’re talking about moving him to another department. Even as my assistant, it’s something of a demotion compared to working for the CEO, and all

because he made the mistake of dating you.”

“Fuck.” I exhaled. That had never crossed my mind. In truth, the best option would be for Byron to leave Courtland and find another position somewhere else, but I didn’t want to force him out. If I were a good, thoughtful boyfriend, though, I’d be helping him to make that transition if it was what he wanted.

“Second,” Declan continued, as if he hadn’t just rocked my poor little world. “As his boyfriend, you should have left with him, taken him home, and done things to make sure he felt cared for and safe until he was willing to tell you what was wrong. Then you would solve the problem together instead of leaving him to deal with it alone.”

I stared at Declan, utterly speechless, my brain reduced to white noise. “How the hell do you know that? You know nothing about relationships. You couldn’t date your way out of a paper bag.”

“I learned it from you. You’re the one who said everyone wants to be taken care of. Even grumpy assholes like Pierce. And Byron isn’t half as grumpy as Pierce can be.”

He was right. Very, very right.

When Byron had canceled our dinner date, I should have followed him home and offered to take care of him. At the very least, grabbed a fucking bucket of fried chicken and offered to cuddle him until he felt better.

I needed to fix this.

As I jumped to my feet, I snagged my phone, wallet, and keys. “Whatever brought you here, send it in an email or tell Kaylan to make you my first meeting of the day. I need to go talk to Byron now.”



“Fine. Just try to be less of an idiot.”

Yes, that was the goal.

14

BYRON GRAHAM

Fucking jackass.

I sat on the floor of my apartment, my back against the mini fridge, glaring at the floor. Upon returning home, I'd changed out of my suit, thrown on my most comfortable clothes, and dropped to the ground, not knowing what to do with myself next. I was a fucking jackass.

What a horrible day!

But that was to be expected after a shit weekend. The visit with Ronnie hadn't been bad, but it had hit home that I needed to figure out something for his situation. I was reluctant to pull him out of Holy Mother because I didn't want to cause him any kind of distress, but it was what he needed. Giving Hope Long-Term Care Facility could provide him with the kind of care and attention he needed to live his best life possible.

After a lackluster visit with my mother on Saturday, I'd passed that night and all day Sunday working through all the information Sebastian's people had gathered regarding government grants and other kinds of financial support.

Of course, I'd already banked three years of care thanks to Sebastian, and we'd had another date scheduled for tonight, which would have given me four years, but I couldn't go through with it. Not tonight. My head was a mess, and my heart ached.

How could I go out on a date with Sebastian when I couldn't give him the full attention that he deserved?

Some wicked part of my brain argued that I should have sucked it up and done it for Ronnie.

No. That was wrong. I wasn't using Sebastian for his money, and I wasn't selling myself for my brother. We hadn't hit that level of desperation yet.

But I'd started crunching numbers over the weekend, assuming that Sebastian did only give me enough money for three years. I'd made notes on how I could use it for my brother, stretching every fucking penny until they nearly snapped like a rubber band. Then I made notes on the ways I could spend my money that I wasn't using on Ronnie to help my mother. I looked into nurses who would visit her house a few times a week, rehab programs, and assisted living facilities.

The sad part was that no matter how I worked it, my dollars didn't stretch quite far enough. There was never any wiggle room for an emergency, such as my car breaking down or needing to buy a new laptop. God help me if something happened that required me to go into the hospital.

The truth was that as well as Sebastian paid me to be his assistant, I couldn't stay in that position. I needed to make more money. Which made sense because I hadn't gotten a master's degree to be an executive assistant. I dreamed of managing my own department, and eventually, my own company.

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Leaving Courtland Enterprises would be a good thing, because I wouldn't have to worry about breaking the rules by dating Sebastian. If I could find a good job as a middle manager at another firm, I'd make more money and be able to date the very sexy Sebastian Courtland publicly.

I would miss him, though. Our days together at Courtland Enterprises were some of the greatest of my life.

But just as I'd been turning my brain to focus on the next stage of my career, Sebastian had dropped the bomb on my head that my proposal to help save the company wasn't any good. Clearly, I was fooling myself. There was no way I could sell myself as a manager for any company. My ideas weren't good enough. I didn't have enough experience managing anyone. Yes, I'd hired, trained, and managed Kaylan, but we were a department of fucking two. Big deal.

Between my financial frustrations and my failure with the proposal, I felt like I was swimming in an endless black sea. Right now, I was paddling desperately simply to keep my head above water, but I wasn't making any headway. There was no getting ahead. If I were lucky, I'd be able to improve my brother's and my mother's lots in life, but it depended on me never making a mistake, never having something bad happen.

Regardless of my frustrating situation, I shouldn't have bailed on Sebastian like that with such a lame excuse. I should have talked to him, explained how I was feeling overwhelmed. And as an employee, I should have asked his advice on how to be a stronger employee. Maybe how I could have improved my proposal.

The first step was to apologize.

That was what a mature adult did. It didn't matter if Sebastian decided that dating me was more hassle than it was worth.

Swearing at myself, I shoved to my feet and hurried to the closet, where I grabbed a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that didn't make me look like a bum off the streets. I'd go to the office first to see if he was still there. Sebastian often worked late, particularly if he didn't have other plans. If he wasn't at the office, I'd go to his house. Calling wasn't an option. I'd insulted him to his face. The least he deserved was an in-person apology.

I snagged my wallet, phone, keys, and rushed to the stairs. In my mind, I was already trying to work out what I would say as I jogged to my car. It was nearly seven. Rush-hour traffic would be mostly finished by now. It wouldn't take me more than twenty minutes to get downtown.

"Byron?"

Sebastian's voice jerked me to a stumbling stop. I twisted to see him getting out of his car. Carl was standing by the rear door, holding it open for his boss. Sebastian was missing his suit jacket and tie. His hair was messy, as if he'd been running his fingers through it and pulling on it, something I'd seen him do plenty of times when he was frustrated. In one hand was a plastic bag with an unmistakable bucket of fried chicken, and in his other hand was a bottle of wine.

"What are you doing here?" Those weren't the first words I'd wanted to say to him, but I was so surprised to see him.

"I was coming up to apologize to you." His expression was so pained, I swore my heart was breaking just looking at him. I'd done that to him. I'd hurt him. This

needed to be fixed right now.

“Why do you need to apologize? No, I’m the one who needs to apologize.” I shook my head as I changed direction and hurried to him. This was all fucked up. None of my words were coming out right. “I mean, I was heading to the office to apologize to you.”

As I reached Sebastian, the hand holding the wine shot out and his arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me in so that I bumped against his chest. He set the chicken on the ground and used his now-free hand to cup my cheek, tipping my head up toward his face as my breath caught in my throat. Then he stole it away completely as he kissed me. But that was every kiss I shared with Sebastian—soul-stirring and all-encompassing. It took less than a heartbeat for me to hand myself over to him completely, my relief almost choking me as I placed my arms behind his neck, pulling him even closer.

He hadn’t given up on me.

The warm scent of his cologne drifted around me. His powerful arms fought off the last of the insecurity twisting in my gut, reassuring me that everything was going to be okay.

Except someone was clearing their throat behind us.

I broke off the kiss and took the hand holding my cheek before scooping up the bag of chicken and sides. I peeked past Sebastian’s shoulder at Carl, who was still standing beside the car. “Go home. I’ll bring him back when I’m done.”

Carl’s lips twitched in a barely suppressed smile, but he said nothing as he closed the door and walked to the driver’s side.

“Really?” Sebastian asked, drawing my attention to him.

“You’re coming inside with me. We need to talk.”

His smirk disappeared, and I pulled him to the apartment building. We walked silently up to my place, some butterflies returning to my stomach, but not as big as the condors that had lived there minutes ago.

“Byron—” Sebastian stated as soon as I had the door closed.

“No, please. Let me start.” Squeezing the hand I was still holding, I brought it up to my lips, kissing his knuckles while gazing into his worried brown eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I was so flighty, useless, and a general pain in the ass all day. And I’m sorry for bailing on our date tonight and not giving you even a basic explanation as to why. All day, I felt like I was short with you, because I was just...”

“Hurting,” he finished for me.

“Yes, but that’s not an excuse. My problems don’t give me the right to treat you poorly.”

“No, I understand,” Sebastian said, brushing his lips across mine in another soft, sweet kiss. He led me to my futon and put the food and wine on the floor. The poor thing creaked under our combined weight as we sat, and I sent up a silent prayer for it to not collapse. My hands held in his, Sebastian stared into my eyes, his gaze filled with worry. “I also failed you as a would-be boyfriend. I could tell something was off with you all day, and I did nothing about it. What I should have done was call a halt to everything and sat with you, giving you the time you needed to tell me what was bothering you.”

My heart squeezed at his words. “Darling, that’s sweet, but you can’t do that.”

“Of course I can.”

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His arrogance was so adorable. I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. “Sebastian, my boyfriend, can’t do that. My boss can, but it would be wrong and probably inappropriate.”

Despite trying to tell him no, the biggest grin spread across his beautiful face. “You just called me your boyfriend.”

I bit down on my wayward tongue, but there was no stopping the burning that was spreading across my face. “Shut up,” I mumbled.

“No, say it again.”

“No.”

Sebastian leaned in closer, pressing his nose into the side of my head. “Please, say it again.”

“Boyfriend,” I whispered.

The silly man holding me hummed and scooted even closer to the point of nearly pulling me into his lap. He wrapped his arms tight around my shoulders. “Boyfriend. You make that word sound like magic.”

“And you’re ridiculous.”

Sebastian straightened, his expression turning serious. “I am, but I’m also worried about you. Can you tell me what upset you so badly today?”



So I did. Everything. From the visit with Ronnie to ongoing money worries about his care and my mother's to my solution of finding a new job that had ultimately fizzled when I realized I didn't have the experience and knowledge I needed after getting my proposal shot down.

"First, I'll get my people working on getting the money for Ronnie's care settled in the next week."

"No, Sebastian—" I cut him off, but a stern look from my caring boyfriend had me stopping again.

"We agreed on a year of care for a date. This is date number four, so I already owe you a lot of money."

"This is not date number four!"

"Of course it is. I brought dinner, and we're going to watch a PBS documentary on my phone. This is totally a date."

Motherfucker. He had me there.

"I just want to set up all the money for Ronnie's care in a trust. If something were to happen to you—God forbid—this money will be protected from your mother or anyone else who might try to use it for something else."

That right there almost sent me into tears. Protecting Ronnie and his interests was all that mattered to me.

"And second, you can't let one minor stumble like that proposal derail your plans. If I wasn't a complete idiot where you're concerned, I would have seen earlier that you need to be prepared for a bigger role in the corporate world. You've got the brains

and the people skills. You're destined for big things, and keeping you pinned to my side is only holding you back."

"It is not! I've learned so many amazing things while I've been your assistant and tackled problems that I could never have expected."

"Besides..." Sebastian paused and released a soft sigh, "I might have been too rash in my judgment with your proposal. After you left, I had a long talk with Declan, and he's a big supporter of your idea."

My hands leaped to my mouth, and I struggled to breathe. "What?"

"That's why I handed it off to Declan and several of the other vice presidents to look over and give their opinion. I'm worried that I might not be giving it a fair shake, because I'm afraid of being biased in your favor. Declan supports your suggestion, but all he needed was to see the risk-reward ratio to make that decision. I want to get input from the others. Use these brilliant people and make them work for their paycheck."

My heart was already in my throat with every word he spoke, but the idea of the other vice presidents giving their thoughts was exciting.

"What if they say they like it? Would you actually put my proposal in action?"

Sebastian's smile became a little crooked as he nodded. "I would. I'd take a step away from my suggestion and put everything we've got behind your idea. It would have my full support."

I launched myself at Sebastian, tackling him against the futon and claiming his mouth for a brief kiss. "I promise to work extra hard. You won't have to worry about anything. I'll meet with all the department heads, handle all the big planning, get the

research done. It will?—”

Thankfully, the sexy man under me stopped my babbling with a kiss that curled my toes in my sneakers. Only when he'd turned me into a puddle of goo on top of him did he finally break off the kiss and grin at me.

“I know you'll put in the work, but even though you came up with the idea, if we do it, the plan is no longer yours. It belongs to the entire company. It's not on your shoulders alone to make it succeed.”

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I nodded, my heart soaring at his faith in me. “I just don’t want to let you down.”

Sebastian touched my cheek, his eyes softening. I couldn’t remember anyone ever looking at me like that. “Never. You could never do that.”

This man. I’d never fucking stood a chance.

I kissed Sebastian like my life depended on it, and he immediately responded, pulling me in tight. Strong hands moved along my body, molding me against him while our tongues slid and tangled together. Heat rushed through my veins, melting away all my common sense and fear. Nothing else mattered but feeling him close.

At least, until his foot bumped into the bottle of wine, knocking it over with a cringe-worthy thud. Thankfully, it didn’t break. Almost growling, I pulled away from Sebastian and snatched up our dinner. I carried it quickly into the kitchen and put the food and wine on the counter. That would be for later. Right now, I had other plans.

As I turned back to Sebastian, I whipped my T-shirt off and tossed it on the floor.

“Not in the mood for dinner, huh?” Sebastian teased.

“No, I’m hungry for something else.”

My lover’s grin turned so very wicked as he spread his legs wide and patted his thigh. “You can have anything you want.”

“Oh, I plan to.” I took another step toward him but stopped suddenly. Shit! Almost

forgot something important. I darted into the bathroom and jerked open the medicine cabinet behind the mirror. There I grabbed a new bottle of lube and a condom. Sucking his cock was nice, but I needed to feel him inside me.

I sprinted into the living room and stepped between Sebastian's legs. As I kneeled, I tossed my new treasures onto the cushion next to him.

Sebastian raised his hand to his mouth and rubbed his thumb across his bottom lip. "You look like a man with a plan."

"I always have a plan when it comes to seducing you." I placed my hands on Sebastian's knees and slid my palms up his legs, wringing a long, low grunt out of him. The front of his pants had begun to tent as his hard cock pushed against his briefs.

"You're the only one who can seduce me with a look. I'm already yours."

"Mine," I murmured. I liked the sound of that. Sebastian Courtland was mine. All that power, strength, beauty, and kindness were mine. Always mine. After what felt like a lifetime of always putting other people first, I finally had something that belonged to me alone. And he was the greatest treasure ever.

As I reached his hips, I shifted directions to cup his cock through his pants with one hand while unbuckling his belt with the other.

Sebastian hissed, his hips lifting from the seat to press his dick into my hand. "Fuck. I love your touch."

"Just wait until I suck you," I purred.

With one hand on the nape of my neck, Sebastian pulled me forward to capture my

mouth in a blistering kiss that stole my breath away. Every time I kissed this man, my head would spin. Nothing had ever felt so hot and desperate. We couldn't get enough of each other. We were ravenous, starved for one another.

My fumbling fingers slipped inside his underwear, and I stroked his long, hard length while swallowing his shaky moan of pleasure.

That. I needed that.

I wanted him trembling and desperate. His aching cock in my hand, in my mouth, in my ass.

"Is that what you needed?" My swollen, wet lips brushed against his as I continued to stroke him slowly.

"More," he growled.

I smiled and pulled away slightly so I could see his face. "I'll suck it if you beg so pretty for me."

His eyes widened in surprise, but the fire in his gaze only burned hotter. The cock in my hand got even harder.

"Please." He exhaled, the thread of his voice trembling. "Please, Byron. Baby. Will you suck my dick? Please. I need it."

Fuck. I hadn't been sure he'd actually do it, but he did, and it was so damn hot.

"That's it. Good boy. You beg me and I'll give you anything you want."

"Suck it. Please, God, just for a second. I need...I need you..."

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I bent my head and took him in my mouth, pushing that leaking cock past my lips and sliding it across my tongue. A shout erupted from Sebastian and his entire body shivered.

I sucked him hard, bobbing on his dick, taking him deeper each time until he brushed the back of my throat. I held him there and swallowed, the muscles squeezing the spongy head, making him cry out again.

Cocksucking was not one of my favorite things, but I knew I was damn good at it. Plus, feeling Sebastian come apart under me was highly addictive.

A hand came to rest on the top of my head, his fingers lightly twisting in my hair while being careful not to put any pressure on me. I didn't feel trapped. Just wrapped in Sebastian's haze of ecstasy.

My cock was throbbing and leaking. I shoved one hand down to unbutton my pants and pushed them to my thighs. Sebastian must have noticed, because he groaned and shifted slightly. One hand remained on my head while the other slid along my spine, the tips of his fingers caressing the curve of my ass.

"Byron, let me fuck you," Sebastian begged, turning the remains of my brains to complete mush. "I'll fuck you so good."

Yeah, this teasing, begging game was over. I needed to be filled before I died.

I pulled my mouth off his dick but continued to stroke him with my fist. "Take off your shirt."

Sebastian grabbed the edges, looking like he meant to rip it off.

“Wait!” I shouted. “Rip a seam, lose a single button, and I won’t let you fuck me. I’ll make you watch as I fuck myself with a dildo and I won’t let you touch yourself,” I threatened, not believing for a second that I’d be able to go through with it.

Sebastian’s hand clamped on my wrist suddenly, stopping me from stroking him. He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth as if he were struggling to regain control.

“Um...” He swallowed hard. “Could we circle back to that idea someday? The dildo part.” His voice was so low and rough, it was practically a growl. He was turned-on, and I was wondering what it would be like to be watched in a moment like that.

Later! Later!

I wanted the real thing now.

“Shirt! Condom!” I snapped, pulling free of his hold. I jumped to my feet, snatched up the condom, and threw it at his chest. With him busy, I lowered my pants and underwear to the floor. Unfortunately, I forgot about my damn shoes, forcing me to do a wiggling dance to get everything off without falling over on my damn face. Graceful, I was not. At least Sebastian didn’t seem to notice as he lost his shirt, pushed his pants to his thighs, and fought with the condom wrapper.

Naked and horny, I grabbed the lube and squeezed some onto my fingers. I braced my free hand on Sebastian’s shoulder while I shoved two slick fingers into my hole. The burn and stretch helped to clear my head, but not much as my gaze skimmed Sebastian’s bare chest to where he was rolling the condom down his rock hard dick. So fucking sexy.



The second it was in place, I removed my fingers and put my knees on either side of his hips. The fat head of his cock brushed my slick hole, teasing us both. I lowered myself, hanging on to the back of the futon that noisily creaked with every movement. We cried out in molten hot bliss as he filled me inch by inch. So full at last. He was so hot and thick inside of me, and I was finally so damn full.

But it wasn't enough.

I rose and dropped, taking him again and again in low, slow strokes. I rolled my hips with each rise, rubbing my aching cock on his incredible stomach.

Everything was so fucking amazing. His flushed face and blown pupils watching me with a rapt, hungry gaze. Each broken pant accompanied by a slap of damp flesh and the creak of the futon's aging frame. My cock rubbing against him while his massive dick stretched and filled my ass. The thick scent of sweat and sex building between us.

Oh God, I was so close and I didn't want it to end.

"Harder! Fuck! Bastian, fuck me harder!" I shouted, giving up all semblance of control. I just needed to come.

Sebastian grabbed my ass with his hands and took over, lifting me up and forcing me down hard as he began thrusting upward. The angle had shifted, and he slammed straight into my prostate on the first thrust. Stars exploded before my eyes and an electric current arced through my body. A scream ripped from my lips, and I came so fucking hard I forgot how to breathe. I couldn't even get my hand to stroke myself. My fingers had a death lock on the back of the futon and I could only rub my dick on Sebastian while I came in seemingly endless waves of bright, hot ecstasy.

When my brain started working again, my head was resting on Sebastian's shoulder,

and we were panting as if we'd finished a marathon.

“What happened?” I gasped.

“I’ve never come so hard in my life.”

“Thank fuck,” I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut. “Because I think I died there for a second. I wasn’t sure.”

“Don’t...die...”

I patted Sebastian’s shoulder because I’d run out of words.

Common sense said that I needed to get up. We were covered in sweat and cum. The full condom was going to make the mess worse if we didn’t move soon, but moving took too much energy and it felt so good to just be held in Sebastian’s arms.

“Byron?”

I hummed in response, still gathering the energy for words.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hate your futon. I’m buying you a new bed.”

“No,” I said with a weary laugh. “This is only our fourth date. It’s too early to buy me furniture.”

There was a long pause. He had no witty follow-up? No gentle cajoling?

“Baby, could you do me a favor?”

I kissed Sebastian’s shoulder, grinning at the endearment. “Sure.”

“I need to buy a new bed, but I have nowhere to put it. Can I store it at your place?”

He hadn’t even finished speaking when I almost fell over laughing. God, I was falling so damn hard for this sneaky man.

15

SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

“I’m having second thoughts,” Byron admitted in a low voice from where he sat next to me in the back seat of my town car as Carl drove us.

I slipped my hand under Byron's and threaded our fingers together before raising it to my lips. His palm was sweaty and his fingers tense as I brushed light kisses across his knuckles, trying to soothe away some of the tension humming through him. "Everything is going to be fine," I murmured between kisses.

We'd been dating for almost a month, but this was only our fifth date. Things had become too hectic during the week to even meet up for dinners, and we were often headed in different directions on the weekends. Sure, we could sneak takeout dinners in my office some nights, but I didn't want to count those as dates. Byron deserved better than that.

Today, I was trying to shake things up by adding something a little different to our routine. We were headed to help with a fund raiser for an LGBTQIA+ charity that just happened to be run by my mother. We were going to help with a good cause that was important to us, plus I was finally going to introduce him to my mother.

Byron knew my father, but he knew him as Chairman of Courtland Enterprises. Not as the father of Sebastian Courtland. I hoped to make that new introduction to my father after Byron was no longer my assistant.

"What if she doesn't like me?" Byron inquired.

"I don't see how that's possible at all." I leaned in close and nuzzled the side of his head, my lips brushing against the shell of his ear. "You're brilliant, funny, sweet, thoughtful, and sexy as hell."

