



The CEO's Obsession

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: I don't belong in this town. I never have.

Thirty-eight years old, ruthless, filthy rich, and back in Oakwood for one reason—to build my empire right in the middle of the place that never wanted me. The suits, the cars, the obscene wealth? Just armor. Because underneath it all, I'm still the kid who had to claw his way out of the gutter with bloody fists. And now that I'm at the top, looking down on everyone who once sneered at me, I should feel untouchable.

But then I see her.

Harper Lane. Twenty-one. Wild hair, paint-stained fingers, and a smart mouth that makes my blood run hot. She's got fire in her eyes and stubbornness in her bones, slinging coffee by day, chasing an impossible dream by night. She doesn't know it yet, but that dream? It's mine now. She's mine.

She tries to fight me. I like it. She throws up walls, tells me she doesn't need my money, my influence, my obsession. I bulldoze right through. Because the second I laid eyes on her, something inside me snapped—this primal, possessive need that won't let go.

I want to own her. Protect her. Worship her. Break her down until the only name she knows is mine.

But Harper? She's not the type to be caged. She pushes back, making me chase, making me crazy. Until one night, some asshole puts his hands on her, and I see red. One punch, and everything spirals. Now she's looking at me like she's seeing the monster I've been hiding all along.

I don't know how to be soft. I don't know how to love without ruining. But for her, I'll try. Even if it kills me.

The CEO's Obsession is a raw, obsessive, all-consuming age-gap romance about a billionaire used to getting what he wants—and the fiery artist who makes him earn it.

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CHAPTER

ONE

Mason

The sleek black Aston Martin purrs to a stop, its engine a low growl that vibrates through my bones. I step out, Italian leather shoes meeting century-old cobblestones with a satisfying click. Oakwood Town Square unfolds before me, a quaint chessboard of old money and small-town charm.

My gaze sweeps over the scene, cataloging every detail. The ornate gazebo, strings of twinkling lights, the air thick with the scent of overpriced canapés and desperation. A fundraiser. How predictably tedious.

I straighten my cuffs, ignoring the mix of awed and uneasy stares. Let them look. Let them wonder. I'm here to claim what's mine, not to make friends.

"Mr. Blackwood!" A portly man in an ill-fitting suit hurries over. "We weren't expecting you until?—"

I cut him off with a raised hand. "Plans change." My voice is clipped, bored. "I assume everything's in order?"

He nods frantically. "Of course, sir. If you'll just follow me, I can introduce you to?—"

Something—or rather someone—catches my eye. A flash of color in the sea of beige and black. I turn, my attention razor-sharp.

She moves through the crowd like a flame, all wild energy and defiance. Paint-splattered jeans, a loose shirt that's more canvas than clothing. Bright copper curls bounce with each step as she navigates the crowd, a tray of drinks balanced expertly in one hand.

My breath catches. She's...exquisite. Raw. Completely out of place in this sanitized world of fake smiles and hollow promises.

I watch as she dodges wandering hands and poorly disguised sneers. The urge to intervene, to claim, rises within me. I tamp it down. Not yet.

"Sir?" The man beside me shifts nervously.

I don't spare him a glance. "Who is she?"

He follows my gaze, frowning. "Oh. One of the local artists, I believe. We let them set up booths for exposure, you know. Good PR and all that."

My eyes narrow on a riot of color beyond the girl. Canvases exploding with emotion, each one a window into a passionate, untamed soul.

"Her name," I demand quietly.

"I...I'm not sure, sir. Harper something, I think?"

Harper. It suits her.

I start forward, drawn by an instinct I can't explain.

The man's voice fades behind me. "Mr. Blackwood? Where are you going? We need to discuss the?"—

I ignore him. My focus is singular now.

I have found what I want. And Mason Blackwood always gets what he wants.

I can't tear my eyes away from her as Harper reaches her booth, setting down the tray with a sigh that speaks of both relief and frustration. Her fingers immediately move to a canvas, tilting it just so. Even from here, I can see the paint stains on her hands—evidence of her dedication, her passion.

I'm close now, drinking in every detail. The freckles dusting her nose. The stubborn set of her jaw. The way her eyes dance with barely contained fire.

She stiffens suddenly, her gaze snapping up to meet mine. I don't look away. I can't.

For a moment, we're locked in a silent battle of wills. I see the flicker of irritation in her eyes, quickly followed by a spark of curiosity. She's wary, but intrigued. Good.

I stride forward, aware of the conversations dying around me, the heads turning. I don't care. Let them look. Let them wonder.

My attention is fixed solely on Harper and the vibrant chaos of her art. Each piece is a raw scream of emotion, unfiltered and unapologetic. It's...arresting.

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I feel the hard lines of my face softening as I take it all in. This girl, this artist—she paints what others are too afraid to feel.

I want to know her. I want to possess every brushstroke, every fleck of paint.

I want to own that fire in her eyes.

Harper crosses her arms, her body language screaming defiance. But I can see the way her pulse quickens at the base of her throat, the slight catch in her breath. She feels it too—this electric current humming between us.

I'm close enough now to catch the faint scent of turpentine and something floral. Her eyes narrow, assessing me. I can almost hear the gears turning in that fascinating mind of hers.

"Your art is...captivating," I finally say, my voice low and smooth. "Raw."

I watch the surprise flicker across her face, quickly masked by caution. She blinks, clearly caught off guard.

"Thanks," she mutters, the word laced with suspicion.

But there it is—the slight quirk of her eyebrow, the ghost of a smirk playing at the corner of her mouth. She's not falling for flattery, no matter how sincere. I find myself oddly pleased by her skepticism.

I want to push further, to see what other reactions I can draw from her. But I hold

back, savoring this moment of tension.

Then, I lean in slightly, my eyes never leaving hers. "What inspires you?" I ask, genuinely curious. "Your work has such...intensity."

She tilts her head, a strand of auburn hair falling across her face. For a moment, I'm seized by the urge to brush it away.

"Oh, you know," Harper quips, her tone light but guarded. "The usual. Existential dread, overpriced coffee, and the occasional rabid squirrel."

I can't help but chuckle, caught off guard by her sharp wit. It's refreshing, this refusal to be impressed by me. Most people in this town fall over themselves in my presence, but not her. She's a challenge, and God help me, I'm enthralled.

"Rabid squirrels, hmm?" I counter, matching her playful tone. "I'd love to see that piece."

"Sorry," she shoots back, a mischievous glint in her eye. "That one's for my private collection. Can't let just anyone see my deepest, darkest squirrel-based fears."

"Ah, but I'm not just anyone," I point out.

She raises an eyebrow at me. "You are to me. I don't even know your name."

"Mason. Mason Blackwood."

"Harper. Harper Lane," she quips back.

The tension between us crackles, an unspoken energy neither of us can ignore. I feel an undeniable pull towards her defiance, her refusal to be cowed by my presence or

wealth. It's intoxicating.