"And you're biased as hell. Your mother won't have the same opinion. I'm more worried that she's going to think I'm some poor nobody gold digger trying to sink his claws into her sweet, innocent, rich son."

I jerked in my seat, my head flying back as a bark of laughter burst out of me.

“Sweet, innocent? You’re going to make my mom fall over laughing. Danielle Courtland knows exactly how debauched and crazy her only son is. She’s going to be more worried about how I’m likely to corrupt you. She might even try to save you from me by introducing you to other eligible men.”

“Wonderf—holy shit! Please tell me that’s not your parents’ house!” The panic was instantaneous as we zipped along the driveway to my parents’ enormous mansion. Halfway down the road, the trees that lined the lane retreated to reveal this sprawling building that had heavy Italian palazzo influences.

“Yep. I didn’t grow up here. My parents had it built while I was in college, so I never actually got to live here, which is a shame because their pool is even better than mine.”

Byron snorted. “Why do I feel like they’ve got a guest room here just for you?”

“Maybe. The rooms for their grandchild are insane. My parents are going full out, spoiling their grandkid.”

My sexy date stared at me, a small smile tugging at his lips. I didn’t know what it was about that grin, but I could feel the heat growing in my cheeks.

“What?”

“I’m trying to imagine you as an uncle. I bet you’re great at it.”

Now I wanted to turn around and take him straight to my house so we could spend the day cuddled in bed together. Why the hell did he have to be so cute?

“Taylor is only two, but completely adorable. My sister, Aggie, and her husband are trying for their second, and my parents are eager to have another baby in the family.”

Before we could continue the conversation, Carl stopped the car in front of the house and one of the many valets working the event whipped my door open. With one last reassuring smile at Byron, I slipped out of the car and into the bright, hot June sun. Byron stepped out right behind me, and I grabbed his hand.

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“Everything is going to be fine,” I repeated because the tension was back in his face. “We won’t stay long.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll be fine. When your mother asked you to help with this fund raiser, did she say what we’d be doing? Wait. You told her you’d be bringing a date, right?”

I pulled him along through the main entrance, grateful for the immediate icy embrace of the air conditioning. We walked down warm buttery-yellow hallways with elegant paintings on all the walls and vases overflowing with flowers. It was a gorgeous house, and I wanted to take Byron on a tour, but I figured it would be best to save that for another time. Today was about meeting my mom, doing a little good, and then getting the hell out of there.

“Yes, I told her I was bringing someone that I’d been seeing recently. She’s very excited to meet you. I don’t know what we’re doing. She usually wants me here because I’m handsome and I’m good at getting the old ladies who come to these things to write checks.”

Byron stared at me with one eyebrow raised. “And they know you’re gay, right?”

“I can be gay and handsome,” I gasped.

“You’re ridiculous,” Byron muttered with a shake of his head.

“He really is. Completely ridiculous and impossible to deal with.”

We turned at the intrusive voice to find my mother standing behind us with a smug

grin on her face.

“Hey, Mom.” I released Byron’s hand so I could give her a tight hug and press a kiss to her cheek. “Nice to hear how much I’m loved.”

“Don’t pout,” she teased, giving me a smack on the ass. “You’re not as cute as you think you are when you pout.”

I released her and moved to Byron’s side. “Mom, this is Byron Graham, my date. Byron, this is Danielle Courtland, my charming mother.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Mrs. Courtland,” Byron said, stepping forward to shake her hand.

“Oh, Byron. I like that name. So pretty. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Byron.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Just call me Danielle or Dani. We’re not so formal around here.”

“At least your mother didn’t name you after the crab from *The Little Mermaid*,” I whispered loudly to put that twinkle of laughter back into Byron’s eyes. It worked.

Mom hissed at me. “I did not. I think I named you after a character in a romance novel I was reading while pregnant with you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Naturally, my mother ignored me and walked straight to Byron. She gently took his hand and lifted it slightly so she could place her other hand in the crook of his arm before leading him down the hall. I was left to follow like the “good, obedient” son I



was.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Byron. My son has never introduced me to any of the men he’s dated in the past,” my mom explained, while I rolled my eyes.

“Probably because it wouldn’t have been appropriate to introduce you to any of my random hookups,” I muttered.

Byron shot me a quelling look over his shoulder, but I had to admit that it only egged me on. I loved driving my mom crazy with my antics, and flustering Byron was also high on my list of fun things.

“Now, I know my son can be something of a slut?—”

“Mom!” I cried out. “That’s not fair. You don’t know the details of my personal life.”

“But I don’t think you have to worry,” she continued, as if I weren’t even there. She patted Byron’s hand and smiled. “The fact that he brought you here shows that he’s quite serious about you.”

“I’m not worried. Sebastian knows that if he can’t be faithful to me, there’s no point in us dating. Besides, he’s been very thoughtful and attentive.”

My heart squeezed at Byron’s words. We’d never talked about exclusivity and dating. Byron could be dating multiple people right now and he’d have every right to it, but I knew I was the only person in his life. He was the only person I wanted. The rest of the world didn’t matter.

My mother continued to chat pleasantly with Byron. She wasn’t being oppressively nosy or even interrogating him like I’d expected. Her questions were a natural progression while she was more than happy to fill my date in on all the disasters and

embarrassing incidents that had filled my life through my childhood.

We were getting up to my precocious teen years when she brought us to a table set up on the shaded garden patio. A gentle breeze swept through the lush flower garden, causing the trees to sway slightly. A group of volunteers were filling small clear bags with a variety of rainbow-covered swag and pamphlets filled with information ranging from safe sex education to trans-friendly doctors to safe places for homeless LGBTQIA+ teens to go if they'd been kicked out of their homes.

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“Next weekend is the annual Pride parade downtown,” my mom explained. “We’re going to have a booth where we hand out these packets and bottles of water.”

“That’s wonderful,” Byron said.

“If you want to give them a hand, I’m going to steal my son for a moment. I need him to carry something heavy for me. I promise to return him shortly.”

Byron nodded and slipped into a folding chair at the table. The other volunteers happily greeted him and helped him get set up to stuff bags, seeming oblivious to the dark looks my mother was directing at me behind his back.

Great. I’d been there for less than ten minutes, and I was in trouble.

But I held on to my smile in case Byron glanced over his shoulder at me. I didn’t want him to worry. Not when he was beginning to relax.

I followed my mother into the house and didn’t even try to say a word until she stopped in one of the empty parlors and closed the door. The happy façade fell away in the blink of an eye.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her glare sharpening to a knife’s edge, ready to cut me to ribbons if I lied.

“What are you talking about?”

“Are you really dating him? Or is this just a joke?”

“What? Yes, Byron and I are actually dating. It’s not a joke.”

Her expression clouded, and she shook her head slightly. “Did he quit?”

“Quit what?” Talking to my mother wasn’t usually so confusing, but she wasn’t giving me enough information to understand what she was going on about.

“I thought he was your assistant.”

Oh. Fuck.

She knew. Byron had specifically stated that he’d never met my mother. Plus, she almost never came into the office. My father stopped in the office four times a year since he’d mostly retired. As a result, my mother came in less frequently than that. When had she seen him? The only reason I’d felt safe bringing Byron to this event was due to the fact that my father was in New York and wouldn’t be back until Tuesday.

“Sebastian! What are you thinking?” She smacked my arm. “He’s your direct subordinate. You know better than to think with your dick!” She continued to smack my arm with each sentence, forcing me to at last dart away from her.

“I’m not thinking with my dick,” I hissed, trying to keep my voice low in the event someone passed by the room.

“Well, you’re not using your brain about this. Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you could get into if people find out? And what about him? If this gets out, he will be fired immediately. There’s no way past it. How do you know he’s not going to turn around and sue you for harassment?”

“Mom!” I snapped. “Byron would never do that.” What little amusement floated

through me vaporized the second she said something so hideous about Byron.

“How do you know?”

“I know Byron. He wouldn’t.”

She narrowed her eyes and folded her arms over her chest. Something in her expression chilled me to the bone, and I knew I wasn’t going to like what came out of her mouth next.

“Thomas. Cook.”

Each syllable she spoke was like a bullet shot into my chest. I flinched at the sound of his name and even curled inward.

Somehow, I’d pushed him to the back of my mind. Thank God. Thomas Cook was my greatest mistake and greatest regret in life. He’d nearly destroyed me and my family. I’d met the bastard my freshman year in college before I’d started running with Rome and Pierce. He was a senior, and I had been completely enamored with him. He’d seemed older, wiser, and more experienced with everything.

And somehow, he’d convinced me that I’d needed to just trust him with every aspect of my life. Why wouldn’t I? At the time, he was older and smarter. He’d understood everything better than some idiot eighteen-year-old. It wasn’t just that he’d made decisions for all the minor parts of my life. He’d also needed money constantly, and I’d been happy to give it, because when he’d been happy, my life had just gone better. Of course, this had all happened while my parents were having their own troubles, so he’d given me a sense of safety and love when my family had stood on the cusp of falling apart.

We’d dated for only six months, but in the blink of an eye, he’d maxed out my credit

cards and drained my bank account. Declan had tried to talk sense into me, but I'd refused to listen. He'd gone to my family and told them what was happening. They'd also tried to talk sense into me, but I'd turned on them too.

The moment my parents had threatened to cut me off so Thomas would have no access to my family's money, Thomas then attempted to manipulate and threaten me into stealing from my family. It was a sad wake-up call that had taken years for me to recover from. I was just lucky that my parents and Declan hadn't given up on me completely.

It had taken me years to recover from the deep wounds Thomas had created with his manipulation, gaslighting, and betrayal. I'd given up on relationships and turned my back on the idea of romance. Through college and well into my twenties, I'd slept around...a lot. Honestly, it wasn't until I met Byron that I'd wanted something more. Byron was too precious, too wonderful to just use for a one-night stand.

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“Stop!” I barked so she couldn’t continue. “Yes, I know up close and very personally what a manipulative gold digger looks like, and Bryon Graham is not it. The idea of anyone thinking that about Byron makes me sick to my stomach. If you don’t trust my judgment, call Declan right now. He knows Byron. He will vouch for him.”

Thomas Cook was a very ugly part of our past and something I didn’t ever want any of us to go through again, but I would go to war with anyone who dared to put Byron in the same class as that monster.

My mother continued to frown at me. She opened her mouth, but I interrupted her.

“Stop! Don’t say another word, or I swear I’ll cut you out of my life.”

“Sebastian! Don’t be ridiculous.” She made another dismissive noise but paused when I refused to budge. She held my gaze until some of the derisiveness finally faded from her expression.

“Mom, I love him. I plan to do everything in my power to convince him to spend the rest of his life with me. If Byron wakes up one day and decides he wants my entire fortune, he can have it. All I want is him.”

“Oh, my sweet baby.” She sighed and walked over to me. She rubbed the spot on my arm she’d hit repeatedly. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Byron won’t hurt me. Not intentionally. But he’s got way more to lose than me, so we’re taking it slowly.”

She still looked skeptical. “Who hit on who?”

“I was the instigator from the start. He’s fought me and raised objections the entire way. I’ve worn him down.”

“Yes, that sounds like you. I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse.”

With a smirk, I wrapped my arms around my mom’s shoulders and pulled her in for a hug. “I want you to give him a chance. The sweet guy you spent the last ten minutes chatting with is who he really is, and I think you’re going to like him.”

“Oh, I know I’m going to like him.” She paused and looked up at me. “Declan approves of him?”

It was a struggle not to clench my teeth and growl at her, but I got it. Declan wasn’t the type to get swept away by his emotions. Unlike me.

“Yes, Declan approves of him. He thinks Byron is incredibly smart, efficient, honest, and loyal.”

My sweet, loving mother huffed. “Then he’s definitely too good for you.”

“Whatever. So long as you learn to like him, because a year from now, I plan to make him your new son-in-law.”

Mom pushed away from me so she could meet my gaze. “And how long have you been dating?”

“This is our fifth date, but we’ve known each other for three years.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a groan. “You exhaust me, child.”



“Whatever. Dad brags he knew he was going to propose to you by the third date.”

“Yes, and we were young, poor, and stupid. Right now, you can claim only one of those things.”

“Thanks, Mom. Can you give him a fair shot? Be nice?”

“Yes, yes. Of course. I’m sure he’s a wonderful boy.” She waved me off as she stepped out of my arms, but her stern expression returned a second later. “But I want you to promise that you’ll figure something out about the job. Move him to an entirely different division. Better yet, help him get a new job outside of Courtland Enterprises. Now.”

“I don’t want to force him out of the company. He likes working for Courtland. I have a plan. Don’t worry. I want to go slowly. Otherwise, I risk scaring him off completely.”

“Now, Sebastian. None of your usual feet dragging. I won’t tell your father...yet. But it’s coming. He needs to know you’re putting all of Courtland Enterprises in danger.”

“I’m not. I’ve got everything under control.”

She didn’t look convinced, but I wasn’t worried. My hope was that by the end of July, Byron would be working under Declan and dating me openly. Another option would be to see if Justine was serious about taking him to her department. She answered directly to the chairman, rather than me. That would put even more distance between Byron and me. This was the best I could do and keep him at Courtland, and Byron knew it. If I were lucky, I’d be proposing to my man with snowy Swiss mountains in the background. Or maybe a slow winding river cruise in China.

We returned to join the rest of the volunteers. The afternoon passed easily with a light

lunch and talking about the efforts my mom's charity was planning to pursue. I gave up worrying about whether my mom was going to like Byron when I caught them off together in an intense, hour-long discussion about event planning and new outreach efforts the charity should consider.

Oh, yeah. Byron fit in perfectly, and I couldn't wait to make him mine.

16

BYRON GRAHAM

This was a horrible idea.

Terrible. Disastrous. Bad. Just really, really bad.

Especially after our last date was a wonderful afternoon with Sebastian's charming mother and her LGBTQIA+ charity.

But Sebastian kept pressing, and I understood why. This was a big part of my life, and it was the one piece that I was determined to keep him out of. Everything about it was ugly and painful. Why would I want to include Sebastian in that? Right now, he was everything that was good and happy in my life. I didn't want that sliver of happiness to become tainted.

That wasn't right, though.

Sebastian wanted this to be a real relationship, where we shared all the parts of our lives. Both the good and the bad. How could we ever know if we could date and be in a long-term relationship if we couldn't share all the important pieces of ourselves?

And I agreed with him. If I were dating someone and I regarded this person as my boyfriend, I'd want to share all of my life with that person. I'd want someone to lean on when shit got hard.

Being honest with myself, I wanted that person to be Sebastian. He was so strong all the time, and he felt like the best person to hold me the moment it got to be too much. I wanted to close my eyes and hear him tell me it was all going to be okay, because I knew if he said it, I'd believe it.

However, sharing this part of my life meant introducing Sebastian to my foul-mouthed, foul-tempered, alcoholic mother. Not only did this feel embarrassing, but it was terrifying. There was a part of me that expected him to take one look at this part of my life, say "Fuck this shit," and walk right away. I wouldn't even blame him one bit, either.

"It's going to be fine," Sebastian said for the third time as we approached my mother's house. My knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

"It won't be. It's never been fine before, so I'm not expecting it to be fine now." But it had been nearly a week since I'd last checked on her. I'd sent some food earlier in the week after talking to her on the phone, but I had a feeling she might need more food and for me to throw a load of clothes in the laundry for her. Not to mention, it was time to search her house for bottles of alcohol.

"Even if it's not fine, I'll be right by your side the entire time. I'm not leaving you, no matter how not fine it is."

His comments warmed some of the ice forming around my gut, but they didn't chase away all the chill. We still had to survive this afternoon.

I pulled my car up to the curb outside my mom's tiny house and turned off the engine. Prior to even unbuckling my seat belt, I turned my attention to Sebastian, running a critical eye over him. When I'd agreed to let him accompany me, I'd instructed him to wear his plainest, most ordinary clothes, which he had. Yet, I could still see at a glance that the quality was a hundredtimes better than what I could

afford, even though he was just wearing a pair of jeans and a burgundy polo shirt.

“Take off your watch and put it in your pocket,” I ordered. Thankfully, he didn’t wear any other jewelry. “Keep your watch and phone in your pockets. Also, keep a close eye on your wallet.”

“Is your mother a klepto?”

“No, but I keep a close watch on the money that comes into the house.” I rubbed my forehead, wiping away the beads of sweat forming there in the blistering June heat. Naturally, the air conditioning in my car didn’t work, but Sebastian was kind enough to not mention it. “She shouldn’t have enough to buy as much booze as she does, and yet there it is. All I can figure is that she’s selling the food and other things out of the house to buy it or she’s stealing from somewhere. I don’t even want to think about the amount of cash you potentially have in your wallet right now.”

“Got it.”

“The other thing...” I hesitated, not even wanting to say the words out loud. “It would probably be best if you didn’t talk about dating me or even dating men in general. She’ll probably still guess, but I’ve learned to not throw fuel on the fire. Let’s go. We’ll try to make this as fast as possible.”

I reached for the handle on the door and Sebastian’s hand clamped on my right arm, stopping me. “Is your mom homophobic?”

I huffed out a bitter laugh. “I’ve always hated that word. Phobic? She’s not scared of me. No, she just hates gay people.”

“And yet she relies completely on you for her survival and the care of her eldest son.” Sebastian sounded like he was talking through his teeth.

“It is what it is, but don’t drag Ronnie into this. It has nothing to do with him. None of this situation is his fault.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I flashed Sebastian the best smile I could manage and got out of the car while I still could.

Sebastian followed me, a silent, supportive shadow. During the walk up to the house, I felt a hundred times more aware of the brown patchy grass, the cracks stretching across the sidewalks, worn shutters, filthy windows, and dirt-crusted siding. The entire building needed to be overhauled. Or better yet, torn down. Every step felt like a wide gulf was opening between us. Sebastian had a warm, loving, accepting family made up of financially stable and productive people.

And then there were my mom and me. Everything Sebastian knew about me and my life felt like a cheap plastic Halloween mask, and I was about to rip it off to reveal the true ugliness beneath.

As I reached the door, I stopped and sucked in a deep, fortifying breath. It was like an old set of armor clicked into place around my body, so she couldn’t touch me with her hate-filled words. A hand landed on my shoulder and squeezed, reminding me that for the first time, I wasn’t alone.

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I knocked before I used my key to unlock the door. “Mom? Are you awake?” I called into the dimly lit house, even though I’d heard her shuffling through the kitchen and the clink of glass bottles. Hot, stale air laced with the lingering scent of old beer hit me square in the face. “I brought a friend for you to meet,” I continued when she didn’t answer.

“What the hell you want?” she demanded, followed by the telltale scrape of her slippers across the linoleum.

She appeared in the doorway between the kitchen and living room, where she glared at me and Sebastian. A loose ponytail held her dark brown-and-gray hair. The old T-shirt she wore was stained and hung on her awkwardly, making her look even more skeletal. Little holes riddled her black jogging pants. I’d tried getting her new clothes that fit her frame better, but she never wore them. Instead, she opted for the same two or three T-shirts and the same couple of pairs of sweat pants.

“I wanted to stop by and see if you needed anything.”

“Who’s that?” she snapped, her eyes locked on Sebastian. She seemed more lucid than my last few visits, but I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“This is my friend, Sebastian.”

“Friend? What kind of friend?” Her nose wrinkled at the last word as if it were something disgusting.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Graham,” Sebastian chimed in. “Your son and I are

work friends. He was kind enough to invite me to hang out with him this weekend.”

An ugly scoff jumped from her as she continued to shuffle into the living room, where she dropped onto the sagging cushion of the ancient brown couch. “Hang out? Is that what you call it when you’re fucking my son?”

In a flash, my face felt like it was on fire, but I held my tongue. I’d learned the hard way that arguing and reprimanding her only made it a hundred times worse. It was smarter to not engage at all.

“I’m going to check the fridge and pantry before putting in a grocery order for you,” I said as my hands snatched up old soda cans, empty beer bottles, and half-eaten food containers from the coffee table and took them into the kitchen. Thankfully, Sebastian followed my lead and didn’t speak.

“Did you know my son is one of them fags?” she announced as if she couldn’t stand that we were ignoring her incendiary remark. Usually her digs flew right past me, but today each word was a bullet finding all the chinks in my armor.

“His father and I didn’t raise him to be like that. They say they’re born that way, but that’s a lot of bullshit. He picked it up at college. He paid all that money to turn himself into a dirty whore. Turned his back on God.”

I rolled my eyes. Same old song and dance with her. Nothing new in her routine, which allowed me to tune her out.

“Are you originally from this part of Kentucky?” Sebastian asked, bravely attempting to change the subject to something different and less controversial. “I grew up across the river in Ohio.”

She answered his question, but her voice was low and mumbled, like she didn’t have



any interest in what he was saying if it would not upset me.

It took only a glance to see what she needed. I pulled up the grocery delivery app on my phone and clicked off a lot of the usual suspects from previous orders. This was one of the few times my mom's limited menu worked to my benefit. She didn't like most things and refused to do more than simply boil water.

"Mom, why's it so hot in here? Something wrong with the air conditioning?" I shouted as I submitted the order and started checking her usual hiding spots for alcohol.

"It's busted. Been broken for three days. You left me here to cook in this fucking oven," she complained.

I clenched my teeth as I poured out the two half-empty bottles I'd found in the trash. That was pretty sneaky for her, thinking I wouldn't check the trash as a hiding spot. I would have fixed the AC if she'd told me there was a problem. Surprise, surprise! I wasn't a mind reader.

The linoleum creaked behind me, and I turned to find Sebastian standing in the middle of the kitchen.

"Where's the thermostat? I can look at it," he offered.

I pointed at the hall off the kitchen. "On the right. Down the corridor."

I was closing up the trash bag to take it out when I heard the air kick on. Sebastian returned a second later, wearing a smirk.

"The temperature was set at eighty-five. I lowered it to seventy-five," he whispered.

“Perfect.” I exhaled. There was no telling why she’d jacked up the temperature. I was grateful I didn’t have to pay for a repairman to come out to fix it. “Let me throw in a load of wash for her and we’ll get out of here.”

Sebastian winked at me as he turned toward the living room. “Take your time. I’m fine.”

After dealing with the trash, I darted into Mom’s bedroom and gathered up the clothes scattered about. I was taking them to the washing machine as she began her shit, ignoring all Sebastian’s attempts at polite conversation.

“You should stay away from him or he could infect you too,” she admonished.

“Homosexuality isn’t a disease.” Sebastian’s voice was low but firm. My hand tightened on the detergent bottle for a moment, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I was always proud of Sebastian for taking a stand for what was right, but there were some people it was pointless to argue with. They heard nothing and couldn’t be reasoned with. My mom was one of those people.

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I rushed through, adding the soap, no longer caring if it was the right amount. It was time to get the fuck out of there.

“It is. Those people are sick. Tainted by the devil. You need to stay away from him before he taints you, too.”

“Mrs. Graham, I’m gay too.”

Fuck.

There was a loud gasp, and then the shouting began.

“Byron! You brought one of them into my home! Out! Both of you get out of my house. I’m calling the police. Get them to arrest you both!”

“I plan to marry your son and spend the rest of my life taking excellent care of him. He’ll never have to deal with your hatred if he doesn’t want to,” Sebastian stated in a booming voice above her screeching.

I tripped over my feet at his words, barely catching myself. Part of me argued that he only said that to get back at my mother. Yet there was such a fire of determination blazing in his eyes as he glared at her. I knew he believed every word he spoke.

But there was no way I was going to hold him to such a promise. My mom had a way of getting under a person’s skin and driving them to do and say things they would regret later.

“Get out!” she screamed, her voice growing shriller to the point of cracking.

I reached Sebastian and shoved him to the door. “Food will be delivered in an hour. I started a load of laundry in the washer and the air conditioner is now working,” I informed her, not caring if she was paying attention. “I’ll return in a few days to check on you.”

“Don’t come back! You’re not welcome here. You’re not my son. Ronnie’s my only son!”

It was not the first time she’d told me to stay away or even the first time she’d disowned me. And without a doubt, it wouldn’t be the last time.

17

## SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

As soon as we stepped outside and escaped her screams, I glanced at Byron. His entire body looked sunken in, his head hung and shoulders slumped as if he were trying to curl into a protective ball while remaining mobile.

Did he have to deal with this every time he went to see her? He bought her food, cleaned her house, ran himself ragged to make sure she was okay, and she still treated him like shit.

If that had been me, I would have told her to fuck off a long time ago. She could starve for all I cared. It wasn’t like she had to thank him for physically and financially supporting her, but keeping her mouth shut would have been fair.

But this wasn’t about me and my rage over her treatment of her son. This was about Byron and his pain.

I wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him against my body as we walked to his car. Despite the heat, he felt chilled to me. The only thing that mattered was getting him away from this place as quickly as humanly possible.

“Give me your keys. I’ll drive,” I said, holding out my hand.

Byron opened his mouth but for a couple of seconds, nothing came out. In the end, he closed his mouth without saying a word. He handed his keys over with a nod and allowed me to help him into the passenger seat.

After a few adjustments, I had us racing down the street and winding out of this neighborhood of small homes, chain link fences, and old trees. It reminded me of my childhood home, when my parents were both working and struggling to make ends meet with two kids and a mortgage. The entire area felt so familiar and yet so foreign at the same time. It had been more than a decade since I’d traveled along a street like this, so different from the neighborhoods I’d lived in while in high school and college. A world apart from where my home sat. It left me feeling uncomfortable and out of touch.

Byron sighed next to me, dragging my wandering thoughts away from me and back to him. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. He slumped low in his seat, his elbow resting on the door and his head leaning on his hand with his eyes closed. I couldn’t stand to see the defeat in him.

But how could I possibly help him? I’d never felt so utterly helpless in all my life. All I wanted to do was lift this horrible burden from Byron’s shoulders, so he wouldn’t feel so trapped all the time. I could offer to pay for a rehab program for Byron’s mother, or maybe help to place her in an assisted living situation, so someone else was taking care of her instead of the son she clearly hated. None of these things would improve her opinion of Byron, but they might help to ease Byron’s mind and remove some of the hate from his life.

Would he even accept my help with this matter? This whole dating bargain to pay for his brother's hospital bills had made Byron grumpy. I didn't know how to frame this to make it easier for him to swallow. Byron rightfully had his pride, and I didn't want to step on it any more than I had.

On my way to the highway that would carry us north across the Ohio River, another sign caught my attention and led me on a quick detour. A few minutes passed before I was hitting the turn signal and slowing the car to turn into the park. Byron opened his eyes and immediately sat up, taking in his surroundings.

"I'm sorry. Did you get lost? I should have been giving you directions," he said.

"No, I'm not lost. I thought we could go for a walk. You look like you need to talk, and I'll do a much better job of listening to you if I'm not trying to concentrate on the road." I held my breath, waiting for him to argue with me, but he didn't.

Byron nodded. "Yeah. A walk sounds nice."

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The park was a tiny one, but it appeared well used. There were two sets of swings, a couple of seesaws, and a jungle gym for climbing. Scattered under a thick canopy of maple trees were half a dozen wooden picnic tables. Birds trilled from among the dark leaves and cicadas buzzed low from their hiding spots. The sounds of the nearby traffic were hushed on this lazy Sunday afternoon, and the park was nearly empty as most people preferred to be inside in the air conditioning than out in the heat. I could almost pretend that we were alone in our own little world.

I walked with Byron as we left the car, and I was content to follow him as many times around the park as he needed to walk. He surprised me, though, almost immediately darting into the shade.

“I must be getting too soft. This heat is unbearable,” Byron said. “Do you mind if we just sit?”

“Nope. Sitting works for me.”

He flashed a weak, somewhat shy smile as he selected a picnic table and sat on the top. I climbed up with one step and dropped beside him onto the table. My eyes skimmed over the hundreds of names and random doodles carved into the old wood, a dizzying mix of offensive and loving. I’d never carved my initials into wood with anyone, but something childish in me wanted to do it now with Byron’s initials.

“She wasn’t always like that,” Byron stated, breaking the comfortable silence that had stretched between us. “When I was little and Dad was still alive, she worked off and on. Minimum-wage stuff, but the jobs didn’t seem to last more than a year or two. She complained a lot about her back. I think maybe she was in a car accident or

something, but it must have been before I was born because I don't remember it. Things didn't heal correctly. Nobody ever talked about it. She drank then too, but not to the excessive level that it is now. That all began after Ronnie's accident. Everything changed that day."

"How old was he?"

"Seventeen. It was his senior year of high school. I was fourteen. He spent nearly six months in a coma, and another year in rehab learning how to walk and talk again. But when he came home, he wasn't the same. There were a lot of doctor appointments and trying to keep track of lots of meds. More rehab."

"He was living at home?"

Byron nodded. "Yeah. My mom quit working completely to stay home with him and take care of him. It was like caring for a toddler with the strength of a full-grown man. It was...hard on her. Dad and I pitched in after work and school. I got odd jobs in the summer to help pay all the medical bills. That was how we managed for eleven years. But Dad died."

I reached over and took one of Byron's hands in mine, massaging his palm and fingers, trying to soothe away the tension that was tightening his frame. "Were you close to your dad?"

Byron tipped his head up and let out a long, slow breath that sounded as if it had been released from the depths of his soul as he stared at the leaves. "Not really. You have to understand, Ronnie was their golden child. He was the quarterback for the high school football team and the star pitcher for the baseball team. His grades were decent, but not great. Yet none of it mattered, because everyone who met him just loved him. There wasn't a person who didn't love hanging out with my brother."



“The life of the party,” I murmured, my heart breaking as I tried to imagine the younger brother left in his shadow.

“Definitely. I loved him too. He didn’t enjoy spending too much time with his dorky little brother, but he wasn’t mean to me. After the accident, old friends came around for a while and they tried, but it was hard and painful for everyone. It was like talking to a stranger who was wearing the body of someone you’d adored for a decade. It was almost a blessing that he didn’t remember most of his friends from high school. That made it easier for them to stop coming by.”

Byron grunted and shoved his right hand through his sweaty hair, pushing it away from his forehead. “But the short of it was that Ronnie was the crown prince, and I was the spare. They didn’t pay a lot of attention to me prior to Ronnie’s accident and after, they didn’t have much energy to spare for me.”

My heart broke for that kid forced to grow up years too soon, missing out on so many important moments in life because fate had darker plans for his family. I lifted his left hand to my lips and pressed a series of small kisses to his knuckles. When I was finished, I glanced over to find a ghost of a smile playing on his lips as he watched me.

“After Dad died, I had to put Ronnie in a facility so he could get the constant care he needed. Mom’s drinking picked up after Ronnie’s accident and it spun out of control with Dad’s death. She couldn’t take care of herself any longer. There was no way she could manage Ronnie on her own, especially since I was working a full-time job in Cincinnati. She completely lost it after I placed Ronnie at Holy Mother. Throwing things and saying that I was destroying this family. That I wanted to take her baby away from her. That I never loved Ronnie, and that I was jealous of him. Putting him in that hospital killed me. I felt like I’d failed him because I couldn’t take care of him myself. She started her shit, and this time I yelled. I don’t even know how it came up, but I ended up outing myself to her. That was the first time she kicked me out of the

house. Lived in my car for a couple of weeks before renting that apartment you've seen."

Horror threatened to choke me. "Your car? Didn't you have any friends you could have stayed with?"

Byron shook his head. "I had a few growing up, but I'd lost touch with everyone by the time I graduated high school. Life narrowed down to three things—school, work, and Ronnie. There wasn't time for hanging out with friends. I didn't have anyone I felt comfortable leaning on."

There was no holding it in any longer. I released his hand so I could wrap my arms around him in a tight hug. The need to hold Byron, to absorb some of his pain, was nearly choking me. There was nothing else I could do. There was no way I could go back in time and help teenage Byron dealing with these big issues. All I could do was hold him now.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled into his hair. "So fucking sorry. I wish there was something I could do, but I know there's nothing and it sucks. It's not fair that you had to go through this alone."

Byron's arms closed on my waist and squeezed me. "It's enough that you're holding me now. But there is one problem."

"What?"

"It's like a hundred degrees outside and you're a walking furnace, making it twice as hot," Byron said against my chest. A hint of laughter played among his words, and I released him to find him smiling—genuinely smiling—up at me.

I winked at him as I moved away. "Sorry. All my sexiness is prone to creating lots of

heat.”

He nodded. “I came to realize that when I was lying in bed with you.”

We simply stared at each other for several seconds, grinning like idiots. There was still a shadow of weariness in his eyes, but his smile seemed to wipe away years of worry from his handsome face.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying that I’m really impressed with how you continue to care for your mother despite how she treats you. I don’t think I could have done it. Spending all your time and money on her only to have her call you names and treat you like shit. I would have said fuck it all years ago. Left her to deal with shit on her own.”

Byron winced and rubbed the nape of his sweaty neck. “Please don’t turn me into a saint. I’m not. There were plenty of times that I wanted to do that, but my dad would be disappointed in me if I abandoned her. Plus, even if I hate her a bit, she’s still my mom. She took care of me when I was little. I should at least take care of her now.” He quickly raised his hand as if he knew I had a few choice words about those thoughts. “I know. Probably not my sanest thoughts, but that’s how I feel. I don’t ask that you agree with it or even understand. Just respect my wishes.”

I snatched his hand and pressed a kiss to the palm. “Okay. That’s fair.”

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He relaxed and even let out a harsh bark of laughter. “But that whole God and the gays bullshit. I don’t even know where she got that. Growing up, my family was never religious. There was no talk of God and the devil. No one said grace at meals. Never went to church. But as soon as she learned I was gay, it was all this evil, devil, turned-my-back-on-God stuff.” He cocked his head to the side and narrowed his eyes on me slightly. “Did your parents have any trouble accepting you?”

My face scrunched up at the memory. “They weren’t against it. They were more like...confused. I figured out I was gay in high school, but didn’t tell them until I was about to start college. They thought I didn’t date in high school because I was busy with classes, clubs, and sports. No, I was just fucking around with guys on the sly and didn’t bring anyone home. They assumed I was straight and couldn’t figure out how I ended up gay. It took a couple of years for their brains to accept that I was born that way. It wasn’t because of some book I read, some movie I watched, or because I was fucking inoculated as a child. But from the moment I came out, they treated me exactly the same as my straight sister.”

Byron sighed. “That sounds nice.” But the smile that had lingered on his lips crumbled before my eyes and he shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. “The difference between our families is frightening. There’s a part of me that can’t believe you’re still sitting here after seeing and hearing what a horror show my life is. I mean, I’ve met your dad in the office, and he’s totally put together and brilliant. Your mom is fucking amazing. By contrast, there’s my family?—”

“Don’t,” I cut him off with a single sharp word. “Please, don’t. It’s not right to compare our families. Your family has been through hell. While I might not be a fan of your mom, I recognize she has suffered a lot. She lost both a husband, and a son in

the prime of his life. Besides, you've only seen the pretty, public image of my family. There was a long period while I was in college that my family almost didn't make it."

"What?" Byron gasped. His hand shot out and grasped my wrist, squeezing it as if to reassure me he was right there with me.

"When my dad was building up Courtland Enterprises, he was taking a lot of trips and spending more time away from the house. My mom was still working as a nurse. They never saw each other. The times they did, they fought. During that time, my dad cheated on my mom. It was a brief fling, but there was no denying that it happened. My parents almost divorced over it, but they tried counseling first. They loved each other a lot and wanted to work past mistakes they'd both made. It took years for them to get to the point they're at now. While my parents were having problems, their kids were running wild. My sister, Aggie, ended up running off with some guy who only wanted her for her family's money. It took a lot of lawyers to get rid of that jackass."

"And...what about you?"

It was fair. I braced my hands behind me and leaned on them, stretching my legs in front of me. It was easier to keep talking as long as I was staring straight ahead rather than meeting his eyes and the disappointment I was fully expecting to see there.

"There was one asshole who tried to use me for my money. We dated for less than a year, but it was long enough to make a big mess of my life and my family." I paused and mentally poked at the old, ragged wound, wishing I could finally move on from this old nightmare. No one liked talking about how someone they'd cared about had made a fool of them. "I thought he loved me, but he was using me. The whole thing fucked with my head for a long time. After I got rid of him, it was lots of drinking and anonymous sex. Really, kind of made a slut of myself. The endless sex and partying helped me forget that my family was falling apart and how I'd played a part in that. Even after things improved, I didn't stop until Dad told me he wanted to

retire, and I needed to pull my shit together. I decreased the drinking a lot. Now it's rare if I have two drinks in a single night."

"And the sleeping around?" Byron prodded.

I dragged my eyes up to meet his, only to find no judgment there. Just sweet compassion and understanding. "That got cut way, way back." I shoved upright and leaned in close, lowering my voice. "Especially after I hired this super sexy guy to be my assistant. I couldn't even date once I met him. No one could hold a candle to him. Smart, funny, brilliant, patient even when his boss was a total lunatic. And did I mention sexy? So fucking sexy."

Byron snorted. "Shut up." He tried to push me away, but I caught his wrist and kissed his knuckles.

"The only smart thing I did in all my whoring was that I was always safe. I never had sex without protection. Plus, I get tested every year. All of them were negative. Not that I'm asking to go bare with you, but I want you to know that I would never endanger your life."

His sweet face softened as he lifted his hand, his fingertips lightly grazing my cheek. "I know. I trust you."

"I'm sorry for all the pain you've gone through with your family, especially what you deal with every week with your mom. If there's something I can do, help pay for home care or assisted?—"

Byron's fingers slid across my cheek to touch my lips, stopping my words. "No. I don't want your money. You may not believe this, but talking to you like this has done more for me than any other help I've received. There hasn't been anyone in my life for the longest time who I could talk to about something like this. That means

more to me than you will ever understand.”

I moved his hand from my mouth and leaned in the last few inches to take his mouth in a slow, tender kiss that had him wrapping his arms around my waist.

I broke off the kiss and pressed my forehead against his. “Byron, you are my everything. I would do anything to protect you and keep you safe from harm. I would be lost without you.”

His lips brushed mine as they stretched into a smile. “It’s a good thing you never have to be without me, because I’m not going anywhere.”

Perfect.

We kissed again and again. Each was soft and sweet. Just a gentle exploration and reassurance after our shared pain. Byron was the bright, shining star in my life, and I would do anything to protect his light. I would never let anything happen to him.

18

## BYRON GRAHAM

This had to be one of the first times I’d woken with a smile on my lips. I stretched and my foot hit the railing of the futon, but I didn’t care. The only thing that could have made this morning better would have been waking with Sebastian beside me, one hand resting on my stomach or hip, his eyes closed and his lips parted as he slept. I would have lain there, watching him peacefully sleep, admiring how handsome he was even with his hair messy and his cheeks flushed.

One of these days. It was going to happen. I’d be able to sleep over at Sebastian’s house and wake up to his warm body next to mine. So far, we hadn’t been able to

make it happen because of work or our own busy schedules on the weekend, but there was still plenty of time.

It didn't matter, though. Not after this past weekend. Sebastian had seen the very worst of my life, learned some of the darkest secrets I tried to keep hidden from everyone, and he was still there. He hadn't run away, hadn't declared that I was more trouble than I was worth. The sexy billionaire had rolled up his sleeves and proved that he was willing to stick beside me.

More than that, he'd listened to me. He'd let me talk. All the words and emotions had poured out, and he'd stuck by me, soaking up all that pain so that I'd been left with relief. The boulder resting on my chest was lifted away, and I could catch my breath. For the first time in too many years, I truly felt safe. The ground was no longer slipping away under my feet.

And it was all because of him.

I didn't need to go on the other four dates to know that I wanted to be with him. Sebastian Courtland was everything I'd dreamed of finding in a boyfriend, and I wasn't about to let him go. Today, I was going to schedule a meeting with Declan Foster and formally request to be made his assistant. I could get Kaylan trained up in a couple of weeks, and then I'd be around for questions until I could find a new, more permanent position outside of Courtland Enterprises. It was time to end this silly bargain and claim Sebastian as my own.

A high-pitched alarm screamed through my tiny apartment, and I winced. I usually woke before my alarm, but I'd forgotten to turn it off. My brain was too full of Sebastian. I rolled over and fumbled with my phone, getting the app silenced. My vision was bleary and unfocused, but it looked like I had a ton of social media notifications waiting for me, which was strange. I had very few friends and followers on social media. I maintained the accounts for work purposes.



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Frowning, I plucked my glasses off the makeshift table and slipped them on my face to find that the numbers were worse now that I could see. Who the hell was lighting up my accounts? All my accounts.

I tossed aside the covers and sat up. With the first account that I pulled up, my stomach sank to my toes like I was on a roller coaster. There was no need to search. The software pulled up a picture someone had secretly taken of Sebastian and me in the park yesterday as we'd kissed. It had taken three tries to get my brain to register the words, but someone had seen us, snapped a picture, and posted it to support gay love. And it had been shared. There were thousands of shares. It had hopped off one social media platform and bounced across numerous others, where people had shared it more and more.

Eventually, it had reached someone who recognized Sebastian.

And someone had recognized me.

Someone had shared the picture and tagged us both, linking our names with the picture.

Our relationship had been outed.

The bright new day I'd thought I had ahead of me disappeared before I could even get out of bed. The dark storm clouds I'd feared from the first second Sebastian had proposed dating had appeared—and in the very worst way.

I kept scrolling through my notifications, skimming the comments, searching for

familiar names. I couldn't fault the person who'd taken the picture and posted it. Their intention had been sweet and well meaning. It was our fault for not being more cautious. Until now, we'd been careful about how we'd acted while in public in case we ever ran into someone who recognized either of us.

But yesterday, the park had been deserted. There had been a couple of kids playing on the swings with their mother watching them. Had it been her? Or had someone been walking through the park as we talked and caught our kiss?

It didn't matter. There was no stopping this now.

I closed social media when I couldn't take it any longer, only to find that I had an equally massive number of text messages and emails waiting for me. Most of them were from people I worked with. The office knew I was dating my boss. I was fucked.

I jumped to my feet and paced as I called Sebastian's number. Was he up yet? I normally got into the office more than an hour ahead of him. But he still had to get up early. He had a long drive from his home to downtown. He had to be up.

But the call went to voice mail. I hung up and tried again. And then again. And again.

After the fourth attempt, I left a message.

"Hey. It's me. I'm assuming that I can't reach you because you're busy trying to fix this mess. If not, we need to talk about how to handle this picture. They're going to fire me, Sebastian. I-I-I can't lose my job. You know how things are. I can't—" My voice cracked and gave out as panic choked me.

I ended the call and dropped my phone as I ran to the bathroom and threw up in the toilet. Everything was falling apart. My job was the only thing that was keeping

Ronnie and my mom taken care of. If I lost my job, my entire world would fall apart.

“No!” I snapped at myself even as I kneeled beside the toilet.

That would not happen. Sebastian had promised that I wouldn’t lose my job. He’d promised to keep me safe and that everything would be okay. We would talk to human resources and any of the other executives we needed to. I’d be moved away from Sebastian, so there would be no more question of inappropriate behavior. Possibly even suffer a pay cut as punishment with an ugly mark on my file at work, but I’d still have my job. Things were going to be okay.

I repeated that sentence as I showered and got dressed. I didn’t bother putting my contacts in. My hands were shaking too badly to manage it. It would have to be a glasses day.

Somehow, I got to the office without getting involved in an accident. I wasn’t sure how that had happened since I couldn’t concentrate on anything in front of me. My stomach was in knots and cold sweat soaked my entire body. My hand reached for my phone every five seconds to check to see if Sebastian had messaged or called me, but there was nothing. Only silence.

Where the fuck was Sebastian? He had to be awake now. There was no way he hadn’t seen the images and gotten textmessages about it. Were his friends horrified that he was dating his assistant? Were they busy trying to talk him out of being with me?

No.