For a moment, I forget about the fundraiser buzzing around us, the carefully cultivated image I've spent years building. All I see is her—this fiery, enigmatic woman who paints her soul onto canvas and throws my world off its axis with a single smirk.

I want to know everything about her.

"Tell me about your ambitions, Harper," I say, leaning in slightly. "Where do you see your art taking you?"

Her eyes narrow, suspicion flickering across her face. "Why do you care?"

I shrug, aiming for nonchalance despite the intensity I feel. "I'm curious. Your work...it speaks to something raw, something real. It's rare to find that authenticity in Oakwood."

Harper's gaze softens a fraction, and I can see her wrestling with whether to let her guard down. "I want to make people feel," she finally admits. "To create something that resonates beyond this bubble of privilege."

The bustling square seems to fade away, leaving just the two of us in our own private world. I'm acutely aware of every shift in her expression, every subtle change in her body language.

"And what about you, Mr. Mysterious?" she challenges, tilting her chin up defiantly. "What drives the man who looks like he owns half the town?"

I chuckle, but there's no real humor in it. "Power," I answer honestly. "Control. The ability to shape the world around me."

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Something flashes in Harper's eyes—interest, wariness, or both. The spark between us intensifies, a silent challenge hanging in the air.

"Dangerous ambitions," she murmurs.

"Perhaps," I concede. "But no more dangerous than an artist determined to make the world feel."

I lean in slightly, lowering my voice. "Your ambition, your talent...they deserve a wider audience. I have resources, connections. I could help your art reach beyond Oakwood."

Harper's chest rises and falls rapidly, her internal struggle evident. I can see the war in her eyes—desire for opportunity battling against fierce independence.

"I don't need handouts," she says, but there's a waver in her voice.

"It's not charity," I counter smoothly. "It's an investment. In your vision, your potential."

Her fingers fidget with a loose thread on her paint-splattered shirt. I fight the urge to still her hand with my own.

"And what would you want in return?" Harper asks, eyes narrowing.

The question hangs between us, loaded with implications. I consider my words carefully, aware that pushing too hard could shatter this delicate moment.

"For now? Nothing but the satisfaction of seeing your work get the recognition it deserves."

Harper's skepticism is palpable, but I can see the temptation warring with her instincts. She opens her mouth, likely to refuse, but I take a step back before she can speak.

"Think about it," I say, holding her gaze. "I'll see you again, Harper Lane."

I turn and walk away, feeling her eyes boring into my back. She'll take the bait.

She has to.

CHAPTER

TWO

Mason

The morning sunslants through the penthouse windows, painting my skin with golden light. But it's not the warmth that wakes me—it's thoughts of her. Harper. Her vivid image burns behind my eyelids, consuming me from the inside out.

I sit up, sheets pooling around my waist, and run a hand through my hair. "Jesus," I mutter, my voice rough with sleep and something darker.

Last night replays in my mind: Harper weaving through the fundraiser crowd, a whirlwind of color against Oakwood's muted elegance. The way her eyes flashed when she spoke about her art, challenging the world to keep up.

I close my eyes, letting the memories wash over me. Harper was radiant last night,

her auburn hair catching the light like burnished copper. Those hazel eyes sparked with passion as she described her latest series—a study in motion and stillness. Her slender hands moved gracefully, punctuating each point.

My breath catches as I recall the way her emerald dress clung to every curve. The neckline dipped just low enough to hint at the swell of her breasts. When she turned, the fabric skimmed over the perfect arch of her back, down to the flare of her hips.

I groan, my cock hardening as I imagine running my hands over that silken skin. Tracing the line of her collarbone with my tongue. Cupping those pert breasts, feeling her nipples harden beneath my palms. I picture her gasping as I push her against the wall, hiking up that tantalizingly short dress.

My hand drifts lower, wrapping around my shaft as visions of Harper writhe through my mind. I want to worship every inch of her body. To claim her, possess her, make her mine in every way.

I groan and make myself stop, my fists clenching in the Egyptian cotton sheets. This obsession is...unexpected. Unprecedented.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, bare feet hitting cool hardwood. "Get it together, Blackwood," I growl at myself. But even as I say it, I know it's futile. The fire Harper ignited refuses to be extinguished by logic or self-control.

I stalk to the floor-to-ceiling windows, gazing out at Oakwood's pristine streets. The town looks small from up here, containable. But Harper...she's anything but. Her raw talent, her unapologetic authenticity—it's intoxicating. Dangerous.

"I have to see her again," I decide, the words escaping before I can stop them. It's not a want. It's a need, primal and all-consuming.

I press my forehead against the cool glass, wrestling with the intensity of my reaction.
This isn't me. I don't lose control. I don't fixate.

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But as I watch Oakwood come to life below, all I can think about is finding a way to make Harper mine.

I reach for my phone, fingers flying across the screen as I pull up my contacts. "James," I bark when my assistant answers. "I need you to arrange a meeting with Harper Lane. Today."

"The artist from last night's gallery opening, sir?" James's voice is carefully neutral.

"Yes," I reply, pacing the length of the penthouse. "Set it up under the pretense of discussing her work. I want to commission a piece."

As James confirms the details, I find myself standing before a mirror, studying my reflection. The man staring back at me is unfamiliar—eyes too bright, jaw too tight. I look...hungry.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Blackwood?"

I pause, considering. "Yes. I want a full background check on Ms. Lane. Finances, family, everything."

There's a beat of silence before James responds. "Of course, sir. I'll have it to you within the hour."

As I end the call, a flicker of unease passes through me. This is crossing a line, isn't it? But I brush the thought aside. I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm simply...interested. In her art, of course.

"You're supporting a talented artist," I tell my reflection. "That's all this is."

But even as the words leave my lips, I know they're a lie. The possessive glint in my eyes betrays a darker truth. I want more than her art. I want her. All of her.

I turn away from the mirror, unable to face the raw need I see there. "It's for her own good," I mutter, trying to convince myself. "She needs a patron, someone to help her reach her full potential."

But I know better.

I clench my fists, fighting against the urge to smash something. This isn't me. I'm not some obsessed stalker. I'm Mason fucking Blackwood. I take what I want, when I want it.

And right now, what I want is Harper Lane.

I pace the length of the bathroom, my body thrumming with an intensity I can't shake. Harper's image flashes in my mind—her bright, defiant eyes, the curve of her lips as she smiled. My breath catches, and a wave of heat washes over me, settling low in my abdomen.

"Damn it," I growl, gripping the edge of the marble countertop. The cool stone does nothing to quell the fire burning through my veins.

I try to focus on something else—anythingelse—but it's futile. My thoughts keep circling back to Harper, to the way her auburn hair caught the light, to those puffy pink lips.

I wonder if her other lips are just as pink and puffy...