Not Sebastian. He wouldn’t abandon me now.

When I reached the office, it was still early and there were few people around. I managed a tight smile and a nod to the people that I saw, but I couldn’t get out any

words yet past the lump in my throat.

A loud sigh of relief escaped me as I sat at my desk. The top floor was silent except for the wind rushing past the building. I closed my eyes and tried to shove aside my growing feeling of panic and despair. Why wasn't Sebastian calling me? What was I supposed to do? I refused to believe that he was going to leave me to deal with this on my own, but what else was I supposed to think if he wasn't returning my calls or texts? We needed a plan, but any plan I came up with was pretty much useless without him. He was the one with all the pull and power.

The first half hour ticked by, and I got little accomplished. I had to do things two and three times before I got them right. I was still trying to prepare all the papers for Sebastian's meetings when Kaylan arrived with an awkward expression.

Yep, he'd seen the picture.

I grabbed my mug as I always did, even though I knew I wouldn't drink the coffee I made. My stomach was too upset right now. Anything I drank or ate would come right back up.

Kaylan followed me into the break room a second later. There was a humming tension in his frame, as if he were barely holding himself together.

"Sooooo...do anything interesting this weekend?"

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Oh, my fucking God. Really? There was nothing nonchalant in his voice. Nothing.

I sighed and rubbed my face. It was so tempting to just say no and move on to his weekend, but I was pretty sure if I shut him down right now, he would die from disappointment. That wasn't fair to him. Kaylan had been a good work friend, and I might have even helped Sebastian meddle in his love life. It was only right that I gave him a sliver of mine.

"You can ask. I know you saw it," I said.

Kaylan slammed his mug on the counter and stepped even closer. "Holy shit! Are you dating the boss? Was that your first date? A chance encounter? Was that your first kiss? Tell me that wasn't your first kiss blasted all across the Internet!"

This was why I liked Kaylan. He was great at taking me out of my head. His emotions poured from him, allowing you to get lost in them for a bit.

"Yes, I'm dating the boss. No, it wasn't our first date or a chance encounter. And no, thank God, it wasn't our first kiss."

While those stolen kisses on the park table had been sweet and perfect in every way, I wouldn't have wanted my first kiss with Sebastian to be fodder for the world to both love and hate.

"That's amazing! I bet you are the perfect person for him," Kaylan stated. His wide smile made it easier to breathe. But that smile was wilting way too fast. "But...isn't it against the company's policy..."

“Yes,” I broke in when it seemed like he couldn’t finish. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. I don’t mean the dating. This was supposed to be a trial run to see if we wanted to date and be in a relationship. The plan was to have me move to another department and then we could date out in the open. I wouldn’t be his direct subordinate. But the picture...”

“Shit,” Kaylan hissed. “Do you need me to do anything? Talk to HR or maybe the chairman? That’s who Sebastian reports to, right? I can tell them that everyone acted completely professionally in the office. Sebastian wasn’t inappropriate toward you, right?” Kaylan’s eyes darted to the open doorway and back to me, his expression growing sterner. “He wasn’t, right?”

“No, no. He was never inappropriate, never tried to make me feel like my job was on the line if I didn’t do something,” I said.

Okay, so Sebastian was flirty from time to time and maybe he touched my leg more than once, when we were alone in his office and I was standing close, but I would never complain about any of that.

“Byron! Are you here? Byron!” Sebastian’s frantic voice rang out across the floor.

My heart leaped into my throat as I ran out of the break room to find Sebastian standing by my desk. He didn’t look much better than me with his crooked tie and scowl. Relief washed over his face the moment he saw me. He grabbed my arm and pulled me in for a bone-crushing hug.

“God! I’m so sorry I didn’t call you this morning. I’ve been dealing with phone calls and chaos since I woke up. Are you all right?” Sebastian squeezed me and then pushed me away to examine me from head to toe. “You’re wearing your glasses? What’s wrong? Is it your eyes?”

“I’m okay. Just scared. My eyes are fine. My hands were shaking too badly this morning to put my contacts in without poking myself. It was easier to wear my glasses.”

Sebastian grunted before pulling me in for a second hug. He brushed a kiss to my temple and stiffened. I glanced up to find him staring behind me. I twisted around to find Kaylan watching us with his eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

“It’s okay. Kaylan saw the picture.”

“Sorry, sir,” Kaylan said, taking a step forward. “Whatever you and Byron need, I’m there for you. I’m glad you’re dating. You need someone like Byron in your life.”

I choked on a laugh and Sebastian’s arms tightened as if he were silently agreeing.

“Thanks, Kaylan. I need you to man the phones and act as a barrier. Take messages and tell people I’ll be getting to their requests in the next twenty-four hours. I don’t have time for gawkers and busybodies.”

“Got it!” Kaylan gave us a thumbs-up and hurried off to his desk.

When we were alone, Sebastian turned his attention to me and took a step away. “Everything is going to be fine. My father is coming in for a meeting. I’m sure I’ll get reamed over this, but I’ll talk him down. He’ll see reason. I will take care of everything. You’ll be fine. I’ll protect you.”

I could only nod. The growing tightness of my throat made it impossible to get any words out. I believed him. There might be some ugliness, and I was sure we’d both suffer some punishment, but he’d get this straightened out. I’d still have a job, though probably a different one and a new official boyfriend.

Sebastian stole a quick kiss and smiled, but even I could see it was tight and forced. “Try to get some more work done. I need to return phone calls and put out some fires.”

I watched him disappear into his office, shutting the doors behind him. Everything was going to be okay.

As I returned to my desk, my phone was already ringing.

“Good morning, Byron. This is Janice with HR. Could you come to my office for a meeting?”

19

BYRON GRAHAM



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:22 am*

The human resources department was on the first floor to make it easier for them in terms of new applicants coming in for interviews and testing. There was no worrying about people sneaking on to elevators and wandering around departments they shouldn't be in.

It was the longest elevator ride of my life. As the light flashed for each floor, I recounted the big moments of my career at Courtland Enterprises. I could remember the very first time I saw Sebastian, the first time I'd received a raise, the first bonus based on outstanding performance, the friends I'd made. Hell, the last time I'd even come to HR had been to interview Kaylan. Other than needing to fill out some forms for myself or Kaylan, I'd had almost no interactions with HR.

When I stepped off the elevator, my knees tried to give out, but I pulled myself together enough to straighten my spine and give off the appearance of being an intelligent human being.

I poked my head into Sebastian's office before leaving the top floor to tell him that HR had summoned me, but he was pacing behind his desk, shouting into his phone. It was not a good time to interrupt him. With any luck, he was talking to either his father or someone from HR already.

Everything was going to be fine. Sebastian had promised it would all be fine.

I was going to be reprimanded, and a warning would be put on my record that might impact any future pay adjustments I received. It was going to be fine.

I stepped through the glass door and entered the HR office, which was sizable. There

were at least eight people in the HR department for the downtown location, but Janice was the head of the department. We'd had a few interactions over the years, but I couldn't say that I knew her well.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Byron," she said, meeting me at the front desk. She was an older woman with light brown hair streaked with gray. Her wrinkled face was pleasant and friendly, professional in every way. She managed to be welcoming while still being firm about where the line was for the company and its employees. In short, she was good at her job, particularly with firing someone.

"You're welcome," I murmured, following her to the end of the corridor to her office. She shut the door behind me, and I took a seat.

Janice sat, and her smile disappeared. While I couldn't say that her demeanor became cold, it was detached and serious.

"I'm sure you know why you've been called in here today."

"The picture," I stated.

"It's not the picture. Courtland Enterprises has a strict policy of nondiscrimination against people of all color, religion, and sexual orientation. The problem is that you were seen romantically involved with your supervisor, which is forbidden by the company's policy." She paused to open a file on her desk and take out a sheet of paper. She turned it toward me to show that I'd signed the document, acknowledging that I'd read and agreed to the terms of the company's policy. "This is your signed agreement for said policy."

"Yes," I choked out.

In a matter of seconds, my entire body had become a block of ice. I couldn't move. I

could barely even drag in a breath. Blood rushed past my ears in a roaring torrent like a tidal wave plunging through a narrow gorge.

This couldn't be happening. Sebastian had promised that this wouldn't happen. He'd promised to protect me. To protect my family. Where was he? Why wasn't he calling to stop this? Why wasn't he barging through the door to halt this tragedy?

"Because of your actions, Courtland Enterprises has decided to let you go effective immediately. We are grateful for your three years of exemplary service. I?—"

"Wait," I forced past my constricted throat. "Mr. Courtland said..."

Said what? Promised that I wouldn't be fired because I was his boyfriend? Wasn't this what the company policy was trying to protect against? It was trying to level the playing field for all employees; there were no favorites. That everyone had a chance to rise. But that also meant that everyone had to have a chance to fall.

Except it wasn't level.

Was Sebastian in danger of losing his job? No. No, he wasn't. His father was the chairman and founder of Courtland Enterprises. John Courtland wasn't about to fire his son and hand the reins of the company off to someone else outside of the family.

Someone had to take the fall for breaking the rules to show that the company stood by its rules and policies. That someone had to be me.

I could only stare dumbly at Janice, watching as her detached expression cracked. After a couple of seconds, she leaned forward. "I shouldn't be saying this," she whispered, "but I've already received several phone calls from other executives vouching for how wonderful you are at your job. They've all spoken on your behalf, but the chairman was firm on this. However, I negotiated a nice

severance package for you. You'll receive two full months' pay..."

She continued to talk, but I couldn't understand a word of it. Her words were white noise in my ears.

Sebastian didn't rush through the door to save me.

He didn't stop the one thing he'd promised wouldn't happen.

I was fired, and now my mom and my brother would pay the price for my stupidity.

20

SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

Shit.Shit. Shit.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:22 am*

Everything started going to shit as soon as I opened my eyes this morning.

That damn fucking picture. Why would someone invade another couple's privacy by posting something like that? Didn't they know it was dangerous? That they could ruin someone's life by doing that?

Not that the person had intended to harm us. No. I'd tracked down the original post. It had been a lovely thing about "Love is love" and supporting gay marriage. That was great, but it was fucking up my life right now. I'd be lucky if Byron ever wanted to marry me after this.

Except if there was blame to toss about, it fell squarely on my shoulders and nowhere else. This wasn't Byron's fault or the company's or even the person who posted the picture. I'd been the one stupid enough to engage in a secret affair and then do something as mindless as kissing Byron out in public.

I knew better. Common sense stated that if you wanted to keep things a secret, you did them in private.

But I hadn't been thinking clearly yesterday. Byron had been in a lot of pain—pain I hadn't known he'd been dealing with for more than a decade. I'd been desperate to do something, anything, to make him feel better. That desperation had made me stupid.

Now I had to clean up my mess and do everything I could to keep Byron from being hurt by my selfishness and carelessness.

A text flashed across my phone from my father announcing he'd arrived and that we

needed to talk. That was a fucking understatement. I left my phone on the charger in my office. The battery had already lost half of its life, and it wasn't even nine in the morning.

As I charged out of my office, I paused for a heartbeat when I noticed Byron wasn't at his desk, in the break room, or speaking to Kaylan, who was briskly answering calls. Maybe he'd stepped out to the bathroom to splash some water on his face and pull himself together. If we could get through these first few hours, everything would even out, and we could get to work.

I continued across the long hall to the other side of the floor, where my father maintained an office. It was smaller than my own since he stopped in the office only four to five times per year now that I had taken over as CEO.

I walked in without knocking just as his assistant, Bridget, was getting him a glass of water. She gave me a nod as she passed by me and hurried from the room, closing the double doors behind her.

The office was cold and emotionless, filled with lots of black and silver. The windows faced the north, giving a view of the other skyscrapers of downtown and one of the many hills that surrounded the city. Everything about the style of the room was old-fashioned and reserved. I hated this room. I wanted to redecorate it, but it wasn't mine, so I didn't touch it.

John Courtland sat behind the large desk in a leather swivel chair that dwarfed him. I hadn't seen him in a few weeks, but it appeared as if his salt-and-pepper hair had become decidedly saltier. The wrinkles had multiplied on his face overnight and the line between his bushy brows was dug even deeper than normal. My father's face comprised a lot of harshly carved features, as if the artist who made him couldn't be bothered with smoothing him out to make him more handsome or kinder looking.

Dad and I generally got along. We frequently butted heads on several topics, but since retiring, he'd become more hands off with the company, content to let me run it how I saw fit.

Unfortunately, with the icy glare and frown directed at me, I got the feeling that today wouldn't be one of those days.

"What the hell were you thinking?" my father growled so low I almost didn't hear him, but somehow he still sounded as if he were shouting. "Do you have any idea how disappointed I am with you right now? How much you've tarnished the Courtland name? How you've damaged the company?"

"Why? Because I removed all doubt that I was gay?" The snide words were out of my mouth before I could catch them. I never reacted well to being backed into a corner, even when I was in the wrong.

My father slammed his hand on the desk with a loudboom, and I couldn't help but flinch. "Don't you dare make this about people accepting your sexual orientation! You know that's not the issue."

I lowered my head and forced my fingers to unclench. "You're right. I'm sorry. This is about my dating an employee."

"Dating an employee? This isn't just about you dating an employee! This is about you dating your goddamn assistant! Your mother told me you were dating someone new, but she neglected to mention he was your assistant. What the hell were you thinking?" he repeated at much higher volume as he rose to his feet. "Do you have any idea what you've done? He could sue you for harassment. He could sue the company for creating an unsafe work environment. We're in enough financial trouble as it is. If we can get through this year without layoffs, it'll be nothing short of a miracle, but if your fling sues the company, there will be nothing left."

“Byron isn’t some fling, and he’s not like that. He won’t sue Courtland Enterprises.”

“Well, I’m going to make damn sure of that. We’re not about to have another Thomas Cook incident.”

I mentally cringed at the mention of my bastard ex. He hadn’t gotten the chance to threaten Courtland Enterprises while I was in college, but I had a feeling he would have if I’d given him enough time and control over me. But Byron wasn’t Thomas Cook. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I have the lawyers working on some documents to save your ass and the company’s. We’re going to offer him a few million to sign a waiver, agreeing that he won’t sue you or Courtland Enterprises. I think that should be more than enough to satisfy him.”

I staggered. Nausea roiled my stomach, and I was sure I was going to be sick on his expensive Aubusson rug.

“You’re paying Byron off?”

“Yes, it’s the safest option for everyone. And I’m taking the money out of your portion of your inheritance.”

“Byron isn’t like that.”

“Everyone is like that,” my father grumbled.

This was spiraling out of control. I needed to take a step back, breathe, and de-escalate this before anything truly unfixable could happen.



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“Dad, please,” I started again, speaking more slowly and with purpose, “I need you to calm down. You know Byron. He loves Courtland Enterprises, and he values all the people who work here. He doesn’t want to hurt anyone. We don’t need to go to extremes. This was all my fault. I’m the one who hit on him. I’m the one who convinced him to date me. Why don’t you just punish me? Suspend me. Dock my pay for the year. Fuck, fire me! We can move Byron to be Declan’s assistant. He always needs someone, and Byron would be a great fit for Dec.”

“Have you lost your mind? This isn’t something that can be swept under the rug. You broke the rules. If we give you and Byron a slap on the wrist, how are any of your employees going to feel safe working here? How are they ever going to respect you as their leader?” My dad shook his head, looking more exhausted and disgusted than I’d ever seen him.

Stone after stone sank in my stomach as the sick feeling inside of me increased. This wasn’t the first time I’d disappointed my dad with my behavior, but this felt a hundred times worse. As if it were something I couldn’t come back from.

“The board has been calling for your resignation, but I’ve talked them down from it. You’ll take a brief leave of absence after you make a public apology, admitting your wrongdoing to the company and reasserting the importance of company policy to create a safe environment for everyone.”

I nodded. It was only fair. My recklessness shouldn’t hurt everyone else who depended on Courtland Enterprises for a paycheck. “What about Byron?”

“He’s out.”

My head snapped up and my heart stopped dead in my chest. For a second, I couldn't even breathe or form a sentence. "What?" I rasped, still trying to get my body functioning.

"He's gone. Fired. We let him go."

"You can't do that. This isn't his fault," I argued. It felt like the world was melting around me. My feet were sinking into the floor like I was stuck in a stinking bog that was sucking away all my strength. Every time I attempted to fight it, the pull on me grew stronger.

"He made the choice to date you, knowing the rules. The employee policy clearly laid out the consequences, and he agreed to it the day he took the job. We're bending the rules enough for you. He has to go."

"You can't! I promised him I'd protect him. That he wouldn't lose his job. We can just move him to another department, and everything will be fine."

"If you promised that, you're a fool, and he's an even bigger one for believing you." Dad slapped his hand on his desk and shoved to his feet. He leaned forward, staring holes straight through me. "Use your damn head! You promised to protect him? That's the very thing the policy is in place to guard against! How is that fair to the thousands of other people we employ?"

The worst part was that what my dad was saying was making sense. Deep down, I knew he was right, and it was like daggers being thrust into my chest. How had I not seen it earlier? How could I have played so fast and loose with Byron's life when he had so many people depending on him?

"But Byron...I love him..." I whispered. My brain kept turning in useless circles. I didn't know what to say or do to fix any of this.

A heavy sigh drained out of my father, and he dropped into his seat. “Go home, Sebastian. Take a day or two to get your head on straight. We’ll talk more after we’ve both had some time to think. This isn’t anything personal. I like the boy, and I don’t want this for him, but if we don’t take a stand, how can anyone work for us? We’re worse than that scum Wallace Barnes at Bluepoint with their years of embezzlement, lies, and cheating.”

I nodded and silently left my father’s office. My head was clogged with cotton and my throat was raw with the scream of frustration I was holding in. The only thing that was clear in my head was getting to Byron. If I could talk to him, explain how I’d fucked up, we could make a plan for him. This wasn’t the end of the world. I could support him, help him get on his feet.

As I walked down the hall, my eyes first lit on Kaylan, who was standing at his desk, glaring daggers at me. I almost paused to apologize to him and reassure him I’d fix things, but I forced myself to keep walking. I’d talk to Byron first and then Kaylan.

Byron was gone.

All the things he’d kept on his desk—the potted orchid, the stack of pens and legal pads for his random notes he took while he was working, his mug—were gone. A stranger sat there now. He looked like someone I’d met from the IT department. They were wiping his computer.

Byron was gone, and it was all my fault. I’d failed to save him.

21

BYRON GRAHAM

I didn’t know what to do.

There were no more solutions. I was completely out of ideas.

Coming up with solutions and answers to unending problems had been my entire life for the past three years. Every moment of every day was fixing one problem after another, conjuring up money from thin air like I was some kind of magician with a white rabbit tucked in his top hat.

But this time, I had nothing left.

After leaving the office, I'd returned home, stripped out of my suit, which was still in a pile on the floor, put on some messy clothes, and crawled into my shitty bed. With the blankets pulled over my head, I could pretend that the rest of the world didn't exist. I had no job and little hope of getting another one anytime soon. Who the hell were they going to call for a reference? Anyone my would-be employer talked to would find out about this entire debacle.

What was I left with? Try to cobble together three or four minimum-wage jobs so I could keep my mom and brother from being homeless while I gave up on things like sleep and any semblance of a life until...until what? Until my mom finally passed away and I had to support only Ronnie? Until everyone forgot about this mess and I could sneak back into Corporate America with my tail tucked between my legs?

Hopelessness choked me. I couldn't think of any way to get out of this.

Right now, I was avoiding thinking of Sebastian and all his pretty promises about protecting me and not losing my job, because rage would rise to choke out the despair. That wouldn't last long, and I'd fall right into despair again.

I'd believed him...

Pounding footsteps echoed up the staircase and filled my silent apartment. I knew before the hammering on my door started that it was Sebastian. For a moment, I considered not answering, just letting him think I wasn't there. Or that I was ignoring him. Whatever. I didn't care what he thought anymore.

"Byron! Please, open the door! We need to talk!" Sebastian shouted.

I cringed, tucking my head farther beneath the covers despite the stifling heat. It was too hot to be hiding under the covers, but the world was too harsh and bright to be anywhere but hidden away.

"Please, Byron! Answer the door!"

I sighed. Sebastian was annoyingly stubborn. He was going to keep this up until I finally caved. Or worse, until he broke down the door. That was the last thing I needed right now.

With a huff, I tossed aside the covers, climbed to my feet, and shuffled across the room to open the door for him.

Sebastian burst in, wrapping me up in a tight embrace, but I couldn't bring myself to return it. I stood there, my body limp and numb.

"Oh, God! Byron, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. This happened so fast. I wasn't able to step in quickly enough. But don't give up. I can talk to the board on your behalf, get them

to see reason. To understand that none of this was your fault.”

“Don’t.”

Sebastian flinched at that single word. He slowly released me and took a step back, allowing me to walk away from him.

“But...”

“No one is going to believe that it wasn’t my fault. I started dating you of my own free will. I knew the rules and the consequences, yet I still did it anyway,” I continued. My voice was dead. Completely without inflection, as if I couldn’t summon up the emotions that had churned in me just a couple of hours ago.

Even though it had happened only this morning, I didn’t want to talk about any of it now.

“What happened to you?” I asked. My head was throbbing, and my throat was raw from holding in screams and tears.

Sebastian’s ragged voice had somehow become sandpaper to my ears. “I had to issue an apology to the entire company for my behavior and I’m on a temporary leave of absence.”

I grunted. It was more than I’d expected. I’d figured they’d brush all this under the rug or shift the entire blame onto my shoulders. The fact that Sebastian had admitted to some culpability and he’d had to step back, even temporarily, was considerable.

Of course, it was a slap on the wrist compared to my current unemployed status, but that was what you got when your name was on the building.

“Look, it you need some help until you get on your feet...”

My head spun around to him so fast. “Are you offering me money?” I demanded. The little threads that were holding my temper in were snapping faster and faster now. The dam was crumbling, and the town below was about to get washed the fuck out. “That’s what got me into this mess in the first place. I sold out my reputation and my integrity so I could have somebreathing space. So I could have a taste of what a normal life and a normal date with a hot guy might be like.”

“Byron, I can fix this.”

“There’s no fixing this anymore!” I bellowed, but I barely heard the words over the loud cracking sound that broke from within me. “You said I wouldn’t lose my job, and I did. I trusted you. Believed in you.” Shaking my head, I paced away from him. Anger boiled inside of me, but I couldn’t tell any longer if I was pissed at him or myself. “I’m lucky that they paid out my unused vacation time and gave me a somewhat decent severance package because some of the other executives felt bad and tried to go to bat for me. Right now, my choices are living in my car or trying to move in with my mom if I don’t find a job right away.”

“What? You can’t do that! Your mother is toxic. Just being in her presence, listening to her hate, will make you sick.”

“But what other option do I have? I’m not making enough money to afford this apartment, plus her mortgage, plus my brother’s bills.”

“You can come live with me. Besides, our bargain covers?—”

“Don’t bring up that stupid bargain!” I rounded at him, shoving a trembling finger in his face for a second, only to whip my hand away. I resumed my pacing while muttering, “I should never have agreed to this.”

“Should never have...” Sebastian whispered harshly before taking a heavy step toward me. “What about us? I thought we had something. I thought we were building something important to both of us. That it was more than money, but that’s all I’m hearing out of your mouth since I walked in the door.”

“Yeah, because my whole life hinges on having enough of it to pay my bills. Sure, you might not have been born into a rich family, but it’s been long enough that you don’t remember what it’s like to be really poor. You don’t know that constant worry about whether you’re going to scrape together the rent in time or if you’re going to be evicted at the end of the month. You don’t know what it’s like wondering if you’re going to spend the next month living on nothing but rice and cheap ramen packets, because that’s all you can afford.”

“I don’t want you worrying about that, either. If you’ll move in with me, I’ll take care of you.”

My jaw ached as I clenched my teeth. I knew he was trying to be kind and thoughtful, but his words made the bile rise in the back of my throat. My feet carried me to the far side of the room because they didn’t trust me not to fall into his waiting arms. Let him take all my worries away with more sweet promises, and the terrified part of me wanted to take him up on it. But I couldn’t. I just couldn’t.



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“And then what? I become yourkeptboyfriend? I depend on you for everything. You give me an allowance and I do nothing all day, waiting for you to come home.” I shook my head. “I might be poor, but I have some self-respect left.”

“That’s not what I meant. My offer is to help you get on your feet.”

So, guilt. He felt guilty about failing to save my job and now he was attempting to clean up this mess with his money.

“I...” I stopped and swallowed hard. My eyes were burning and I couldn’t even bring myself to look at him. “Sebastian, I appreciate the offer. I know it doesn’t sound like it, but I do. I can’t take it. If I did, I wouldn’t be able to face my reflection in the mirror. For as long as I can remember, I’ve stood on my own two feet and helped to support my family without needing to sell myself.”

“Accepting some help isn’t selling yourself. You’d have space to yourself. I wouldn’t expect you to...”

Thankfully, Sebastian didn’t finish that statement, but I could fill in the blanks. I wouldn’t be trading sex for money with him. Deep down, I knew he wasn’t trying to buy me, but my headwas a fucking mess right now. There was no thinking straight through this tangle of anger, frustration, and fear.

“Where...” Sebastian started, his voice growing more ragged. “Where does this leave us?”

My eyes fell shut, and I drew in a steadying breath. “Us dating...it was always about

more than the money. To me, the bargain was a gimmick to break through the wall between us. I never really gave the bargain a thought after we first agreed to it, and I don't expect you to pay a damn cent now. I...I just loved being with you. Whether it was in the office or on a date, I loved being near you. When I was with you, I felt like I wasn't one step away from disaster. You made me feel safe, but that's all over now." I swallowed hard and pushed the last words out as fast as I could. "I don't think we should see each other. At least, not right now. All my focus needs to be on fixing my life so that my brother and mom don't end up homeless."

I loved him. I loved Sebastian Courtland with every fucking fiber of my being, but I couldn't be with him while my life was such a mess.

The silence that fell on the apartment was suffocating. Neither of us moved for several minutes. My heart was screaming the entire time I waited for Sebastian to respond that I should take the words back. I'd take them all back and beg Sebastian to hold me so I wouldn't feel so scared and helpless. If Sebastian believed in me, I could handle it all.

But it didn't feel like he believed in me. He just wanted to fix it all with a wave of his checkbook.

The floor creaked under Sebastian as he straightened from where he'd been leaning on the sink. His footsteps were like thunder as he pounded across the room. One hand thudded beside my head as it hit the wall, and he leaned in so close his breath brushed across my hair.

"I'm not giving up on us, but I understand. Can you at least promise me something?"

There was a long pause as he waited for me.

"I can try," I rasped.

“If you need help, you will reach out to someone. You can reach out to me as a friend if you need it and I will always be there. No strings attached. No expectations. I promise. But if you’re not comfortable reaching out to me, call Kaylan or Declan. Someone. You might think you’re alone, but you aren’t, Byron Graham. There are a lot of people out there who see you as a friend and they would jump over buildings and rivers to help you. Just promise me.”

“I’ll try,” I said, because they were the only words left to me.

“We’re not through. I’m not giving up.” Sebastian leaned in, bumping his forehead against the side of my head.

I couldn’t tell if his words were a vow or a threat. Maybe a little bit of both. I wanted to believe him. Wanted to hold on to that promise that the time we had together wasn’t finished and that one day I was going to be in his arms, but I couldn’t do it right now. So much of my identity was wrapped up in my ability to fix my problems and support my family. I needed to fix this on my own. Especially since this was my mistake. Not his.

“I’m sorry, Sebastian. I wish?—”

He lifted a hand and flicked the end of my nose, halting my words sharply. “You’ve not gotten rid of me yet.”

“Trust me, you’re better off without me.”

“Not happening.” He brushed a light kiss across my cheek and something inside of me splintered. “Get some rest. You’ll think better after you’ve had some rest.”

Sebastian shoved away from the wall and walked out of my apartment, shutting the door loudly behind him. The farther he moved away from me, the softer his footsteps

grew. I slid down the wall, finally giving in to the hopeless sobs that had been fighting to escape all day.

It was a pretty promise, but I knew I would never see him again. The man was so far out of my fucking league, it was ridiculous. I'd tasted heaven, and now I was being punished for reaching too high.

In a matter of days, he'd forget about me and move on to someone of his own social class who didn't come with so many burdens and headaches.

Oh God, why did this hurt more than losing my job and my life falling apart?

22

SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

“Well, you look like shit.”

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Pierce's drawl rolled through the room, and I cursed my bad luck. Why did it have to be Pierce who came searching for me? Why couldn't it have been Declan? He would have been content to sit in silence, letting me wallow in my misery. Good ol' Dec didn't offer commentary or judgments regarding my shitty choices in life.

Of course, Declan had been around to check on me twice and might have tired of my moping and whining, so he'd probably called in Pierce to force me out of my funk. Rome was usually willing to cajole me, but Pierce would throw punches if I gave him too much attitude.

"What are you doing in here? You having your bedroom remodeled?" Pierced strolled in and gave the guest bedroom a questioning glance, as if he were trying to decide if it was nice enough for him to sit in. He definitely didn't need to know this was the same room where Byron had slept that first time he'd come to my house.

Three days had passed since that horrific disaster and since Byron had declared we'd needed to go our separate ways for a time. Because I couldn't go into the office, I had taken uphaunting my house. I wasn't sleeping, and had no interest in eating. That left me with wandering the house and staring at the walls.

Today's walls were the ones in Byron's room. Not that it was really his room. He'd slept there one time. Thrown up in the toilet. And a little on my shoes. We'd chatted for the first time as people and not employer and employee here. I'd had my first glimpse of Byron as a real person here. I might have been infatuated with him from the moment I met him, but I knew talking to him at the table, hearing his personal story, that was when I'd actually started to fall. Now I was just left with that stupid marble egg in my pocket.

“Get up. Let’s go,” Pierce ordered, turning to the door.

“Where?”

“I’m getting you out of the house. You need some fresh air.”

“No. Go away.”

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Pierce complained. He plopped his hands on his narrow hips and glared at me, his dark hair falling forward onto his prominent brow. “I don’t understand this at all. Are you this upset about being put on leave? Declan says you’ll be back in the office by next week. The board is already asking for its maverick to return.”

I could only stare at him in open mouth shock for a second. “No! This has got nothing to do with work. What the hell!”

After shoving out of the seat I’d been sitting in at the table, I stalked out of the room, roughly brushing past him. I didn’t want Pierce in that room, anyway. He didn’t belong in there.

“Wait! It’s about that guy?” Pierce said, chasing after me. His hard-soled shoes slapped on the floor as he picked up speed until he could finally grab my arm. I tried to shake him off, but he pulled and swung me around. As I did, I brought up my fist. I was not in the mood for his shit.

“Whoa! Whoa! Stand down, asshole!” He released me in an instant and backpedaled a few steps. “I’m trying to find out what the fuck is going on with you. You’re not returning anyone’s texts or calls. You’ve holed up in your house. Declan asked me to check on you.”

Okay, so maybe that was enough to get Pierce worried. Declan was very hands off, letting people figure their shit out on their own. He didn't get involved in problems unless you specifically asked him to get involved.

"Besides, when have you gotten emotional over some piece of ass? You could teach a master class in the art of the one-night stand."

"Byron isn't like that."

Pierce sighed long and loud before grabbing me by the shoulders and turning me. He pushed me toward the kitchen and forced me onto a stool at the island. "Wilkins told me you've been skipping meals, and that Carol has been making sandwiches for you, hoping you'll eat something soon."

"I'm not hungry," I grumbled.

"You know, she's scared she's going to lose her job. She's convinced you don't like her cooking anymore."

I narrowed my eyes at his back. "You're making that up."

"Am I? I think I even heard that you were cooking in here one night." He turned to me with a plate holding a carefully wrapped sandwich, a bowl of fruit, and another bowl of pasta salad. "Carol is a nice lady and a superb cook. If I didn't love my chef, I'd consider stealing her." Pierce slid the plate in front of me as he spoke.

Annoying. He was so annoying.

And he was definitely making up the entire story about Carol being worried about her job. That didn't matter. The seed had been planted in fertile soil. Talking to Byron had made it clear how fragile someone's life could be when they depended so heavily

on that next paycheck. Not that I thought Carol was in that situation, but I also didn't want her to worry.

Without a word, I peeled off the wrapper and started eating the sandwich. Thankfully, Pierce didn't feel the need to comment or gloat. He dug into the fridge for a bottle of water for me and one for himself.

"Okay, tell me about this guy."

"Byron," I supplied.

"Byron. He's your assistant."

"Was," I bit out. My stomach was souring, and eating felt like a bad decision.

"So, he got shit-canned because everyone found out you were dating."



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Yes, Pierce was the king of tact.

“Yeah,” I mumbled as I shoved the plate away.

Pierce immediately pushed it back toward me. “Tell me about him. He’s the one I met that time I came in to grab you for lunch about six months ago, right?”

I stared at my old college friend for several seconds. He was serious. The snarky jabs were gone, and he returned my gaze with a look of genuine concern and interest. Pierce was hard to get along with at the best of times. Where Declan was simply cold and reserved, Pierce was like trying to make friends with a honey badger that was constantly trying to rip your face off.

When we’d been in college, I was determined to get everyone to like Declan, so I’d forced Declan to accompany me everywhere until they just accepted him. The funny thing was that Rome and Sawyer had used the same approach with Pierce. Eventually, we were all together for so many years that we could no longer imagine a world where we didn’t see each other or talk every day.

The thing with Pierce was that he was all brick walls and boiling oil to keep people from seeing how damaged he was on the inside. It took ages to get past his defenses, and I couldn’t imagine the person who had the strength and patience to give it a try.

“Yeah. You met him at the office.”

Pierce nodded and cracked the seal on his water, unscrewing the top. “He’s cute, if you’re into that super prim and proper thing.”

“You know you are, so don’t give me that shit.”

My friend’s smile turned a little devilish. I might have had a reputation for being a bit of a slut in my twenties, but Pierce had been right there in the gutter with me.

“Only because they’re the most fun in bed,” Pierce purred.

“Stop right there. You may not think things like that about Byron.”

Pierce smirked but wisely moved on. “He’s the one we’ve been hearing about for the past few years that you have such a crush on. He’s the reason you stopped even attempting to date.”

“No one could compare to him.”

“How?”

His question stopped me short. “What do you mean, ‘how?’”

“How is he so great? I get that he’s adorable and efficient, but how did that translate into being this person who you’ve been enamored of for three years?”

I opened my mouth to chastise him for being so dense. Of course, Byron was amazing. How could he not see it? It was obvious when...

My mind went blank. What was it that had captured my attention? No, what had grabbed me by the throat and wouldn’t let me go, instead tightening its grip with each passing day?

That first day, it had been his tiny smile as I’d passed him in the main lobby. We’d caught each other checking one another out. Our gazes had slid down our bodies and

slammed into each other as we made it up to our faces. The smallest lift of the corners of his lips. It wasn't a smirk, but something similar. Like we'd shared a joke without ever saying a word.

The situation had become even funnier after it had turned out that he was there to interview for the position of my assistant.

But despite that shared moment, he'd always been one hundred percent professional. Yes, he was brilliant, efficient, analytical, detail oriented, and driven. Yet, within a year, I'd discovered he was also thoughtful and compassionate. No matter how busy he was, he always had time to help someone out, no matter who they were. He had a soft spot for everyone he met, and that only made me want to protect that vulnerability.

Each day, he'd been there at my side, making every hour easier. He'd listened to me complaining and my crazy ideas. He'd seemed to know naturally when I just needed someone to listen and when I'd needed suggestions.

What had driven me crazy was that he was always there to help me, but I'd never felt like I could return the favor. Not once had he shared anything personal. Until a couple of months ago, I'd known nothing about his family or his financial situation. To the entire world, he presented this guy who had everything under control and didn't have a single problem.

Being able to listen to his problems and hold him had given me more joy than I would have ever thought possible.

"Wow. I don't think I've ever seen you quiet for this long. And that smile is getting a little creepy." Pierce's comments broke into my rambling thoughts.

"Shut up."

“Got it bad, huh?”

“Totally. I want to marry him. I want to marry him, lock him up in this house, and keep him safe from the world while spoiling him in every way possible.”

Pierce chuckled and shook his head. “That a lot worse than bad. That’s a felony.”

“Shut up.”

My friend shut up and couldn't speak for nearly an hour because I was too busy telling him all the things that I loved about Byron from the very first time I'd met him until just a few days ago. I told him about Byron's family and his financial situation of supporting his disabled brother and mother all on his own. At the same time, I finished my plate, and we both picked at the charcuterie board Carol had also pulled together.

I finally stopped talking. My stomach was full and my heart didn't feel as if it were still carrying around a dozen knives jabbed into it.

“So, let me get this straight. On a whim, you convinced him to risk this delicate balancing act that's his life. Meanwhile, you couldn't be bothered to take the steps to protect him from losing everything because...why?”

I winced at Pierce's words, but I couldn't argue with him. “At first, my reasoning was that if I did it too quickly, and we discovered we weren't a good fit, I'd never get him back as my assistant. We might be horrible as a couple, but I knew we were great work partners. And then later...I might have gotten caught up in all the fun we were having. I didn't want to rush losing him. For almost two months, I was getting to see him during the day and a few evenings a week. Everything fell apart so fast and unexpectedly.”

Pierce reached across the counter and smacked me on the side of the head. “You were greedy and selfish.”

“And I ruined his life. I’m not surprised he doesn’t want to see me. Who would want to date a selfish asshole?”

Pierce groaned and smacked me again, which earned a glare. “You were selfish, but you’re not normally selfish. I’m sure Byron knows that.”

“I need to fix this. To help him. Even if he doesn’t want to see me, I’ve got to make this right by him. And not by offering him money. He’s proud and doesn’t want to be taken care of. He needs a job.”

Pierce rolled his eyes. “God, I hope you don’t win him back. He’s a catch, and I plan to steal him from you.”

“Fuck you! He won’t have you.”

My dear, sweet friend flashed me a wicked grin. “Wanna bet?”

A boulder sank into my stomach, and I worried about losing everything I’d just eaten. Who the fuck was I kidding? Pierce was tall, dark, and fucking sexy. He could be smooth and charming when he set his mind to it. Why wouldn’t Byron fall for him? And Pierce probably would fall in love with Byron.

Didn’t I want Byron to be happy? Wasn’t that the important thing in all this? Of course, I was being selfish.

“Holy fuck, Cor! I was kidding. I’m not going to steal your man away.” He slapped his hand on the marble counter, jolting me from my bleak thoughts. “I might be a dick, but I like to believe that I’m not that bad. At least, not to my friends.” He straightened, a dubious frown on his face, as if he were having serious doubts about my sanity. I didn’t blame him. I was beginning to have doubts about my sanity.

“Let me check in with my head of HR tomorrow to see if we have any openings.” Pierce pulled his phone out of his back pocket and started typing himself a reminder. “I mean, I could always create a position, but if Byron is half as smart as you claim he is, he’d smell a charity job a mile away.”

“Definitely.”

“I’ve also sent a message to Rome asking him to check with his HR people. Maybe they’ve got something there.” Pierce tucked his phone away. “Even with this shadow over him, he’s a smart guy and has to have a killer résumé. I know he’s going to land on his feet. Once you’ve both had time to cool off and get stable, I’m sure you’ll be able to try dating again. It’ll probably be even better because you don’t have to worry about being discovered.”

I grunted, but it felt like my hope was sliding away with each passing day. The important thing was helping Byron feel like he was in control and safe. That would only happen when he had a job that gave him a sense of pride and self-worth. My fuckup had stolen all that away.

As I glanced at my friend, I briefly considered bringing up the topic of Sawyer’s little brother being in town, but I dropped the idea almost as quickly as it had formed. Right now, Pierce was in a good mood and feeling helpful. Mentioning Simon, or even Sawyer for that matter, would destroy all our goodwill and camaraderie. To be honest, I was exhausted. I didn’t have it in me to tackle that subject.

Sawyer had died well more than a decade ago, but the topic was marked permanently off-limits with Pierce. As far as I knew, he and Sawyer had only ever been friends. They’d never dated. Hell, I’d thought Sawyer was the one straight one of our group. Yet, Sawyer’s death had hit Pierce like someone had ripped out part of his soul. All our attempts to get him to open up and talk about it had been met with shouts, fists, and slammed doors. We’d learned to back off before we lost him as a friend.

I'd thought enough time had passed since Sawyer's death that Pierce wouldn't care about Simon moving to town, but he'd proved me wrong.

For now, it was something we couldn't worry about. My brain was full of Byron.

23

BYRON GRAHAM

"I brought pizza and beer!" Kaylan exclaimed as soon as I opened the door.

It may have been the first time I'd smiled in a week.

My former coworker held up a six-pack of a local brew and what looked to be a large pizza that smelled fucking divine.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked as I stepped back to let him in into my apartment. It was Monday—a full week since my inglorious firing—and he should've been in the office right now dealing with the phones, reports, and whatever the chairman needed him for.

"The chairman felt sorry for me and gave me a three-day weekend after the shit storm that was last week."



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I winced at Kaylan as I shut the door. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m blaming Sebastian for this nightmare, and I am cooking up plans for how I’m going to torment him when he returns to the office.”

For a full minute, I let myself daydream about all the ways that Kaylan could fuck up Sebastian’s day and make his work hell, but then the minute was over, and I came to my senses. “No, don’t.”

Kaylan swung around, his eyes wide enough to roll right out of his head. “Are you shitting me? You don’t want me to get even? Just a little torture? Wait! Are you still dating?”

Talking to Kaylan could be a roller-coaster ride at times. He had this fantastic way of firing questions at you faster than a machine gun spit out bullets, and he’d change topics midstream.

With a grunt, I took the pizza and beer from him and nudged him toward the futon. “Sit. No, we’re not dating...technically...I think. We’re...on a break, I guess. I need some time to get my bearings. Besides, regardless of what’s happening between Sebastian and me, you can’t be unprofessional at work. You’re better than that.”

“He’s not,” Kaylan muttered under his breath, and his sense of loyalty was touching.

“Sebastian was. Mostly,” I corrected him. “What happened between us was unprofessional, but the personal side all occurred outside the office.”

Mostly.

I'd never gotten to fulfill my fantasy of giving him a blowjob in his office or having him fuck me on his desk, but that was for the best.

"How did you even find out where I live?" I asked, trying to get us off the topic of Sebastian and Courtland Enterprises for a second.

Now it was Kaylan's turn to wince as he opened the box holding the beers. He handed me one and offered an apologetic smile. "So, I might have gone begging to Janice for it. I told her I'd been unable to contact you, and I was worried. That I just wanted to check on you. Are you mad? I would have asked you, but you've always been so private, I was afraid that you wouldn't tell me."

How could I be angry with him? It didn't sound like Sebastian had put him up to it, and Kaylan had always been such a good friend to me in the office. The only reason I would have avoided telling him was out of shame for my place, but sitting there with him as I opened a beer, it didn't feel like it mattered.

"No, I'm not pissed. I'm touched that you were worried about me."

"Of course! I loved working with you, and how things went down was fucking wrong."

"How's morale in the office?"

Kaylan shrugged one shoulder as he grabbed a slice of pizza loaded with toppings. "Not great. Everyone is worried about earnings and if there are going to be layoffs this winter. Of course, there's the thing with you and Sebastian. Last week was rough. I'm kind of hoping that things improve this week after everyone has time over the weekend to chill."

I took a big bite of pizza and moaned. To make my money stretch, I'd already slashed my meager food budget to the essentials. A greasy, hot pizza loaded with meat and veggies was just the thing I needed to fill my stomach.

“However, Mr. Courtland is planning to announce later this week that they are going to implement your proposal to improve earnings and save jobs. They’ve still got one new product they are planning a big splash for, but he said that he thinks your proposal is brilliant and will save the company even without the new product.”