I run a hand through my hair and try to shake her from my thoughts.

But my body has other ideas. The urgency builds, an insistent pressure I can't ignore. With a frustrated groan, I push away from the counter and make my way across the bathroom. The tile is cold against my bare feet, a stark contrast to the heat coursing through me.

I catch sight of myself in the full-length mirror and pause. The man staring back at me is barely recognizable—eyes dark with hunger, jaw clenched, muscles taut with tension. I look...dangerous. Unhinged.

"What are you doing?" I ask my reflection, but the only answer is the rapid rise and fall of my chest as I struggle to control my breathing.

I know I should walk away, take a cold shower, do something—anything—to regain my composure. But the need is too strong, the pull of desire too powerful to resist.

As I reach for the waistband of my pants, a sharp knock at the door makes me freeze.

"Mr. Blackwood?" James's voice calls out. "I have that information you requested."

I close my eyes, torn between relief and frustration. "Just...give me a minute. I'll call you when I'm ready," I call back, my voice rougher than I'd like.

And then my hand wraps around my cock as I give in to the urge to relieve myself.

I close my eyes, letting Harper's image flood my senses. Her defiant gaze softens, melting into something more...yielding. In my mind, I see her in my penthouse, her paint-splattered clothes discarded on the floor.

"Mason," she whispers, her voice husky with need. "I want you."

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My hand moves lower, finding its target. I start a slow, deliberate rhythm, hissing at the contact.

In my fantasy, Harper's body arches towards me, her skin flushed and glistening. I imagine the softness of her curves, the warmth of her breath on my neck.

"God, Harper," I groan, my movements becoming more urgent.

The bathroom fills with the sound of my ragged breathing, echoing off the tile walls. My free hand grips the edge of the sink, knuckles white with tension.

I picture Harper's lips parting, her eyes locked on mine as I claim her. In my mind, she's pliant, willing, surrendering to my touch with a desperation that matches my own.

My muscles coil tighter, a pressure building that demands release. I'm lost in the fantasy, consumed by the imagined feel of Harper's body against mine, the taste of her skin, the sound of her pleasure.

"Please," fantasy Harper begs. "I need you, Mason."

I grit my teeth, fighting to maintain control even as I spiral towards the edge. The Harper in my mind writhes beneath me, completely at my mercy, and it's almost more than I can bear.

I catch my reflection in the mirror, and for a moment, reality intrudes. The man staring back at me is wild-eyed, desperate. A flicker of doubt crosses my mind. Is this

obsession healthy? Am I losing myself to a woman I barely know?

But then I picture Harper's smile, hear the passion in her voice as she talked about her art, and I know I can't let her go. The thought of never seeing her again is unbearable.

"Fuck," I growl, my hand moving faster.

The pressure builds to a crescendo, and suddenly I'm there. My body shudders violently, waves of pleasure crashing over me as I reach my climax. I cry out, Harper's name on my lips as I spill over my hand.

For a few blissful moments, my mind is blank, free from the torment of wanting her. But as the afterglow fades, frustration creeps in. This release, intense as it was, is a poor substitute for the real thing.

I clean up mechanically, my thoughts a swirling mess. Satisfaction wars with an aching emptiness that threatens to consume me. Harper has gotten under my skin in a way no one else ever has.

I run a hand through my disheveled hair, steadying myself against the cool marble countertop.

I stride out of the bathroom, purpose in every step.

I move to the floor-to-ceiling windows of my penthouse suite, gazing out at the Oakwood skyline. The morning sun glints off glass and steel, turning the city into a dazzling jewel. But my eyes are drawn to the west, where I know Harper's modest apartment lies among the converted industrial spaces and small galleries.

My hands press against the cool glass, as if I could reach out and touch her from here. "Harper," I whisper, her name a prayer and a curse on my lips.

The sprawling vista below reminds me of all I've built, all I control. Yet none of it compares to the storm she's unleashed within me. I close my eyes, picturing her defiant stance, the fire in her hazel eyes when she spoke about her art before I sigh and press the button to my intercom.

"Sir?" My assistant's voice crackles through the intercom.

I clear my throat. "Yes?"

"I've arranged the meeting with Ms. Lane. She's agreed to meet you at The Rustic Bean at 2 PM today."

A surge of adrenaline courses through me. "Excellent work," I reply, fighting to keep my voice level. "That will be all."

As the connection cuts, I turn back to the window. My reflection stares back at me, superimposed over the city I've conquered.

I will have Harper Lane.

CHAPTER

THREE

Harper

The bell jingles as I push open the door to The Rustic Bean, the rich aroma of freshly ground coffee beans enveloping me like a warm embrace. Normally, it would soothe my nerves, but today it does little to calm the storm raging inside me. My eyes dart around the room, scanning unfamiliar faces until they land on him.

Mason.

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My grip tightens on the strap of my bag, knuckles turning white. Why did I agree to this? A flutter of anticipation battles with the skepticism churning in my gut. I take a deep breath, willing my racing heart to slow. It's just a meeting, I remind myself. Nothing more.

But as I step further into the café, I can't help but notice how Mason commands attention without even trying. He's sitting in the corner, leaning back in his chair with an ease that makes it seem like he owns the place. Even in a simple henley and jeans, he exudes an air of authority that's impossible to ignore.

My steps falter for a moment, and I have to force myself to keep moving forward. Stay calm, Harper. He's just a guy. My heart, however, doesn't seem to get the message. It pounds harder with every step, a staccato rhythm that matches the tension creeping into my stride.

I lift my chin, determined not to let him see how much he affects me. As I approach his table, I can't help but notice how his intense gaze follows my every move. It's unnerving, like being caught in the crosshairs of a predator.

"Harper," he says, his voice a smooth rumble that sends an involuntary shiver down my spine. "I'm glad you could make it."

I slide into the seat across from him, forcing a polite smile onto my face. "Let's skip the pleasantries, shall we? Why did you really want to meet?"

My words come out sharper than I intended, but I don't regret them. I meet his gaze head-on, daring him to cut through the BS and get to the point.

A smirk plays at the corners of his mouth, and I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Direct," he comments, leaning forward slightly. "It's one of the things I admire about you."

I arch an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Mason. What's this about?"

He pauses, studying me with those piercing eyes that seem to see right through me. The tension between us thickens, and I find myself holding my breath, waiting for his response.

"My proposition still stands," he finally says, his tone measured and deliberate.

My curiosity piques despite my better judgment, and I lean in slightly. "And what exactly does your proposition entail?" I ask, trying to sound nonchalant. Could I really take him up on his offer? I looked him up last night when I went home. The man definitely has power and influence. He could certainly put me and my art on the map.

But at what cost?

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms as I process Mason's words. The Rustic Bean hums with quiet conversation around us, but it feels like we're in our own bubble, the air thick with possibility and tension.