The bite of pizza was forgotten in my mouth for a moment as I struggled to digest what Kaylan had said.

“Really? He told you that?”

Kaylan nodded. “He did, and it wasn’t Sebastian pitching it to his dad. Declan Foster and a bunch of the other executive VPs all pushed it. They’re excited about your plan.”

Wow...

Just...fucking wow.

More than anything, it showed my termination wasn’t personal if he was willing to hang the company’s future on my plan and that so many people supported it. Now, if I could get someone to admit that during a reference call, I’d be golden.

“How are things with you?” Kaylan asked as he snagged another slice of pizza.

I shoved to my feet and went to the kitchen to grab a hand towel for us to share. “It’s about as good as you would expect. The job market isn’t all that great right now. I’ve sent out about twenty résumés so far, but I’ve heard nothing back.”

“Yeah, but it’s too early. It takes forever for those big companies to work through the stack of résumés and then send the ones that meet the qualifications to the manager and then the manager has to go through them. You’ll start hearing from people later this week.”

The smile that grew on my lips felt so damned forced. I knew Kaylan was trying to help, but the idea of waiting and not knowing was the worst part. Plus, most of these enormous companies were using algorithms and AI to weed through applicants. There was no telling if my application was getting through the AI sorting or if I was being rejected before a human even saw my qualifications.

Thankfully, Kaylan was good at reading people and wandered off to a new topic. This one was the more enjoyable random gossip he still heard, despite being on the top floor. Unlike me, he was always smart enough to make a trip to the coffee cart in the first-floor lobby at lunch and always volunteered to deliver random documents and other things to the various other departments. He said it was to “stretch his legs” but I knew it was his chance to chat with other departments and get all the good tea.

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While we talked, we polished off half the pizza and a couple of beers a piece. I was debating another slice when there was a knock at my door. I looked at my companion and raised one eyebrow.

“No clue. I didn’t tell anyone I was coming here,” Kaylan said.

I answered the door and was floored again, but not in a good way.

“Mr. Stern, this is a surprise,” I choked out. The Courtland family lawyer was standing in my hallway. Jacob Stern had appeared in the office here and there to deal with some personal legal matters for Sebastian over the years. We’d exchanged pleasantries, and I’d fixed him some coffee, but that was the extent of our interactions.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Graham. I hope I’m not disturbing you. If you have a moment, I’d like to discuss some legal matters.”

“Um...sure,” I said, fighting the urge to mumble as the pizza I’d eaten now churned in my stomach. I stepped aside and waved him to enter. “Mr. Stern, I don’t know if you’ve met Kaylan Baumgartner. He is Sebastian Courtland’s executive assistant now.”

Kaylan jumped to his feet and stiffened, going from relaxed and easygoing to prim and proper in a flash.

Jacob smiled at Kaylan. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced, but I believe I’ve seen you in the office. A pleasure, Mr. Baumgartner.”

They shook hands while I hastily gathered up the box of remaining pizza and the box holding the last two unopened beers.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your lunch, gentlemen, but I have two small matters the Courtland family has asked me to discuss with you.”

Kaylan took a step away and pointed at the door. “I’ll get out of your hair then. I’m sure you want to discuss this in private.”

“No!” The word leaped from my tongue. I had a dark suspicion of what one of those issues might be and I wanted a witness here with me, someone who at least had my back. I cleared my throat and forced a grin for my friend. “Could you stay? Please?”

“Yeah, sure. Of course.”

No one said anything for several minutes as the lawyer perched his old bones on the edge of my futon and awkwardly dug through his briefcase, which was balanced on the box I was using for a table. I sat next to him, trying not to peer at the papers he had with him all while every nerve in my body practiced tying itself into a bow. Kaylan grabbed a folding chair I’d had propped against the wall and set it up next to me. The apartment had more people in it than I’d ever had. This was almost feeling like a party.

Except one of my guests was a lawyer and was probably there to sue me.

“Mr. John Courtland initiated the first piece of paperwork I’d like to go over with you. It is the incident of you and his son, Mr. Sebastian Courtland.” He handed me a large stack of papers that were filled with tiny type and instantly created those first twinges of a headache in my eyes. “The basic overview of the document that I’d like you to sign is an agreement that you will waive all right to sue Sebastian Courtland, the Courtland family, and Courtland Enterprises regarding the termination of your

position as it relates to your romantic relationship with the younger Courtland. You would also agree to not publicly or privately slander Sebastian Courtland regarding your work history or your romantic history.”

Some of Jacob’s words blurred a bit in my brain, but I got the gist of it. Sebastian’s father was making sure that I wouldn’t come back and sue their asses. Maybe some people were assholes and would jump on this, but there was no way I would. I might be the person who was suffering the most from this debacle, yet I couldn’t deny that I’d brought it on myself. Sebastian wasn’t alone in this. He hadn’t harassed me or forced himself on me. Fuck, I was pretty sure I was the one who’d jumped his bones.

My brain tuned in to the lawyer as he pulled out a check made out to me with a lot of fucking zeros on it.

Ten million.

Jacob Courtland was offering me ten million dollars to not sue the company or his son.

A loud coughing and choking noise came from across the room, but I couldn’t tear my eyes from the check to look at Kaylan.

“Holy shit,” my friend whispered, though it sounded like a shout in that quiet room.

“Is he trying to pay me to stay away from his son?” I demanded in a strangled tone.

“No! No, that’s not what this is,” Jacob argued. “Mr. Courtland said he had no problem with you dating Sebastian. No, this is a matter of the impropriety of the relationship at the time and the possible legal ramifications. Mr. Courtland would like you to view this monetary offer as a show of gratitude for not dragging the Courtland family and company into a lengthy court battle that would be emotionally exhausting for all involved.”

“No.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What?”

Jacob and Kaylan reacted at the same time.

“You won’t sign?” Jacob pressed.

“I’ll sign, but I won’t take the money. I don’t want the Courtland money. This isn’t and will never be about money for me.” With my heart pounding, I reached out and grabbed a pen from Jacob’s open briefcase. I snagged the check first and wrote “void” across it in big, bold letters, so there was no mistaking that no one was cashing this damn thing, and I didn’t have room for second-guessing myself. While both men were busy gasping for air, I picked up the legal document and started skimming to make sure that I wasn’t admitting to any wrongdoing or other nastiness by signing it.



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“Byron!” Kaylan groaned. “Why not take it? No offense, but you could use it. Hell, most people in the world could use it.”

“Just because I could use it doesn’t mean I have a right to it,” I snarled. “I never had any plan or intention of suing anyone. I have no interest in Courtland money. Taking the money is wrong.” I finished skimming and signed the document. With it back in Jacob’s hands, I felt like I could breathe easier.

“Thank you, Mr. Graham. I’ll tell Mr. Courtland. I’m sure it will put his mind at ease. You understand, of course, that it was a formality to protect the financial well-being of the family and the company. I don’t think Mr. Courtland is particularly proud of this offer, but unfortunately, Sebastian had a run in with someone who didn’t possess a tenth of your integrity. I think that past encounter has made Mr. Courtland very...cautious.”

The corner of my mouth lifted in a smirk. “There are no hard feelings.”

Yeah, it was a dick move on John Courtland’s part, but I got it. There were plenty of people out there who would have done anything they could to get a slice of Courtland money, and this was the easiest way he could protect his family.

Yet, despite everything that had happened, I didn’t hate Sebastian, and I certainly didn’t want to hurt the company. They were facing enough problems. I didn’t want to be the reason hundreds or even thousands of people lost their jobs.

“Well, there is one other matter, and after your response to this, I’m not sure how you’re going to react,” Jacob continued. He stuck the legal documents that I’d signed

away into a folder and pulled out another thicker packet. I couldn't even guess what it was. The first thing wasn't a surprise, but what else could there be?

Jacob opened the folder and in big letters at the top was written "The Ronald Graham Jr. Trust." The gasp cut my throat, and I slapped my hand over my mouth to hold in any other noises before they could escape. Kaylan leaned closer to me in his seat, his hand squeezing my shoulder.

"Sebastian Courtland had me start on the creation of the trust weeks ago. I'm sorry I couldn't get it completed until now. He has funded the trust already. He told me that the goal of the trust is to provide the money needed to support your disabled brother comfortably, covering all his living expenses and medical needs for a minimum of ten years. I was there in the meetings with the financial team, who will oversee the investment of the funds, so they will continue to grow. I will be honest with you, Mr. Graham, with careful management, the amount in this trust should last all of your brother's life without a problem."

"But he can't..." My voice broke and I could only shake my head. The bargain was one year for each date. We'd gone out on six dates, but he'd put aside all this money to help my brother. He couldn't do this. After the meltdown at work, I'd decided that I wouldn't hold him to that stupid bargain. The whole thing had been a silly ploy to get me to go out with him.

"I can't accept this," I said, wiping away the tears that kept trying to spill down my face. This hurt even more than that ridiculous check from Sebastian's father. This was for my brother and making sure he could live the best life he could. No matter how hard I worked, I'd never be able to give him this kind of security.

"I'm sorry. You misunderstand, Mr. Graham. Technically, there's nothing for you to accept. The money has been set aside and placed in a trust for your brother. Not you. As his primary caregiver, you can elect to not use the money for his care, but it will

then sit there untouched. As you'll see here." Jacob flipped through some pages to show me the details of the trust. "Mr. Courtland has noted that he is willing to act as an advisor if you have questions, but he can neither take the money out of the trust nor spend it. You are the sole manager of this trust."

"And as the manager, I could dissolve the trust and give the money back to Sebastian, right?"

Jacob frowned at me, and even Kaylan was frowning now.

"True, but is that in your brother's best interest?" Jacob asked.

Kaylan's hand tightened on my shoulder, and I looked at him. "Maybe he wants to help your brother. Why don't you take some time to think about it before you do anything rash? You've been through a lot recently. Got a lot on your mind. Just...just let it be for now. Maybe talk it over with Sebastian in a few days."

They were wearing me down. I honestly didn't know what the right answer was. Rejecting John Courtland's payoff felt like the right thing. I wasn't for sale. What was left of my integrity and pride were still intact.

But now, with this trust, I wasn't as sure. When it came to Ronnie and his care, I was willing to sell my soul to take care of him. Was that so wrong? Would Sebastian say I used him for his money, even if it was for a good cause?

In the end, I closed my eyes and nodded. I swallowed hard against the tears of relief that had risen in my throat. "Thank you, Mr. Stern. Could you tell Sebastian that I appreciate the trust for Ronnie and that I will think this over?"

"I will pass the message to him."

Jacob spent another few minutes walking me through the information packet that he'd brought, showing me a variety of people I could contact if I had questions about how to use the money, how it was invested, and any tax-related concerns. It seemed like Sebastian had thought of everything, but then it might have also been the problem of my brain being overloaded by the shock of what he'd done.

After the lawyer left, Kaylan lingered for another fifteen minutes. Clearly, he was there to make sure that I was okay and wasn't about to do anything insane like call someone to have the trust dissolved. My gut response might have been to shove the money away as if it were something dirty, but the more time passed, the more all I could feel was relief.

Ronnie was safe. I could move him to the new hospital, and he'd have access to whatever treatments and medication he needed.

Plus, if I wasn't worried about paying Ronnie's bills any longer, I could breathe easier about finding a job. When I did, I might even have enough free now to get Mom in an assisted living facility or at least try to get her in another program to help her sober up. This was more help than I could begin to even understand or explain.

The moment I was alone, I sat on the floor in the middle of the apartment and cried. Big, heaving sobs left me, shaking my entire body until I thought my bones were going to break. I didn't have a job, but my brother was safe. Part of me wanted to run out and find Sebastian. To hug him so tight and thank him a million times for what he'd done.

But I couldn't. Things were still such a mess between us. There was no way Sebastian would want me back if he thought for a second it was only out of gratitude. Sebastian hadn't created this trust to buy my love. That was not his style.

No. It was all too much right now.

Yet...later...after things were quiet and settled, could we really find our way to each other?

24

BYRON GRAHAM

Don't panic.

Everything is going to be fine.

Just don't panic.

I'd been repeating this to myself the entire drive up to Blue Ash. The job interview had come out of nowhere. I'd woken up to a phone call from a recruiter asking if I could head to the Stanton Holding corporate headquarters for an interview for a management position that promised a much higher six-figure salary. The only problem was that I needed to be there in ninety minutes. That gave me zero time to research anything about the company.

I rushed through my morning prep, jumped into a suit, grabbed my briefcase, prepped with my résumé and a stack of reputable references, and raced out the door. Of course, morning rush hour heading north was a bear, and I arrived at the shining glass building with less than five minutes to spare.

As I walked into the lobby to find a receptionist or a directory that would point me to the correct floor, my feet stopped as a barrage of rainbows hit my eyes. And not the typical rainbow flags hanging or draped over random surfaces, but subtle things like several bouquets in crystal vases were arranged to form a rainbow. There were a couple of end tables and a coffee table in the waiting area that had a flourish of pamphlets that were fanned out to form a rainbow.

And it wasn't even June. It was July. Pride month was finished, and they were displaying rainbows. This had to be more than a simple LGBTQIA+-friendly

company.

“Mr. Graham?” asked the woman sitting at the round desk in the center of the lobby with a smile on her lips.

“Hello. Yes. I have an appointment with Mrs. Heather Culver.”

“Wonderful. If you would like to have a seat, I’ve already sent her a message that you’ve arrived.”

I nodded and walked to the pleasant seating area with plush white couches and elegant glass tables. The second the receptionist’s attention was on her computer, I leaned in to take a peek at the pamphlets that were set out. One looked to be for a counseling service that specialized in helping parents of LGBTQIA+ children. Another one was for a program to support homeless LGBTQIA+ kids. I was reaching for another when the clack of heels across the marble floor jerked my attention up to the smartly dressed woman walking toward me.

I stood and ran a hand down the front of my suit while tucking my portfolio under my arm.

“Mrs. Culver?”

“Hi, Mr. Graham. I am so happy you could meet with us on such short notice,” she replied, shaking my hand as she reached me.

“Not a problem.”

She turned, and we walked together to the elevators at the rear of the lobby. “Was traffic bad?”

“Just the usual,” I stated. The traffic had been horrendous, the car was low on gas, and the engine was now making a new weird noise that sounded ominous and expensive. I needed this interview to turn into something big. While I’d been out of work for roughly three weeks, there had been few nibbles on the many résumés I’d sent out. Plus, I was hearing that the interviewing process had grown even longer in recent years, which meant getting hired and receiving that first paycheck could take months.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but the recruiter’s call took me by surprise,” I said as the elevator doors closed in front of us. “I didn’t have the chance to do any research about Stanton Holding to make sure that I’m a good fit for your firm. It would be horrible and unfair to both of us if I wasted your time.”

“Oh, you’re fine. It was unfair of us to spring this on you, but when Danielle saw your résumé, she announced that you’d be a perfect fit. You also come highly recommended.”

Danielle?

Did I know any Danielles? Particularly ones who worked in human resources. No one was coming to mind.

“Stanton is a holding company for three different LGBTQIA+-focused charity organizations to help children, adults, and parents of LGBTQIA+ children safely navigate the world while also providing advocacy for equal rights whether at the city, state, or national government levels.”

“Wow.” I exhaled. “That’s...that’s amazing. And this position that I’m interviewing for? The recruiter couldn’t give me any details. Only that it is management. Which specific charity would it be for?”



“I’m going to leave that for Danielle to fill you in. You’ve been all she’s talked about since her charity fund raiser at the end of June. Your suggestions for the new marketing campaign have lit a fire under our lead designer.”

Her words dissolved into white noise as she said something that called up a key memory.

The charity fund raiser at Sebastian’s parents’ house.

Danielle...as in Danielle Courtland.

Sebastian’s mother.

My brain was still processing this information when the elevator doors whooshed open and I was left staring out at a bright and pretty top floor with another sitting area that reminded me a lot of the top floor for Courtland Enterprises. It wouldn’t have surprised me if the same interior designer had been used for both companies.

All the hope that had bubbled in my veins and danced in my stomach turned to rocks and sank, pulling my organs down to my toes. I didn’t want to move off the elevator. What was the point? This couldn’t be a real interview. This had been Danielle’s way to get me here so she could shout at me over ruining her son’s reputation or using him for money or some other despicable thing.

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Heather looked back and smiled at me the moment she noticed I hadn't moved with her. It was all I could do to paste a matching smile on my lips. She had no idea that this was all a farce. It wasn't her fault that her boss was pulling some shady shit to make my life hell.

We walked in to encounter Danielle's assistant, who rose from her desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Graham. I'm Mrs. Courtland's assistant, Chloe. Mrs. Courtland is ready for you."

Heather reached out and gave me a pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll do great. We can chat again after your meeting."

I wanted to tell her that there wouldn't be a chat and there was no way I was going to be great, but I swallowed the knot in my throat and nodded. I followed Chloe through the lobby to the nearby office with the door standing open.

Unlike Sebastian's and John's offices, Danielle's was sunny and cheerful, with beautiful flowers in cut crystal vases that reflected the light coming from the wall of windows behind her. She rose from behind her desk the second Chloe stepped into the doorway, not even giving her a chance to knock on the door.

"There you are! Byron, you must hate me for calling you so last minute, but I refused to wait a minute longer. Come in! Come in!" She waved at me with both hands as I stood frozen in the doorway.

This was not the enraged Momma Bear I'd been expecting. She appeared genuinely

welcoming and happy to see me. What the fuck was going on?

“Would you like something to drink? Coffee? Water? Tea?” Chloe inquired as I stepped into the office.

“No.” I stopped and cleared my throat when that single word got caught. “No, thank you. I’m fine.”

“Chloe, could you make some hot tea for us? The one with lemon. Byron is looking a little pale to me.”

“Right away, Mrs. Courtland.” Chloe zipped out of the office, leaving me alone with Danielle in her shining, posh domain.

“Mrs. Courtland...”

She waved at me again, beckoning me to a sofa and two chairs around a coffee table, like we were going to have a chat. She settled in one of the white chairs, but I remained standing beside the sofa.

“Mrs. Courtland,” I started, managing a firmer tone. I understood she was probably upset over her son being hurt by me, but she needed to recognize that Sebastian wasn’t the only injured party in all this. My hands balled into fists at my sides, and I gathered up the last shreds of my courage. “I wish you would have contacted me directly rather than going through this farce of calling me in for a nonexistent job. I would have been willing to meet with you to discuss anything you wish, but when I agreed to this meeting, no one told me it would be with you. It is rather cruel to have gotten my hopes up about nothing, and I didn’t take you for someone who was cruel.”

Danielle blinked at me. “Nonexistent? Byron, do you really think I’m the type of person to mix business and personal?”

“I...” Everything in my brain became a muddled mess, and I didn’t know what to say next. While I didn’t know her well from our one meeting, I didn’t get the impression that she was the type to use her work to settle a personal feud.

“There is a job, I promise. I just told them to not mention my name or the Courtland name. I was afraid you wouldn’t consider it because of my link to Sebastian or even John.”

“I think...I’m confused,” I whispered, feeling very lost at sea.

“Sit down, please.”

My knees gave out, so I wasn’t exactly graceful.

Danielle’s smile remained bright and gentle as she continued, “We didn’t get the chance to talk as much as I would have liked at the fund raiser, but in the time we had together, I was so impressed by all your creative ideas and suggestions. I kept thinking, ‘Here’s a guy who was coming up with all these things off the top of his head with only a moment’s notice. What amazing things could he do if he had days, weeks, or even months to plan?’”

“Thank you,” I murmured, still in awe of what she was saying. “But I know nothing about working for a charity.”

She gave a shrug. “It’s the same as running a business in a lot of ways. Of course, there’s more legal paperwork and tax issues, but that’s why we have a legion of experienced lawyers and accountants on our payroll—to keep us protected.” She leaned forward and grinned. “Do you know why I started the Rainbow Counseling Network? Sebastian came out to his father and me as gay, and I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t even understand it. Was there something his father and I had done or didn’t do when he was young? I tried to say the right things

and be supportive, but I wasn't even sure if I did that correctly. That bothered me. Not him being gay, but that I didn't know how to support my child. Before my husband and I came into our money, I worked as a nurse. A nurse with a college degree and countless years of training, and I didn't know how to help my son."

"That must have been very painful for you," I said.

"It was, and I was disappointed in myself. So, I began doing research. I talked to social workers and therapists. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and even pediatricians. Even with all these professionals, there was a lot of bad information out there. I could only do this because I have the privilege of money and time, but there were a lot of families out there without the same resources who are asking the same questions I was."

A smile spread across my lips while my eyes burned. "So, you created the counseling network?"

She nodded. "It was designed to help people of all ages who are questioning their sexual identity and need mental health help dealing with that. Or even if they just need general information, such as safe places to live and work. Even doctors who are allies of the community. We also offer training and support to families of LGBTQIA+ children, giving them the skills they need to support their children." She sighed and lifted her hands. "But once we dug in, we uncovered so many other underserved areas. Particularly homeless kids who'd been kicked out after their parents discovered they were LGBTQIA+. So, I created the Hope Bastion and Stanton Law Group." She paused and winked at me. "Stanton is my maiden name. Stanton Law Group specializes in assisting LGBTQIA+ people who have been discriminated against. We focus mostly on the local level and state, though we are doing a bit of lobbying on the national level."

"This...this is all amazing, but I'm not sure why you believe I am a fit here, other

than the fact that I'm a gay man."

Danielle made a dismissive noise. "Being a gay man only helps you about this much." She lifted her hand to show her thumb and index finger held about an inch apart. "It gives you real-world insight that a straight man wouldn't likely have. No, the main reason I'm interested in you is your college education combined with your experience at Courtland Enterprises." She leaned forward and picked up a piece of paper that looked like it was a copy of my résumé, but I couldn't imagine how she'd gotten her hands on it. "You got your bachelor's degree from the University of Cincinnati with a double major in business management and marketing. Then got your master's from Xavier University. Both times, you finished with a GPA of 3.8. You had a couple of other jobs for smaller firms working in their marketing department before getting hired on at Courtland Enterprises, where you worked for just over three years. Why don't you tell me about this proposal that Courtland is implementing to save its ass?"

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I had to bite the inside of my cheek at her snarky tone, but I got myself under control and launched into a lengthy description of my process for developing my idea and how I'd worked with the other departments to gather the financial proof I'd needed to show that it was a viable idea.

From there, Danielle ran me through a variety of initiatives that I'd worked on. After a short time, I no longer needed her to prompt me. The interview gremlin in my brain finally fucking woke up and remembered how to sell me and my skills. She'd slipped us straight into an interview without making it feel like I was being interviewed.

Two hours flashed by in the blink of an eye. I stopped only to take a sip of my now-lukewarm tea to wet my painfully dry mouth after so much talking.

"So, what you're telling me is that you have experience working with multiple departments to organize and spearhead long-term initiatives to meet goals by a set deadline. You can design and stick to a strict budget. And you have no problem dealing with people from all levels of a business."

"Yes."

"And since you worked for my son, I know you are an expert at handling frantic, impulsive, idea-driven people who just might have a tendency to flit from one shiny thing to the next."

"Um...yes." That was a frighteningly accurate description of her son. However, Sebastian could focus and worked very hard at getting tasks done even when he was haunted by shiny new things.

“Good. I need a COO. We’ve never had one. I’ve overseen everything and I have presidents who oversee the workings of the individual charities, but I’ve come to realize that I don’t enjoy the managing part as much. I am a big ideas and big plans person. What we need is someone to manage the general operations of everything. To direct this giant ship to keep my crazy ideas from steering us toward an iceberg. Someone who will tell me no.” She paused, a smirk growing on her lips. “I know for a fact that you told Sebastian no plenty of times, stopping him from running off with new and crazy ideas.”

Heat burned my cheeks. I had told Sebastian no many times as his assistant, but not nearly enough times as the man he was dating. But I pushed through my embarrassment to tackle something a little uglier.

“Mrs. Courtland?—”

“Danielle.”

I nodded. “Danielle, I don’t know what Sebastian has told you about my situation, but I will freely admit that I need a job. Badly. This would help me out tremendously and I think I would enjoy working here, but I don’t want a job offer that has been made out of guilt or pity.”

“Oh, no, not at all. I asked you here because I think you’re best suited for this position. My charity is important to me, but I’m not about to hand it over to someone to run into the ground because I feel bad for that person.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your honesty.”

Danielle rose and walked to her desk to pick up a thick packet of papers. She brought them to the sitting area and handed them to me. “This contains all the details of the job position. The list of expectations is long, but I am confident that you can handle



it. There is also a detailed list of the pay and benefits for the position. I've also included an overview of the charities, what we've done during the past several years, how they've performed, and some rough ideas of how I'd like to expand in the future. My direct phone number and email are in there. Take a couple of days to review everything. Give me a call or shoot me an email if there's anything you have questions about. We'll discuss it. If possible, I would love to get an answer from you by Friday about whether you'll accept my offer."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that I didn't need to take any time to think about it. I could accept right this second. I didn't have to look at the pay offer. There was no doubt in my mind that it was very nice. Throw in that I would be in a position of executive management and working for a charity in an area that was very near and dear to my heart. How could I turn it down?

But she was right. I needed to look over everything and seriously consider whether I was up for the challenge. My college education was in business management, and I'd worked on many projects with different department heads, but it had always been with the feeling that I was Sebastian's voice, borrowing his power. This would all be on my shoulders.

"Yes, I think I should be able to decide by Friday," I agreed, my fingers tightening on the packet of information. The weight of it was daunting, but I was sure it held my future. A much brighter future that could not only help me, but also my mother.

"Excellent, and don't worry if it feels overwhelming at first. I'll be there every step of the way. I'm not going to just toss you in the deep end with the sharks."

"Thank you," I murmured. I stared at the packet and repeated those two precious words a little louder. "Thank you so much for considering me for this opportunity. Regardless of what happens after I leave here today, I am very honored that you believed I would be a good fit for this role. And it would mean a lot to me on a very

personal level to help with your charities.”

Danielle’s smile grew so wide that her eyes became narrow slits and sparkled in the afternoon light. “That makes me so happy to hear. You’re very welcome.”

After that, the interview was done. We shook hands and she walked me to the door, but my feet dragged. Now that the business side of things was complete, there was a personal matter that was screaming loudly, demanding that I at least ask.

“Mrs. Courtland?”

“Danielle,” she corrected, but I didn’t change because this was something else entirely.

“May I ask you a personal question?” I stopped walking, and she turned to face me, her expression silently inquisitive. “How is he doing?”

That warm grin became wickedly sly. She returned to my side and slipped her hand into the crook of my arm before directing us to the sitting area we’d just left.

“Oh, that is personal. And how long have you been wanting to ask that question?”

“Pretty much since you confirmed that this wasn’t a job offer out of pity or guilt.”

She chuckled as we sat at the same time. “To be honest, he’s a mess. Does that make you happy?”

“No!” I shouted in her face, but I didn’t care. The idea was abhorrent and disgusting. “Of course not! I’ll admit that I was pissed at him that first day, but I was angry at a lot of things. Mostly myself. But what happened wasn’t his fault. It was mine. He’d made a lot of silly promises that deep down I logically knew he couldn’t keep, but I

let myself believe them because I wanted to believe them. I wanted to go out on one date with him. I'd had a stupid crush on him for years, and I thought I could be happy with one date. Afterward, we would realize that we were being silly and return to our normal working relationship."

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“Uh-huh. And how’d that work out?” she teased.

“Like shit,” I muttered. We were talking about personal things now. There wasn’t as much need to worry about my language being unprofessional. “One date wasn’t enough. I needed to see him on the weekend and for dinner during the week. I wanted to know all the crazy things he was thinking. We’d both stopped thinking about the consequences of our stupidity because we were so damn happy.”

“I believe it. I can’t remember a time I’ve seen Sebastian happier with someone. Or more depressed since losing you.” She nudged me with her elbow so that I would lift my eyes to her face. She smirked. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

“I—”

What the hell was I going to do about it?

“Would he even still want me? Asking for space hurt him. My entire world was falling apart, and when I looked at him, I felt anger. I didn’t want to feel angry with him. He didn’t deserve it. At least, no more than the anger I felt at myself. Do you think he’d give me a second chance?”

Danielle picked up my hand and held it between both of hers. “Sweetie, I am pretty sure Sebastian would give you a million chances if it meant having you in his life.”

My heart flipped over and raced faster than it had at the impromptu interview this morning. I had a chance. Even if I had to grovel and beg to win another chance with Sebastian, I was willing.

Even before the news of the trust and the job offer, I'd been weakening, wanting to reach out to talk to him. To ask how he was doing.

Oh, fuck that. I wanted to feel his arms around me and have him whisper that everything was going to be okay, because if he said it, I knew it would happen.

After the news of the trust, I'd almost called him a hundred times, but I could never figure out what to say. I was afraid that if we restarted our relationship then, he would always think I'd made the choice because of the money.

"And you don't think he'll believe I'm returning because I'm interested in his money? You see, he set up this trust for my brother?—"

Danielle patted my hand. "I know all about the trust. His father loudly told both Sebastian and me that you refused the money he tried to send to pay you off." She leaned in and lowered her voice. "Sebastian laughed in his father's face and spent the better part of ten minutes crowing about how you couldn't be bought. John feels terrible about that offer, by the way, and would like to apologize in person, but make him wait until you patch things up with Sebastian. Don't let him off the hook too soon."

My lips twitched with barely suppressed laughter at the idea of Sebastian's dad apologizing to me. I pushed on to more important things. "If Sebastian and I were to date again, it wouldn't be a problem if I was also your COO? You wouldn't view that as a conflict of interest?"

"Absolutely not."

I sat still for three seconds before shooting to my feet, pulling my hand free from hers. "I'm sorry, Danielle, but I need to get going. There's something important I need to do right now."

“Go get him!”

Damn straight, I was gonna go get him. No matter what it took, I was getting my Sebastian back.

25

BYRON GRAHAM

Traffic was considerably lighter when I got on the expressway to head south toward downtown, but as soon as other vehicles rushing along I-71 south surrounded my car, I realized I could be headed in the wrong direction entirely. My instincts screamed to go downtown to the office because Sebastian was always there during the week. Where else could he be?

Except I had no idea if he was still on suspension. If he wasn't allowed in the office, he could be at home. Or out with friends who were kind enough to cheer him up. Or he could be out of the country, living it up on some warm beach where some hot Italian in a speedo was currently hitting on him.

Shit.

Fumbling with my phone, I tapped a button and shouted, “Call Kaylan!”

If Sebastian was in the office, Kaylan would know his schedule and help me get in to see him. This couldn't be accomplished over the phone or through a series of text messages. I needed to look Sebastian in the eyes and tell him...

Fuck. What the hell was I going to say?

Sorry I flaked the moment things got rough. Can you give me another chance?

I'm sorry I didn't believe in you enough to help me out of the pit I'd fallen into?

Oh yeah, that made me more freaking appealing than the hot Italian.

“Hey, Byron! How's it going?” Kaylan's voice cut through the car from my phone.

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“Great and possibly terrible. I might have found a job, but what I need is to find Sebastian. Do you know where he is? Has he returned to the office?”

“What do you need him for? Has he screwed up something else?”

“No! No!” I tapped my brakes as the cars ahead of me slowed. “I need to find him to apologize to him about how I overreacted.”

“Um...from what you told me, you didn’t overreact at all. I’m pretty sure you went too easy on him.”

His kind words made me smile, but this was not helping me right now. “Kaylan,” I growled. “Have you seen him? I need to beg him to give me a second chance.”

“Really? Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Kaylan! I thought you liked us together!”

“I do. Er...I did. But he hurt you bad, and I think he should suffer a lot more. You lost your job, and that put your family in danger.”

“Oh my God, when I see you, I’m going to strangle you. Sebastian didn’t mean for this to happen, and he’s already done so much to help my brother. I need to see him. Now. Please...”

“Okay. Okay. He’s here, in the office, but not for long.”



“What?” I screeched. “What’s wrong? Where’s he going?”

“Um...his private jet is fueling up at Lunken now. He’s flying over to Paris for a week or so to meet with the distribution team there.”

“Shit,” I hissed. My hands were so tight on the steering wheel, my knuckles ached. “He’s there. Do you know for how much longer?”

“Well, he popped down to talk to the CFO, but after that he has to come back up to collect the information I’m compiling for him and a couple of other things.”

“I need you to stall him.”

“What?” He sounded as though he thought I’d lost my mind. Maybe I had, but I didn’t care anymore.

“I just passed the BMW Store and Red Bank Road. That puts me about ten, maybe fifteen minutes from downtown. Call security and arrange for them to allow me up. If Sebastian tries to leave before I get there, stall him.”

“How? Should I tell him you’re coming to see him?”

“No! Don’t do that!” For a second, I thought my heart was going to leap out of my chest. “What if he doesn’t want to see me? Telling him I’m coming there could make him leave even faster.”

“And this is the guy you want to make up with?”

“Kaylan! You’re killing me!” I whined. “Are you going to help me or not?”

“Okay! Okay! I still think he needs to suffer, but if you think he’s going to make you

happy, who am I to stand in your way?”

Fucking exactly.

“I’ll go break the printer and call up IT to mess with it. That’ll definitely buy you at least twenty minutes.”

“Oh sweet God, thank you,” I moaned, no longer wishing I could pound my head on the steering wheel. Kaylan wasn’t normally this difficult. I couldn’t only imagine that managing Sebastian was driving him a little crazy.

“Don’t forget that you’ve got to park under Fountain Square when you get here. That other lot close to the office is full at this hour. Come up using the south staircase.”

“Got it! Thanks for your help!”

Kaylan ended the call, and at last I could breathe a sigh of relief. Thank goodness he’d reminded me about the parking. There was one lot near the office that was exclusive to Courtland employees, and I would have gone straight there out of habit. The only problems were that I wasn’t an employee, and it would be completely full at midday.

But now that I had Kaylan working to keep Sebastian in place for the next fifteen to twenty minutes, I could focus on the next problem—what in the world was I going to say to Sebastian that would convince him to give me another chance? How was I going to prove that I was worthy of it? That I would not abandon him the next time things became difficult for us?

I mean, the first test was a hard one. I’d lost my job and had no way of supporting my family. My reputation had been ruined, or so I’d thought.

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Sebastian had only wanted to help me through the rough patch. To give me a little breathing room so I wasn't killing myself to support my mom and brother. And what had I done? Let my ego get in the way. My pride had stopped me from leaning on him when I'd really needed to. Sebastian wouldn't have thought less of me.

Even if I hadn't been willing to take his money, I could have gone to him for emotional support. He would have kept me from feeling so alone and helpless during those dark days.

I should just be honest. Admit where I went wrong, state that I've learned from it, and try very hard to never make the mistake again.

Boooooooooorrrriiiiiinnnnnngggggg...

That would never work.

He was going to laugh in my face, hop on his private jet, and run off to the open arms of some hot French guy who would never abandon him.

Fuck. No. I needed some grand gesture. Some big thing that would steal Sebastian's breath away and make him not hurt any longer. Something?—

A coughing, choking sound erupted from the car engine. I clenched my teeth and silently prayed for it to not stall as we cruised past Rookwood and Hyde Park. I was less than five minutes from my exit. So fucking close.

“Come on, baby,” I coaxed. “If you can make it downtown, I swear I’ll give you a

nice break. We'll go for a proper oil change and even take you in for all kinds of service. All the parts will be replaced. I promise. You just gotta get me to Sebastian."

My poor car sputtered and coughed, her complaining growing louder for every mile that we crossed. She was steadily slowing, but she continued to move as if she were willing to crawl those last few miles to get me to my destination.

Each time we approached an exit, I debated whether to get off, park, and call a rideshare to pick me up, but that would take up even more time that I didn't have. In the end, I kept going, praying my car would make it.

Sweat poured off me, and I pulled at my tie. We could do it. She could keep moving. She was going to get me to the office one last time.

But she didn't.

The old car coasted along the Gilbert Avenue exit, coming to a final wheezing stall just at the cross streets of Seventh Street and Broadway. I was still more than four blocks away from my destination. I had no other options. Cincinnati wasn't one of those cities like New York, where taxis were roving everywhere, waiting for someone to flag them.

Cursing my luck while refusing to be beaten, I snagged an old backpack from the rear seat and stuffed all the paperwork Danielle had given me into it. My phone and keys immediately followed.

And then I fucking ran.

I would not let Sebastian leave town, potentially flying out of my life forever, without him knowing that I loved him.

Yes! That was it. That was exactly what I needed to tell him.

I loved Sebastian Courtland.

I loved his impulsive insanity, his silly grin, and his larger-than-life heart. There wasn't a thing about him I didn't love. Even the stuff that drove me crazy. I wanted all of that every day for the rest of my life.

The brutal July heat beat on me, hammering on my head and cooking me in my suit. Sweat soaked into all the fibers, making the pants stick to my legs as I moved. The hard soles of my dress shoes knocked angrily on the sidewalks as I rushed forward, dodging other pedestrians going about their normal lives. As I approached, a few stared at me and laughed at the insane idiot in a suit running like a horde of zombies was on his heels.

They didn't understand. I'd found the man I wanted to spend my life with, and I could not let him go. Not yet. Not without telling him how much he meant to me.

Two blocks south and four blocks over. It wasn't that far, but it had been a long time since I'd run, particularly in the summer heat. A stitch formed in my side and sweat slipped into my left eye.

At last, Fountain Square came into view. I wheezed and coughed like my poor old car. It was right at lunchtime, when the square was at its busiest. People were slipping out of the surrounding skyscrapers to hit many of the nearby restaurants and food trucks for something to eat.

I could do this. So close. Nothing was going to stop me.

I charged up a few stairs leading to the square that held the famous Tyler Davidson fountain with her arms outstretched, raining water down on other bronze statues. Not

far now.

“Byron Graham is the most honorable, amazing man in Cincinnati.”

My feet almost tripped over themselves at the sound of Sebastian’s voice. But it wasn’t him standing near me and talking. It sounded as if he were coming across loudspeakers.

I turned, trying to spot him. Several other people had also stopped and were pointing at the giant screen on the building across the street.

My picture was on the screen.

Holy shit! My picture was up there!

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SEBASTIAN COURTLAND

I'd been standing thereas Kaylan had taken Byron's call.

Of course, I might have also gotten a quick call from my mother hours earlier telling me her plan to woo Byron into taking the COO job at Stanton Holding and that if I promised to not fuck it up again, shemighttry to sneak in a good word for me.

I'd planned everything to the second days ago with help from Rome, Pierce, and Declan, but I'd been stuck in a holding pattern until I could find the perfect moment to spring it on Byron.

Kaylan might have enjoyed his part of trying to talk Byron out of coming back to me a little too well, but he'd gotten what I needed—a timeline for Byron's arrival and the reassurance that he would cut through Fountain Square to get to the office.

Now he was standing in the center of the downtown park, staring openmouthed at the jumbo screen as it scrolled slowly through more than a dozen pictures of my sweet Byron. Most of them were taken from corporate events where people had snapped candid shots of him smiling and laughing. There were even some more recent pictures of him helping at my mother's charity fund raiser.

And then there was the picture that threw our life off track.

When you stepped away from the turmoil and chaos, all you could see was the love and the happiness. They were beautiful pictures of two men seated on a park table framed by dark-green leaves, sharing a tender, intimate moment.

I wanted to include them here to remove the stain that had inadvertently tainted their beauty. I just hoped that Byron could see their perfection as well.

As the pictures flashed by one after another, the apology I'd recorded played on the outdoor speakers for all the city to hear.

“Byron Graham is the most honorable, amazing man in Cincinnati. He started working for Courtland Enterprises three years ago as the executive assistant for the CEO. During his time there, he exemplified determination, hard work, compassion, and courage. There was no task too big or too small. Everything he touched, he gave his all to make sure that it was the best it could be.

“But most importantly, he touched countless lives at Courtland Enterprises. Everyone who worked with him remains in awe of his dedication and thoughtfulness. For him, it was more than getting a job done. It was about supporting and protecting his coworkers when times were tough, while never asking or expecting the same support. Byron's only mistake was daring to date a man who wasn't worth a tenth of him...”

I walked up behind Byron, barely listening to the audio. I'd spent days writing it and going over it, trying to word the apology just right. There were three little words missing to it, and those I wanted to say to his face. He was such a private person. I was afraid he'd hate this. Yet, our lives had been torn apart in a very public way. It felt right that the entire world would see my apology to him.

My eyes were locked on his stiff form as he watched the screen. He was in the suit I loved him most in—a lovely charcoalgray with a pale-blue-gray button-down shirt and understated tie. But his suit was wrinkled and drenched with sweat. His normally



perfect hair was also soaked in sweat, and his face was bright red. Had he run here?

But even in all his flushed sweatiness, he was still perfect. My arms ached to hold him, to gather him close and tell him I loved him with everything I was.

A murmur of noise was building in volume. People had stopped watching the video and had now turned toward Byron. They were pointing and whispering as they realized that the person the video was intended for was standing amongst them.

The audio stopped, but the pictures continued to scroll. A ragged gasp from Byron gripped my heart and squeezed.

Taking an unsteady breath, I spoke. “Byron?”

He swung around, his eyes wide and shimmering, with tears poised to slip down his face. I dropped to my knees and held out my empty hands in front of me.

“My life is nothing without you in it. Just a great black emptiness where my heart used to be. I don’t deserve a second chance. I’m sorry for failing to protect you. I’m sorry for not taking the danger to your livelihood as seriously as I should have and not fully considering the weight that rested on your shoulders. If you give me a second chance, I swear I will do better. I won’t treat every problem as something to be solved with my checkbook. Your feelings and the well-being of your family will always come first. Byron Graham, I love you and I swear I will love you until the end of my days. Please, will you take me back? Can we try again?”

Byron covered his mouth with one of his hands, his tears finally breaking the dam that held them and slipping over his fingers. The audience we’d accumulated was calling out helpful suggestions. And not so helpful suggestions.

“Take him back!”

“Say yes!”

“Say no! Make him suffer!”

“Give the poor guy a second chance!”

Thankfully, my sweet Byron didn’t leave me to hang in uncertainty for too long. He extended one of his hands to me as he nodded.

“God, yes please,” he choked out as he lowered his other hand from his mouth.

I’d barely made it to my feet when Byron launched himself at me. His lithe body crashed into mine, wrapping his arms behind my neck as my arms closed on his waist. The first touch of his lips was heaven. Thunderous applause broke out across the square, drowning out the rush of cars that echoed up the tall buildings. Now that I had Byron in my arms, everything else faded away. There was no one else that mattered to me.

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“I’m so sorry,” I whispered between frantic kisses.

Byron’s hands shifted to frame my face as he pulled away. “No. No more apologies. I fucked up, too. I panicked at the first sign of things getting difficult and pulled away. My pride got in the way. I’d been supporting my mom and brother for so many years on my own that I thought it was bad if I depended on anyone else. I was scared you’d think I only wanted to be with you for your money.”

“No, baby! Never! You’re not like that.”

“I promise that I’ll be more open and willing to lean on you in the future. I’ll let you support me instead of pushing you away.”

His words made my heart soar. This was all I wanted. To be part of his world, to support him. Not just with a wad of cash, but to be the person who held him as his heart was breaking or the times someone had made him angry.

“I love you.” The words tumbled from my lips and hung trembling in the air between us. “I love you, Byron. With all that I am. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Never let me go again. No matter what stupid things I say.”

I slammed our mouths together. The kiss tasted salty from his tears and sweat, but nothing had ever been sweeter to me. Byron was in my arms, and I was never letting him go. No one had ever fit me so well. No one had ever crawled into my heart and made themselves at home the way Byron did. Losing him for those three weeks had been like my soul had floated free of my body and I’d been nothing more than a husk,

going through the motions.