Mason's eyes gleam with something I can't quite decipher. "I want to invest in your art, Harper. Give you the resources and connections to take your career to the next level."

My heart races at the thought, but I force myself to remain outwardly calm. "And what's in it for you?" I ask, because there's always a catch with men like Mason

Blackwood.

He leans forward, his voice dropping to a low, intimate tone that sends an involuntary shiver down my spine. "Let's just say I have a vested interest in seeing you succeed."

I scoff, even as a part of me thrills at his words. "Right. Because billionaires are known for their philanthropy towards struggling artists."

"You're not just any artist," Mason counters, his gaze intense. "You have real talent, Harper. I want to see it recognized."

I bite my lip, torn between desire and suspicion. The offer is tempting—God, is it tempting—but I can't shake the feeling that there's more to this than Mason is letting on.

"And why would you do this?" I ask, my voice steadier than I feel.

Mason's eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, I see something vulnerable flicker behind his confident facade. "Let's just say I have my reasons," he says softly.

I open my mouth to press further, but the words die on my lips as the implications of his offer truly sink in. This could change everything—my career, my life.

A faint smile plays at the corners of Mason's mouth as he leans back, his posture relaxed but his eyes never leaving mine. "Think of it as a partnership," he says, his voice smooth as silk.

I can't help the short, humorless laugh that escapes me. My fingers trace the worn edge of the table, a nervous habit I can't seem to shake. "Partnerships require trust, and we're not exactly there, are we? I barely even know you," I keep my tone cool, wrapping my words around me like armor. But beneath the surface, curiosity gnaws

at me, persistent and undeniable.

What's his game? The question echoes in my mind as I study Mason's face, searching for any hint of deception. His eyes are unreadable, dark pools that seem to pull me in despite my best efforts to resist.

“Ah, so you want to get to know me?” He teases, and my face colors.

"That's not what I meant," I snap, but the heat rising in my cheeks betrays me. "I'm just saying, this whole thing seems too good to be true."

Mason leans in, his voice dropping to a low murmur that sends shivers down my spine. "Maybe it is. Or maybe you're just not used to good things happening to you."

I narrow my eyes, anger flaring in my chest. "Don't pretend you know anything about me or my life."

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"Then let me learn," he counters smoothly. "Dinner. Tonight. No strings attached."

Suddenly, Mason reaches for his coffee cup. His hand brushes against mine, and it's like a jolt of electricity shoots up my arm. I freeze, my breath catching in my throat. The touch was brief, barely there, but it leaves me reeling.

Silence stretches between us, heavy and charged. My pulse pounds in my ears, and I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks. What was that? I pull my hand back, but the sensation lingers, leaving me off-balance.

I look up to find Mason watching me intently, his eyes dark and unreadable. The air feels thick, laden with unspoken tension. I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. For the first time since meeting Mason Blackwood, I find myself completely at a loss.

Mason leans in, his voice low and intimate. "This isn't the best place to talk. Let's find somewhere quieter."

My instincts scream at me to say no, to make an excuse and leave. But instead, I find myself nodding. My curiosity—and something else I don't want to name—wins out. I follow Mason as he leads me toward the back of the café, my thoughts racing.

What am I doing?

We weave through the bustling coffee shop, the aroma of freshly ground beans and pastries fading as we move away from the main area. The familiar sounds of clinking cups and muted conversations grow distant. My heart pounds harder with each step.

Mason pushes open a door marked "Employees Only," ushering me inside. I hesitate for a moment before stepping through, hyper-aware of his presence behind me.

The storage room is small and dimly lit. Shelves line the walls, stacked with supplies and spare equipment. Shadows stretch and twist under the flickering overhead bulb, creating an unsettling dance across the cramped space. The air feels heavier here, thicker somehow, amplifying the tension between us.

I cross my arms, forcing my voice to sound steady. "Alright, Mason. What's your real angle?"

He takes a step closer, and suddenly the room feels even smaller. "I've told you my angle, Harper. I want to help you succeed."

I scoff, trying to mask my nervousness. "Right. Out of the goodness of your heart?"

"Is it so hard to believe I might genuinely want to support your talent?" Mason's eyes lock onto mine, intense and unwavering.

I swallow hard, fighting to maintain my composure. "In my experience, nothing comes without strings attached. Especially from billionaires who barely know me."

A faint smile plays at the corners of his mouth. "Then perhaps it's time we got to know each other better."

The air between us crackles with unspoken tension. I should leave. I should walk out that door and never look back. But something keeps me rooted to the spot, caught in Mason Blackwood's gravitational pull.

My heart thunders as Mason moves closer, his scent enveloping me—subtle and spicy, completely distracting. I try to stay grounded, to hold onto my skepticism, but

the way he looks at me...it's like he's daring me to drop my guard.

"I—" My breath catches as he takes another step. We're so close now I can feel the heat radiating from his body. "This isn't?—"

"Isn't what, Harper?" His voice is low, almost a whisper. "Isn't what you expected? Isn't what you want?"

I should step back. I should leave. But my body betrays me, leaning in ever so slightly.

"I don't know what I want," I admit, the words barely audible.

Mason's hand comes up, fingers brushing my cheek. "I think you do."

When his lips meet mine, it's like the world tilts on its axis. Everything outside this moment fades away. His kiss is firm, unrelenting, utterly consuming. My hands move of their own accord, clutching at his shirt as heat floods through me.

Oh god, I'm kissing Mason Blackwood.

Every nerve in my body feels alive, sparking under his touch. I'm drowning in him, lost in the sensations he's evoking. My mind screams at me to stop, but my body has other ideas. I press closer, deepening the kiss, savoring the taste of him.

What am I doing? What are we doing?

The kiss deepens, and a battle erupts inside me. Desire burns through my body, hot and all-consuming, but underneath it is a gnawing fear. My mind screams for control, but my traitorous body leans into the thrill of Mason's touch.

I'm caught between two halves of myself—the part that wants Mason and the part that knows better. His hands slide down to my waist, pulling me closer, and I can't help the small gasp that escapes me.

"Harper," he murmurs against my lips, his voice rough with need.

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"This is crazy," I whisper, even as my fingers tangle in his hair.

Mason pulls back slightly, his eyes dark and intense. "Does it feel crazy?"

No, it feels right. And that terrifies me more than anything.

I finally manage to pull back, breathless and unsteady. My heart pounds as I meet Mason's gaze, his eyes burning with an intensity that leaves me reeling. The small storage room suddenly feels suffocating, the shelves closing in around us.

"I...I need to think," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. My thoughts are a chaotic mess, spinning faster than I can process. The weight of what just happened settles over me, heavy and impossible to ignore.

Mason reaches for me again, but I take a step back. "Harper?—"

"Please," I cut him off, holding up a hand. "Just...give me a minute."

He nods, respecting my space, but I can see the tension in his jaw. The air between us crackles with unresolved energy.

Without waiting for a response, I turn and push open the door. The cool air of the café hits me like a slap, but it's not enough to clear my head. My legs feel shaky as I walk toward the exit, my pulse still racing.

"Harper, wait!" Mason's voice carries across the café, but I can't bring myself to look back.

I push through the front door, the familiar jingle of the bell now sounding like an alarm. Outside, the crisp autumn air of Oakwood wraps around me, but it doesn't help. Mason's kiss lingers, a ghost I can't shake.

"Breathe, Harper," I mutter to myself, inhaling deeply. The scent of fallen leaves and artisanal coffee fills my lungs, but does nothing to calm the storm inside me.

My mind spins with the implications of what comes next. I start walking, no destination in mind, just needing to move. The cobblestone sidewalks of downtown Oakwood pass beneath my feet, a stark contrast to my inner turmoil.

I run a hand through my hair, frustrated. "He's a billionaire. This is insane."

A couple walking past gives me a strange look, and I realize I've been talking to myself. Great, now I'm the crazy artist muttering on the street. I force a smile and keep moving.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I don't need to look to know it's Mason, and I don't even question how he got my number. With his kind of resources, he probably knows more about me than I know about myself.

I leave the phone unanswered, quickening my pace.

As I round the corner onto Main Street, the historic lampposts cast warm golden light on the sidewalk. It's beautiful, but all I can think about is the way Mason looked at me in that dimly lit room.

Focus, Harper, I mentally tell myself. You're independent, remember? You don't need his help or his...complications.

But even as I say it, I know it's not that simple. The memory of his touch sends a

shiver through me that has nothing to do with the autumn chill.

I stop in front of a gallery window, my reflection staring back at me. I hardly recognize myself—flushed cheeks, wide eyes, hair slightly mussed. Is this really me? The independent artist who swore she'd make it on her own?

My phone buzzes again, insistent. I take a deep breath and finally pull it out, staring at Mason's name on the screen. My finger hovers over the answer button, trembling slightly.

CHAPTER

FOUR

Mason

The city lights of Oakwood twinkle below as I pace back and forth across my penthouse, each step fueled by frustration and longing. Harper's face haunts me, her eyes filled with skepticism as she abruptly left the coffee shop. I replay our encounter for the thousandth time, analyzing every word, every gesture.

"Damn it," I mutter, running a hand through my hair. I've called her countless times, but she never picks up. The silence is maddening.

I stop at the floor-to-ceiling windows, pressing my forehead against the cool glass. My reflection stares back at me, accusation in its eyes. I moved too fast, came on too strong. Of course she ran.

But God, I need to see her again. To explain, to make her understand.

My phone feels heavy in my hand as I debate calling her once more. No. I have to

respect her space, give her time. But every fiber of my being aches to be near her.

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With a growl of frustration, I stalk to my desk and open my laptop. Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm scrolling through Harper's Instagram, drinking in every photo. Her petite frame, those soulful eyes, the hint of vulnerability behind her quippy captions.

Heat pools in my groin as I imagine running my hands over her curves, tasting her soft skin. In my mind, I pin her against the wall, her breathy moans urging me on as I?—

"Enough," I snarl, slamming the laptop shut. This torment has to end. I can't take it anymore.

I grab my keys, my resolve hardening with each step toward the elevator.

The streets of Oakwood blur past as I navigate my Aston Martin through the autumn night. My knuckles are white on the steering wheel, adrenaline surging through my veins. The scent of fallen leaves and woodsmoke drifts through the cracked window, but I barely notice.

I pull up to Harper's modest apartment building, its weathered brick a stark contrast to my penthouse. For a moment, I hesitate. Is this too much? Am I acting like an unhinged madman?

But then I remember her eyes, the way they lit up when we discussed her art. The electric spark when our hands touched. I can't let that slip away.

With a deep breath, I stride to her door. My heart pounds as I raise my fist and knock,

the sound echoing in the quiet hallway.

Seconds stretch into eternity. Then, the door creaks open.

Harper stands there, her eyes widening in surprise. She's in paint-splattered overalls, a paintbrush tucked behind her ear. Fucking beautiful.

"Mason?" she breathes, confusion and something else—desire?—flashing across her face.

I step forward, my gaze locked on hers. "Harper, I?—"

She backs up instinctively, and I follow, closing the door behind me. The small apartment seems to shrink, charged with unspoken tension.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, her voice a mix of wariness and curiosity.

I swallow hard, searching for the right words. "I couldn't stay away. I needed to see you, to explain."

Her eyebrow arches skeptically, but I see a flicker of interest in her eyes. "Explain what, exactly?"

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing thoughts. "I know I came on too strong before. But Harper, I can't stop thinking about you, and I'm not lying when I say I do believe in your talent, and I want to help you succeed. But I also want you."

Harper's fingers twitch at her sides, her body language guarded. "I don't need your charity, Mason. I can make it on my own."

"It's not charity," I insist, taking a step closer. The scent of turpentine and something

uniquely Harper fills my senses. "It's an investment. In you, in your art. And I swear to God, as much as I want you, you aren't beholden to me in any way for helping you. I'm not asking you to prostitute yourself out in exchange for my support."

She shakes her head, but I notice her resolve wavering. "You barely know me. Why would you do that?"

I struggle to find the right words, to express the inexplicable pull I feel towards her without scaring her off. "Because I see something special in you, Harper. Something rare and beautiful."

Her cheeks flush, and for a moment, I think I've overstepped. But then she speaks, her voice soft. "And I don't have to do anything...um...sexual?"

The question hangs in the air between us, and I sigh. "I'm not going to lie, Harper, I want you more than I've ever wanting anyone." Her eyes widen at my honesty, and I pause, then add quietly, "But just being close to you, just helping you will be more than enough."

Harper's eyes widen, and I see the internal struggle play out across her face. She wants this, I can tell, but her pride is holding her back.

"I...I don't know, Mason," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's a lot to take in."

I take another step closer, close enough now that I can see the flecks of gold in her hazel eyes. "Just think about it. Please. Let me help you create the art you've always dreamed of."

For a long moment, Harper is silent. Then, almost imperceptibly, she nods. "Okay," she breathes.

I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face. Harper's agreement, tentative as it is, feels like a victory. My heart races, and I have to resist the urge to pull her into my arms.

"Thank you," I say, my voice husky with emotion. "You won't regret this, Harper. I promise."

She looks up at me, a mix of hope and wariness in her eyes. "Don't make promises you can't keep, Mason."

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I chuckle, feeling lighter than I have in days. "I never do."

Harper rolls her eyes, but there's a hint of a smile on her lips. "So, what now?" she asks, crossing her arms.

I take a step back, giving her some space. "Now, we celebrate. How about dinner? I know a great place downtown."