Not anymore.

The kiss slowly ended, and I glanced up to find that the crowd surrounding us had lost interest in our drama and moved on. The jumbo screen had returned to showing local advertisements of businesses and upcoming events. It looked like the world had moved on, but I still had my Byron.

“Baby, not that I’m complaining, but why are you so red-faced and sweaty? Did you run here?”

“Oh fuck,” he moaned. His head dropped forward to rest on my chest. “My car died. It limped down Gilbert Avenue and finally gave out at Seventh and Broadway. I ran here because I was afraid of missing—oh, shit!” His head suddenly popped up, his eyes wide. “Your flight! You’re supposed to be leaving for Paris.”

“Not without you. But first, I need to get you some water and cooled off before you suffer from heat stroke.”

“But—”

“No buts. You promised you would let me take care of you.” I tucked him against me with my arm around his waist as I ushered him across the square to the Courtland Enterprises building. Byron’s smile turned a little smug, but he didn’t argue one bit as we walked together.

His sigh was profound as we entered the air-conditioned building. The cold air swept over us, working to lower his temperature. Normally, I would head straight for the elevators. Today, I made a pit stop at the security desk where two guards sat wearing the company uniform.

“Mr. Courtland!” one greeted as soon as I drew near. Both men jumped to their feet.

“At ease, guys,” I said with a laugh. “I wanted your team to be updated first. This is my boyfriend, Byron Graham. He’s permitted up to see me at any time he wants. No security checks, please.”

Byron huffed a near-silent laugh and waved to them. “Hey, Nate. Charlie. Good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you again, Mr. Graham,” Nate replied.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Courtland. We’ll update our records and make sure that the entire security team receives your news.”

“Thank you.”

I ushered a giggling Byron onto the elevators. We leaned on the wall as it whisked us up to the top floor.

“You enjoyed that, didn’t you?” he asked, breaking the silence after we’d traveled a few floors.

“Sooooo much,” I admitted, rocking my head back and forth on the wall. “You have no idea. Do you know what else I’ve been dying to do?”

“What?”

I swooped in for another kiss, stealing his breath away as the kiss went on and on. We both seemed to revel in the freedom to kiss each other in public without worrying about the horrific consequences. The thrill of possibly being caught had been fun, but this was a thousand times better.

We only broke apart at the sound of a surprised gasp. My head snapped around to find that the doors had opened without us noticing on another floor and someone was standing on the other side.

“Oh! Sorry. Um...I’ll just get the next one,” she said, her face bright red while a broad grin stretched across her lips.

“Thanks, Fiona,” Byron called out as the door slid shut.

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“Fiona?”

“Payroll,” Byron replied as he pulled me in for another kiss.

“How am I supposed to survive here without you to save my ass constantly?” I teased between kisses.

“Kaylan will take excellent care of you, and I will be there to kiss your bruised ego at the end of the day.”

“Promise?”

Byron’s smile was like a million sparkling lights glowing in a frosty night sky. “I promise.”

The elevator doors opened once again, but to the correct floor this time. I threaded our fingers together and pulled him out after me. As soon as we strolled into view, Kaylan launched from his chair and thrust his arms above his head.

“Yes! I knew you could do it!” he shouted, followed by a wild cackle.

“Thank you for your help. Now, your next job is to make sure that no one disturbs me,” I directed, pointing at him.

Kaylan directed a jaunty salute at us. “Got it. You were never here.”

Now that our backs were covered, I escorted Byron to my office, where I attempted

to capture his lips, but he slipped away from me while holding up one hand.

“Let me borrow your bathroom for a moment to splash some water on my face. I feel disgusting,” Byron begged.

“Go ahead. I’ll get you some water.”

Byron dropped his jacket and bag next to the black leather sofa and disappeared into the bathroom. I immediately tossed my suit jacket across my chair before grabbing a bottle of water from the mini fridge. But that wasn’t good enough for my new boyfriend. No, I got a crystal glass, filled it with ice, and poured the water into that. Then I dug around the assortment of snacks that Byron had always made sure were in my office for when I inevitably got hungry and restless at three o’clock.

What would he like? A packet of mixed nuts? A granola bar? Maybe he had more of a sweet tooth and needed some dark chocolate with sea salt. Or?—

“Stop overthinking it!” Byron called from the bathroom above the sound of running water.

“How did you know?”

Byron’s answer was a low chuckle. Oh, right. Of course, he knew. Byron knew me inside and out from our years of working together. But soon, I was going to know everything about him because of our dating. I couldn’t wait.

Byron reappeared with his tie off and sleeves rolled up. He’d slicked his damp hair off his forehead, and his face was much less flushed. But the wonderful smile was still there, as if he couldn’t stop it from showing now.

I directed him to the couch, where I had the water waiting with a granola bar.



“Perfect,” he murmured as he kissed my cheek.

“Okay, now tell me about your car. Are you okay? Where is it?”

“I’m fine. Just hot and tired,” he answered after drinking half the water I’d poured. “It’s parked, a bit illegally on Seventh, though. I’ll have to call a tow truck to get it taken to a mechanic.”

Carefully, I gathered Byron’s hands in mine. I rubbed my thumbs along his long, nimble fingers, loving that I could now do this whenever I wanted.

“Baby, we’re dating now. Officially, right?”

Byron pressed his lips tightly together, but they still trembled as he nodded. He looked as if he were trying very hard not to laugh in my face.

“If we’re going to be dating, I need you to be okay with something.”

“What’s that?”

“I need you to let me spoil you.”

Byron narrowed his eyes. “Define spoiling.”

“Let me buy you a new car.”

“No.”

“Please, sweetie. I really need to take care of you.” I stuck out my bottom lip and widened my eyes, trying to give him my most pathetic expression. “Please, I need to spoil my baby, and you’re my baby. You’re the only person in my entire life I’ve ever wanted to spoil.”

Byron cackled and pressed his hand into my chest, trying to push me away, but I grabbed his wrist and pulled him in close, nuzzling his neck.

“You’re ridiculous!”

“I’m in love. Hopeless, endlessly, forever in love with you. I want to give you the entire world, but I know you won’t let me. So let me spoil you. A little bit.”

“Okay! Atinybit!”

I lifted my head. “So, a tiny bit is BMW instead of Lamborghini?”

“Okay, but nothing more than a three series.”

I scoffed at him. “Ridiculous. You’re going to be the COO of a multi-million-dollar company. You need at least a five series.”

“It’s a charity, and—hey! How did you know about that? I haven’t even accepted the

job offer.”

“Yet,” I corrected with a grin. I kissed the tip of his nose, but he still glared at me. “Mom called me this morning to warn me she was going to meet with you about the job. She said something like, I need to adjust to this, because while I might have been dumb enough to let you slip through my fingers, she wasn’t.”

“Oh, good Lord,” Byron muttered as he covered his face with his hand.

“Besides, I think you’ll be great at Stanton. Have you thought about it? Are you going to accept? Not that I’m trying to pressure you. You need to do what’s best for?—”

Byron pressed his fingers into my lips and smiled at me. “You’re not pressuring. You’re an adorably excited golden retriever. I think it’s a wonderful opportunity and I want to accept. However, I need to look over all the materials Danielle gave me so I can make a fair and informed decision. This has to be what is best for me and the charity.”

I took his hand and pressed a kiss to his fingers. How could I possibly tell him how proud I was of him? He was brilliant and compassionate and I was so fucking lucky to have him.

“But before we get sidetracked,” Byron said, his expression turning serious as he pulled his hand free. “There’s something I need to say. What you did for Ronnie? I...” His voice gave out, and he swallowed hard. “I don’t have words. Sebastian, you didn’t have to, and I can never thank you enough.”

I leaned in and kissed away a tear at the corner of his eye. “You already have. Plus, I didn’t do it just for you. I did it for Ronnie because he means so much to you. This way, you both can live the best life you can. I would have done it even if it meant

never having you in my arms.”

“I’m never leaving your arms. I love you too much to ever be without you,” he whispered in my ear as he wrapped his arms around my neck.

There was nothing I wanted more than that.

Okay...maybe a little more.

“Baby, I know of this amazing place where you can read all that information my mother gave you. It’s quiet and relaxing. Perfect for making big, life-changing decisions.”

Byron pulled back, his brow furrowed in silent question. “I don’t think your bed is a good spot to make life-changing decisions.”

I chuckled. “No, but I like how you think.”

“Where?”

“Paris.”

“What?” Byron almost choked on the word. “You really need to go to Paris for business? I thought that was some ruse Kaylan made up to get me to hurry downtown.”

I shrugged with a tiny wince. “He made it sound like I was walking out the door so you would come directly here. I was going to leave tonight, but I can postpone it if you need more time to get things in order for your mother.”

“How long would we be gone?”

“What I need to get done would take only a day or two, but we could stay a week. Plenty of time for you to think things over. Plus, it would be our first personal trip together. We could do all the touristy things. Wander the city. Drink wine and eat baguettes. Kiss in front of the Mona Lisa. What do you say?”

“Let me get my passport.”

### EPILOGUE

BYRON GRAHAM

A slow smilesread across my lips as I leaned against the open doorway leading to the balcony of our penthouse hotel room, where champagne and strawberries were waiting for us upon our arrival. Several blocks away, the Eiffel Tower glowed golden in the night sky. A hushed murmur of traffic rushed down the streets while a soft coo and flutter of feathers came from the birds who were finding their roosts on the roof of the building. This magical city was settling in for the night, but I wasn't ready to close my eyes on this dream.

I'd traveled with Sebastian a few times in the past, but it had always been for work, and I'd never taken the time to actually explore the cities we were in. I'd stayed in the hotel and prepared the reports and documents that Sebastian would need for a conference or other meetings. Food had been room service or takeaway from cheap restaurants that were close to the hotel.

But this...it felt like a real vacation in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. There was only one thing that could make this moment better.

As if he'd read my mind, Sebastian silently walked up behind me and slid his arm around my waist, pulling me slightly back sothat I was now resting on his chest. A gentle kiss was pressed to my head, and then my ear, and then my jaw.

“Happy?” he murmured as he nuzzled my neck.

“Blissfully happy.”

“You will be even more amused to know that my mother has texted me yet again.”

“Oh?”

Sebastian had thoughtfully postponed his Paris trip for two days. With some temporary financial assistance, he'd helped me get my mother into a rehabilitation facility to help with her alcoholism and lined up an amazing doctor to look at her back. She wasn't talking to me, but I was fine with that. My conscience was clear.

I'd gotten Ronnie moved to the new long-term care facility shortly after the Courtland lawyer handed the trust information over to me, but Sebastian and I were able to sneak in a visit before we left the States.

The only one who didn't appear pleased with our sudden departure was Sebastian's mother. I'd emailed her that I was going out of town with her son, but I was taking all the information she'd given me to review while I was in Paris.

“Was she reminding you to give me time to get some reading done while we're here?”

“No, this time she warned me not to fuck this up, because she's afraid that if I screw up our relationship, you won't accept her job offer.”

I giggled as I rested my head on his shoulder. “I need to text her and tell her I won't take my frustration with you out on her.”

“Frustration, huh?” One of the hands on my waist wandered upward, sliding across my chest. His nimble fingers had no problem locating my nipple through the material of my shirt and plucking at it. “Exactly what are you frustrated with?”

The low-banked fire that seemed to burn endlessly within my stomach whenever Sebastian was around roared to life with the smallest touch. A soft whimper left my throat, and I pressed into him, instantly craving more. My skin grew tight while blood rushed to my cock, causing it to strain against the front of my jeans.

“Sebastian,” I whispered.

“If you’re such a fan of this view, why don’t I just take you right here on the balcony?” The hand on my hip pulled me back as Sebastian pushed his groin into my ass, teasing me with the outline of his hard cock. My mind was happy to conjure up a picture of me standing with my pants gathered at my ankles while I held on to the railing, Sebastian’s dick buried deep in my ass as I gazed out over the city, my passionate cries of pleasure echoing off the buildings with each thrust.

“God. Sebastian,” I panted. “Dirty exhibitionist. No.”

“Are you sure?” he teased, steadily rubbing his dick along my crease.

Was it tempting? Yes, so fucking tempting. It was also reckless and insane.

We’d already paid the price for a kiss in public. One of us had to have a little sense.

“No. Absolutely not. You can fuck me in the bed.”

Sebastian snorted and the hand on my hip dropped to fondle my dick through my pants, erasing all the common sense I’d claimed to have in the blink of an eye. He could have frog-marched me outside, dropped my pants, and inserted his dick inside



of me and all I would have done was beg for him to fuck me harder. I was weak for him, and there was no saving me.

“I’ve got an idea. You stay right there.”

He released me completely, and I had to catch myself on the doorjamb to keep from falling. A chill swept across my skin where he’d been a second ago, and I shivered as I looked over my shoulder to see him walking across the room to grab a fancy wooden chair with elegantly carved arms and legs. A rose damask with delicate flowers covered the cushions. He couldn’t possibly be thinking...

As he neared the doorway, he peered out, seeming to align the chair with the view of the Eiffel Tower while still being deep within the room.

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“What are you doing?”

“Giving my baby exactly what he wants.”

My eyebrows shot up at that announcement. “And what, pray tell, is that?”

“Sex and the Eiffel Tower.”

“What?” I squawked in a very unromantic, unsexy way. But the horrific noise didn’t appear to deter Sebastian. My boyfriend strolled across the room, shucking clothes as he moved to his bedside table. He paused in his strip show to snag the bottle of lube and a condom from the drawer.

By the time he reached the chair, he was completely naked and looking like a very naughty god with his impressive abs, thick thigh muscles, and devilish smirk. He lounged low in the chair with his legs spread wide, giving me an excellent view of everything. My brain was turning to useless mush. As it was, I felt like I could stuff a hand down my pants and happily jerk off to the vision in front of me. Then he wagged the bottle of lube at me in one hand while he stroked his hard cock with the other.

“You’re wearing far too many clothes, baby,” he purred.

I reached for my shirt to rip it over my head, but stopped to look at the open doorway that led to the balcony and the very heart of Paris.

“We’re far enough into the room that no one should be able to see us from this

angle,” Sebastian reassured me. Not to mention, we’d not bothered to turn on many lights after returning from dinner. The room was dimly lit. Anyone gazing our way probably couldn’t see people moving in the room. To hell with it.

I ripped my shirt off while I toed out of my shoes. In a few seconds, my clothes were lying about the room and I was naked as I strode to my sexy lover. As I leaned down, I gripped the arms of the chair and stole a deep kiss that left him moaning into my mouth. He tasted of wine and a hint of chocolate from the dessert we’d shared after our luxurious dinner.

“Good start, but you’re facing the wrong direction,” he murmured, his lips brushing mine.

I pulled away and frowned at him. “Huh?”

He chuckled and made a little spinning motion with one hand. “Turn around so you can see the Tower.”

I released the arms of the chair and turned. The moment I did, Sebastian grabbed my hips and positioned me exactly where he wanted me.

“Now stretch your arms back. Can you reach the arms of the chair if you bend forward?”

Following his instructions, I bent, pushing my ass toward him until my fingers could grip the chair arms. When I lifted my head, I could see the Eiffel Tower, perfectly, alight against the velvety black sky.

“Perfect.” Sebastian’s low voice caressed my ears and set me on fire. “Now don’t let go of the chair. I promise to take good care of you.” My brain was still trying to comprehend that promise as a hot hand rubbed one ass cheek, sending sparks

shooting through my body straight to my cock.

I'd never had sex with someone quite like this. Sure, I'd been taken from behind plenty of times, but because of the way I was bent and required to hold the arms of the chair, I couldn't twist to see Sebastian. Each time I raised my eyes, there was only the doorway lit by the Eiffel Tower and the alluring feel of his hand massaging and spreading my cheeks.

The snap of the plastic cap on the lube bottle made me flinch, but my heart jumped in eager anticipation of what was to come. One slick, wet digit pushed into me, and I moaned with relief.

"Fuck, that's hot," Sebastian groaned. "It's like I'm being sucked inside of you."

"More," I groaned. One finger wasn't nearly enough. I'd taken his thick cock first thing this morning and had still walked the Champs-Élysées.

He added a second, and I thought my eyes were going to roll into my head. The burning stretch of muscles made my legs tremble while my cock throbbed in time with my racing heart. I wanted to wrap a hand around my dick and stroke myself to the same rhythm that Sebastian had started thrusting his fingers in and out of my ass with.

But I couldn't. My fingers tightened on the arms of the chair. Wood creaked in the nearly silent room. I didn't know if it was from me or Sebastian.

"Look at that, baby," Sebastian grunted. "Your cock is leaking."

I dropped my blurry gaze from the window to my dick. Pre-cum was spilling from the head and dripping steadily onto the carpet.

“So sexy,” he continued. “I can’t wait until we get home. As soon as our latest tests come back negative, we’re doing this position again. I want to fill your ass with my cum and watch it leak out, running down your thighs to the carpet. Do you want that too?”

My tongue couldn’t form words any longer. His delicious torment had reduced my brain to goo, and it was probably dripping out the edge of my dick along with my cum. I wanted everything he could do to me and more. Every touch, every whispered word, every kiss wore away my resistance. I had no defense against him.

“Bastian,” I whined. My knuckles cracked as my fingers tightened on the arms of the chair. It was becoming harder to hang on. My dick throbbed, and I needed to stroke myself for a tiny bit of relief before I screamed.

“What do you need, my baby?”

“Put the condom on and fuck me now!”

“Are you sure?”

“Bastian!” I roared. I gasped to tell him to forget the condom when I heard the heavenly crinkle of the wrapper. My entire body trembled as I danced on the edge of coming. I don’t know how long it took him—somewhere between a second and eternity—but he was pulling me back at last. His fingers had left me and that thick head was now nudging my entrance, stretching resistant muscles.

The moment he was inside of me, I gave in to temptation and sat down, taking all of him in one fast, hard thrust that sent a rush of air out of both our lungs. Oh fuck, so full. I was finally so full that I couldn’t breathe.

“Little devil,” Sebastian growled. He wrapped one arm around my waist and repositioned us so that he could withdraw and thrust upward while I rested on his chest. Sebastian hooked his other arm under my right leg, pulling it up to my chest. A yelp of surprised pleasure burst from me as the next thrust was even deeper.

There was no more conscious thought after that. It was just riding wave after wave of intense ecstasy as he moved in and out of my body like a fucking jackhammer. There was no more finesse or sweet teasing. This was a pounding to knock my teeth out of my head as we raced to the finish line.

Unable to stand it another second, I finally released the chair arm with one hand and closed my aching fingers around my cock. I stroked myself, chasing that tantalizing high until I was screaming my release. My ears were still ringing when Sebastian shouted. The arm across my middle tightened, and I thought he was going to crack a rib.

As I panted, sprawled across my lover with his cock still lodged in my ass, I blinked and the glittering Eiffel Tower came into focus in the distance. I was sweaty, breathless, and sated within an inch of my life in the most romantic city in the world, with a priceless view of one of the iconic structures. It was the perfect moment.

Of course, Sebastian found a way to make it even more perfect.

Soft lips kissed the side of my head down to my ear, where he whispered, “I love you.”

I felt those words in my soul where they were inscribed with Sebastian’s every tender act.

“I love you, too. Thank you for the perfect ending to the perfect day.”

Sebastian hummed and nuzzled the side of my head. “It’s not over until I have you cleaned up and tucked into bed next to me.”

That sounded like heaven, except it required me to move, and right now, I wasn’t sure I could stand on my shaky legs. But my boyfriend was right there to help me up. We stumbled into the bathroom for a quick, hot shower to wash the day and night off us before slipping between the cool sheets.

Sebastian paused long enough to close the balcony door and draw the curtains so the rising sun wouldn’t wake us. As he stretched out beside me, I rolled to rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart under my ear.

“I have an idea...” Sebastian began as sleep was wandering off with my thoughts. Sebastian’s crazy ideas had a way of startling me awake.

“No,” I said instantly.

“What? I haven’t even told you what my idea is yet.”

“You’re thinking of blowing off your meetings tomorrow to spend the day sightseeing with me or fucking me into another coma,” I replied, pinching his side.

“Ha! I wasn’t thinking that, but now I am.”

I chuckled and kissed the center of his chest. “No. Go to your meetings. I’m sure you’ll be done by one or two. That will give me time to finish my reading, and we can meet up for a late lunch.”

Sebastian captured the hand that had pinched his side and pulled it up to kiss. “Fine. But your idea sounds better.”

“What was your idea?” I asked, trying to get him on track before I dozed off. The bed was like sleeping on a cloud. The air conditioning made the room delightfully cool, allowing me to press against Sebastian without becoming overheated.

“Move in with me.”

“What?” I gasped. I sat up so that I could face him, but it was so dark in our room that I couldn’t see him at all.

Sebastian shifted, pushing me onto my back on the mattress while he hovered over me. “Move in with me. If I won’t see your beautiful face every day at the office, I need to at least wake up to it every morning. I need you to be the last person I see when I fall asleep at night.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Also, dead serious.”



“Sebastian, don’t you think it’s too fast? We’ve been dating all of two months.”

“You’re lucky I haven’t proposed to you yet.”

I started to laugh, but choked on it. He wasn’t joking.

“Baby, I need you closer.”

“But...”

“Living with me will reduce your commute to and from Stanton by at least twenty minutes.”

“Will I be able to set up my own home office?”

“Yes,” he hissed before peppering my cheeks with kisses. “You can have my office if you want.”

“And you’ll let me borrow a tie every once in a while.” He really had a fantastic tie collection.

“My wardrobe is your wardrobe. Borrow whatever you want.”

“Okay. Fine. I’ll move in.” His golden retriever bouncing instantly ruined my attempts to sound grudging and reluctant. In truth, he’d sold me on the idea of living together from the moment he’d mentioned being the first and last people we’d see each day.

I wanted that. My life needed to start each day with the golden ray of sunlight who was holding me. Sebastian Courtland was my everything, my personal god of happiness, and I couldn’t wait to spend my life with him.