She hesitates, and I can see the wheels turning in her head. "I don't know..."

"Come on," I coax, "it's just dinner."

Harper's eyes narrow, but I catch a glimmer of interest. "Just dinner? No strings attached?"

I hold up my hands. "Scout's honor. Though I was never actually a scout."

She snorts, some of the tension easing from her shoulders. "Fine. But I'm not changing out of these paint-splattered overalls, so nowhere billionaire fancy-like."

"Wouldn't dream of asking you to," I say, drinking in the sight of her. Even covered in paint, she's the most captivating woman I've ever seen.

We head to my car, and I catch Harper's low whistle as she takes in the sleek lines of my Aston Martin. I open the passenger door for her, savoring her proximity as she slides into the leather seat.

The drive to downtown Oakwood is charged with an electric tension. I'm hyper-aware of Harper's every movement, the way she fidgets with the hem of her overalls, how her eyes dart to me and then away.

I pull up to a low-key bistro, its warm glow spilling onto the cobblestone sidewalk. Harper raises an eyebrow.

"Thought you'd appreciate somewhere a little more laid-back," I explain as we step inside. The scent of garlic and herbs envelops us, and I notice Harper visibly relax.

We're seated at a cozy corner table, candlelight flickering between us. Harper studies the menu intently, her brow furrowed in concentration. I can't take my eyes off her.

"What?" she asks when she catches me staring at her.

I clear my throat, caught off guard. "Nothing. Just...you look beautiful in this light."

Harper rolls her eyes, but I catch the hint of a blush on her cheeks. "Smooth talker," she mutters, hiding behind her menu.

Our waiter arrives, and we order—a rich pasta dish for Harper, steak for me. As we wait for our food, an awkward silence settles between us.

"So," Harper says finally, fiddling with her napkin. "Tell me more about this...investment you want to make in my art."

I lean forward, my eyes lighting up with enthusiasm. "Harper, I want you to focus on what you do best—creating breathtaking art. Imagine waking up every morning and your only concern is what to paint next."

I gesture expansively, painting a picture with my words. "You'll have a studio stocked

with the finest supplies—canvases stretched to your exact specifications, brushes that feel like extensions of your hand, and paints in every shade imaginable. When you're running low, you just send a text, and within hours, a fresh shipment arrives at your door."

Harper's eyes widen, a mix of longing and disbelief flickering across her face. I press on, my voice low and intense. "But it's not just about the supplies. I have connections in the art world—gallery owners, critics, collectors. I'll set up exhibits in the most prestigious venues in Oakwood and beyond. Your work will be seen by the right people, people who can truly appreciate your talent."

I reach across the table, my fingers brushing against hers. She doesn't pull away. "You won't have to deal with the business side of things—no haggling over prices, no chasing down payments. I'll handle all of that. You'll be free to pour your heart and soul into your art without worrying about making rent or buying groceries."

Harper's breathing quickens, and I can see the wheels turning in her mind. "It sounds...incredible," she admits, her voice barely above a whisper. "But it also sounds too good to be true. What's the catch?"

I shake my head, my gaze never leaving hers. "No catch, Harper. I believe in your talent, and I want to see it flourish. All I ask is that you give yourself fully to your art. Push your boundaries, explore new techniques, create without fear or hesitation."

She bites her lip, considering. "And...us? What about...this?" She gestures between us, the unspoken attraction crackling in the air.

I take a deep breath, choosing my words carefully. "That's entirely up to you, Harper. My support for your art isn't conditional on anything between us. If all you want is a professional relationship, that's what we'll have. But I won't lie—I'm drawn to you in a way I can't explain. If you feel even a fraction of what I feel..." I sit back and clear

my throat, "Well, in any case, I hope you'll want to have dinner with me every now and then at least."

I trail off, leaving the possibility hanging in the air between us. Harper's cheeks flush, and she looks down at our still-touching hands. "I...I need time to think about all this," she says finally.

I nod, understanding. "Take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere."

As our food arrives, the conversation shifts to lighter topics, but the weight of possibility hangs heavy in the air. I watch Harper as she laughs at one of my jokes, her eyes sparkling in the candlelight, and I know I'd do anything to keep that smile on her face.

CHAPTER

FIVE

Harper

I glide my brush across the canvas, a contented smile on my face. The vibrant colors blend together, bringing my vision to life stroke by stroke. This piece feels different—more alive, more raw. Maybe it's the newfound confidence coursing through my veins, or maybe it's just the caffeine from my third cup of coffee. Either way, I'm riding this creative high for all it's worth.

A knock at the door breaks my concentration. I set down my brush with a sigh, wiping my paint-stained hands on my already ruined jeans as I cross the tiny studio apartment.

"Coming!" I call out, fumbling with the stubborn lock.

The door swings open to reveal Ben, his shaggy hair windswept and a lopsided grin on his face. "Hey, Harper. Brought you some supplies from the gallery." He holds up a paper bag that clinks promisingly.

"My hero," I say dramatically, ushering him inside. "Please tell me there are new brushes in there. Mine are on their last legs."

Ben's eyes drift to my easel, his expression shifting subtly. "Wow. That's...intense. New direction for you?"

I follow his gaze, suddenly self-conscious about the raw emotion splashed across the canvas. "Yeah, I guess. Just experimenting, you know?"

He nods, but I catch the flicker of something in his eyes. Admiration? Concern? Before I can decipher it, my phone buzzes insistently.

Mason's name flashes on the screen, and my stomach does a little flip.

I hesitate, torn between answering and focusing on Ben. The phone keeps ringing, an insistent reminder of the complications that have invaded my carefully constructed world.

Even though Mason says his support comes with no strings I can't help but feel somehow beholden to him for all he's doing for me.

So, I answer the phone.

"Hello?" I say, trying to keep my voice neutral.

"Harper," Mason's deep voice rumbles through the speaker. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

I glance at Ben, who's busying himself with unpacking the art supplies, pointedly not looking in my direction. "No, it's fine. What's up?"

"I've got an opportunity for you."

My heart skips a beat. "What kind of opportunity?"

"A showing in Paris."

“Paris,” I repeat dumbly.

“Paris,” he confirms.

"Oh," I say, not sure how to feel about this. "That's...great?"

"It is," Mason says firmly. "This is a huge opportunity for you, Harper. Your work deserves to be seen by the right people."

I bite my lip, torn between excitement and anxiety. "When do I have to go?"

"We leave tomorrow," he says, a hint of anticipation creeping into his voice.

“Tomorrow? We? You’re going too?” I sputter.

"Of course," Mason replies, his tone a mix of amusement and determination. "I'm not about to send you off to a foreign country all alone, especially not for your first international showing. We'll take my private jet."

"Your private jet," I echo, my mind reeling. Of course he has a private jet. Why wouldn't he? I lean against the wall, suddenly feeling lightheaded. The paintbrush I'd been holding clatters to the floor, leaving a bright blue streak on the worn hardwood.

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"Harper? Are you alright?" Mason's voice carries a hint of concern.

"Yeah, I'm just...processing," I manage, aware of Ben's eyes on me. "It's a lot to take in."

"I understand," Mason says, his voice softening. "But trust me, this is an incredible opportunity. The Galerie d'Art Moderne is one of the most prestigious in Paris. Their curator saw your portfolio and was impressed. This could be your big break."

I close my eyes, trying to imagine my paintings hanging in a Parisian gallery. It seems surreal, like something out of a dream. "How long would we be there?"

"A week," Mason replies. "Enough time for the opening, some networking events, and a bit of sightseeing. I've already arranged for a suite at the Ritz."

The Ritz. Of course. I glance around my tiny, paint-splattered apartment, feeling the stark contrast between my world and Mason's. "I...I don't know what to say."

"Say yes," Mason urges, a hint of excitement creeping into his voice. "Say you'll come to Paris with me and show the art world what you're capable of."

I catch Ben's eye, seeing a mix of emotions play across his face. Concern, pride, and something else I can't quite name. I take a deep breath, feeling like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff. "Okay," I hear myself say. "Yes. I'll go."

"Excellent," Mason says, and I can practically hear his satisfied smile through the phone. "I'll have a car pick you up tomorrow morning at 9. Pack for a week, and don't

worry about bringing any formal wear. I'll take care of that in Paris."

As I hang up the phone, my head spinning, I turn to Ben. He's standing there, holding a set of new brushes, his expression unreadable.

"So," he says, attempting a smile. "Paris, huh?"

I nod, still in shock. "Yeah. Paris."

CHAPTER

SIX

Mason

I watch Harper step out of the town car, her oversized sweatshirt swallowing her petite frame. She looks beautiful, even in her comfy travel clothes. My heart races as she approaches, her eyes widening at the sight of the private jet behind me.

"Wow," she breathes. "This is...a lot."

I can't help but smirk. "Only the best for you, Harper."

She rolls her eyes, but I catch the hint of a smile. "You know, normal people just book a commercial flight."

"I'm not normal people," I reply, reaching for her bag. Our fingers brush, and electricity crackles between us.

Harper pulls back quickly, clearing her throat. "I can carry my own bag, thanks."

I let her, knowing when to pick my battles. As we board the jet, I notice her hesitation. "First time flying private?"

She nods, sinking into a plush leather seat. "First time flying, period."

My protective instincts flare. I want to wrap her in my arms, keep her safe. Instead, I settle for buckling her seatbelt, ignoring her protests.

"It'll be fine," I assure her. "I'll be right here."

The engines roar to life, and Harper grips the armrests. I place my hand over hers, surprised when she doesn't pull away.

As we take off, I study her profile. I'm too damn excited to be whisking this girl off to Paris.

A whole week alone with her.

As we reach cruising altitude, Harper's death grip on the armrest loosens. She turns to me, a mix of excitement and lingering nerves in her eyes.

"So, um, what exactly does one do on a private jet?" she asks.

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I gesture around the luxurious cabin. "Anything you want. Champagne? Movie? Five-course meal?"

Harper laughs, the sound warming me from the inside out. "How about just talking? I still can't believe I'm going to Paris."

We chat easily as the miles slip away beneath us. I find myself captivated by her passion as she describes her art, her eyes lighting up. When she asks about my business, I try to keep things light, not wanting to overwhelm her.

As our conversation flows, I can't help but notice how her body has relaxed, how she's leaned in closer. The air between us feels charged, electric. I clear my throat.

"You know," I say, my voice low, "there is one activity that's particularly popular on private jets."

Harper raises an eyebrow. "Oh?"

I lean in, my lips nearly brushing her ear. "Ever heard of the Mile High Club?"

She pulls back, eyes wide. "Mason!"

"What?" I smirk. "I'm just offering to show you all the amenities."

Harper's cheeks flush a delicious pink. "I, um...I don't think..."

I hold up my hands. "Just a suggestion. No pressure."

She bites her lip, clearly flustered. "Maybe we should stick to champagne."

I laugh, loving the sweet blush I've brought to her cheeks. Harper can put up her guard and act all tough, but I see how sweet and innocent she really is, and it has my cock hardening in my pants. "Champagne it is."

As I pour the bubbly, I can't help but wonder if I've pushed too far, too fast. But when Harper's fingers brush mine as she takes the glass, that spark is still there.

Our eyes meet over the rim of her champagne flute. The golden liquid sparkles, but it's nothing compared to the light dancing in Harper's eyes. I gently take the glass from her hand, setting it aside. Time seems to slow as I lean in, giving her every opportunity to pull away.

She doesn't.

My lips brush hers, soft as a whisper. I taste the lingering sweetness of champagne, mixed with something uniquely Harper. She sighs, and I deepen the kiss, one hand coming up to cup her cheek. Her skin is impossibly soft under my fingers.

Harper's lips part, and I take the invitation, my tongue exploring the warm velvet of her mouth. She tastes of dreams and sunlight, of possibility. Her hands fist in my shirt, pulling me closer.

I lose myself in the kiss, in the softness of her lips and the quiet sounds she makes. It's intoxicating, more potent than any champagne. When we finally break apart, we're both breathless.

"Wow," Harper whispers, her cheeks flushed.

I brush my thumb across her lower lip, marveling at how swollen and pink it is from

our kiss. "You can say that again."

She laughs softly, the sound sending shivers down my spine. "Is this...is this okay?"

"More than okay," I assure her, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. "But we don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with."

Harper nods, biting her lip in a way that makes me want to kiss her again. "I just...I've never done anything like this before."

My heart swells with a fierce protectiveness. I want to shelter her, to keep her safe from the world. But I also want to show her everything she's been missing.

"We'll take it slow," I promise, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "We have all the time in the world."

As if on cue, the plane hits a pocket of turbulence. Harper gasps, grabbing my arm. I pull her close, wrapping her in my embrace.

"I've got you," I murmur against her hair. "You're safe with me."

She nods against my chest, her breath warm through my shirt. As the turbulence subsides, she doesn't pull away. Instead, she nestles closer, fitting perfectly in the circle of my arms.

I press a kiss to the top of her head, inhaling the sweet scent of her shampoo. In this moment, with Harper in my arms and Paris waiting on the horizon, I feel something I haven't felt in years.

Hope.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

Harper

I jolt awake, disoriented by the gentle hum of engines and the soft leather beneath my cheek. For a moment, I can't remember where I am. Then it all comes rushing back—the private jet, Mason's unexpected offer, the whirlwind departure from everything I've ever known.

My face burns as I realize I must have dozed off on Mason's shoulder. God, how embarrassing. I straighten up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, only to find his seat empty. The cabin around me is dimly lit, most of the windows shuttered against the night sky outside. How long was I out?

The plane seems steady enough, so I unbuckle my seatbelt and stand, stretching my stiff muscles. Where did he go? I make my way down the aisle, past the plush seats and gleaming fixtures that scream wealth beyond my wildest dreams.

At the back of the cabin, I notice a door left slightly ajar. Soft light spills from the crack, and I hear the faint murmur of a voice. Mason's voice, low and intense. Is he on the phone?

I hesitate, knowing I shouldn't eavesdrop. But curiosity gets the better of me, and I

inch closer, peering through the narrow opening.

What I see makes my breath catch in my throat.

The bedroom beyond is bathed in golden light from a single lamp. And there, silhouetted against the glow, is Mason. His back is to me, jacket discarded, crisp white shirt stretched across broad shoulders. One hand grips the edge of a polished dresser, knuckles white with tension.

The other is wrapped around his cock.

I stare, transfixed, unable to look away from the raw, primal sight before me. Mason's powerful body is taut with tension, muscles rippling beneath his tanned skin as his hand works up and down his impressive length. The sheer size of him makes my breath catch in my throat. I've never seen a man like this before, never witnessed such an intimate act.

My heart pounds so loudly I'm sure he must hear it, but Mason seems lost in his own world of pleasure. His eyes are closed, head tilted back slightly, lips parted as ragged breaths escape him. A bead of sweat trickles down his neck, and I have the insane urge to trace its path with my tongue.

"Harper," he groans, the sound sending a jolt of electricity through my body.

And then he's coming, thick ropes of cum shooting from his cock. The intensity of his release is mesmerizing. I stand there, frozen, as Mason opens his eyes and meets my gaze in the mirror. For a moment, time seems to stop. But instead of looking embarrassed or angry at being caught, his eyes darken with unmistakable desire. He holds my gaze, continuing to stroke himself as the last pulses of his orgasm subside.

I know I should look away. I should turn and flee back to my seat, pretend this never

happened. But I remain rooted to the spot, pulse racing, a dull ache building between my thighs. What's happening to me? Why can't I move?

I can't move. Can't breathe. Can't tear my eyes away from the sight of Mason's massive cock pulsing in his hand, ribbons of cum still spurting onto the floor.

"Harper." His voice is a low growl that makes heat pool in my belly.

I should run. Should be mortified at catching him like this. But my feet remain rooted to the spot as Mason turns, his impressive length still half-hard and glistening.

He takes a step toward me. "Come here."

My heart pounds. Every instinct screams to flee, to pretend this never happened. But as Mason's eyes rake over me, hungry and predatory, I find myself taking a shaky step forward.

What am I doing? This is crossing a line. If I let him touch me now, I know there's no going back.

Mason's hand reaches for me, and I hold my breath.

Mason's hand cups my cheek, his touch surprisingly gentle. He draws me closer, and I go willingly, my body betraying my mind's hesitation. His lips brush mine, soft as a whisper. The tenderness of it makes me whimper, a sound that seems to ignite something primal in him.

His kiss deepens, becoming hungry and insistent. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, tasting of expensive whiskey and raw need. I melt against him, my hands clutching at his shirt for support as my knees go weak.

Through the haze of desire, I feel the hot, hard length of him pressing against my stomach. How is he already fully aroused again? The sheer size of him both thrills and terrifies me. My inexperience suddenly feels glaringly obvious.

Mason's hands roam my body, leaving trails of fire in their wake. He cups my breasts through my shirt, thumbs brushing over my hardened nipples. I gasp into his mouth, overwhelmed by the intensity of the sensations coursing through me.

"Tell me to stop," he growls against my lips. "Tell me this isn't what you want."

But I can't form the words. Can't deny the ache building between my thighs or the way my body yearns for his touch. Instead, I press closer, feeling the heat of him even through our clothes.

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Mason groans, the sound vibrating through me. His hands slide down to grip my hips, pulling me flush against him. The firm press of his cock makes me whimper again, a needy sound I barely recognize as my own.

"Christ, Harper," he breathes. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

I shake my head, dizzy with want. This is all so new, so overwhelming. Part of me wants to run, to hide from the intensity of it all. But a larger part never wants this moment to end.

Mason's lips trail along my jaw, down the column of my throat. When he reaches the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder, he sucks hard, marking me. The mixture of pleasure and pain makes me cry out.

"Mason," I gasp. "I...I've never..."

He pulls back slightly, his eyes searching mine. Understanding dawns in his gaze, followed by a flash of possessive hunger that makes me shiver.

"Never?" he asks, his voice rough.

I shake my head, suddenly feeling small and inexperienced in the face of his obvious expertise.

Mason cups my face in his hands, his touch achingly tender. "We don't have to do anything you're not ready for," he says softly. "But know this, Harper—when you are ready, I intend to ruin you for any other man."

The intensity in his eyes steals my breath away. I know I should be scared, should run far away from the heat and hunger I see there. But all I can think about is how desperately I want him to make good on that promise.

"Let me show you how good I can make you feel," Mason whispers in my ear before he removes my shirt and starts to suckle my breasts.

A gasp escapes me as his hot mouth closes around my nipple. The sensation is electric, sending sparks of pleasure radiating through my body. Mason's tongue swirls expertly, teasing the sensitive bud until it's aching hard. His large hands cup my breasts, kneading gently as he lavishes attention on first one nipple, then the other.

I arch into him, desperate for more of his touch. My fingers tangle in his hair, holding him close as little mewls of pleasure fall from my lips. I've never felt anything like this before—it's overwhelming, intoxicating.

Mason's mouth trails lower, leaving a trail of fire across my abdomen. His hands grip my hips, thumbs stroking the sensitive skin just above the waistband of my jeans. He looks up at me, eyes dark with desire.

"May I?" he asks, fingers toying with the button.

I nod, unable to form words. Mason slowly undoes my jeans, sliding them down my legs along with my panties. I step out of them, suddenly feeling very exposed. But the way Mason looks at me—like I'm the most exquisite thing he's ever seen—chases away any insecurity.

His hands caress my thighs, parting them gently. I tremble in anticipation as he leans in, his hot breath fanning across my most intimate place. The first swipe of his tongue makes me cry out, my hips bucking involuntarily.

Mason's strong arms wrap around my thighs, holding me steady as he explores every fold and crevice with his talented mouth. His tongue circles my clit, applying just the right amount of pressure to send shockwaves of pleasure through me.

I've touched myself before, of course, but nothing could have prepared me for this. It's like every nerve ending in my body is on fire, all focused on the exquisite sensations Mason is creating between my legs.

"Oh god," I moan, my head falling back as the pressure builds. "Mason, I...I think I'm going to..."

He redoubles his efforts, sucking my clit between his lips as he slides a finger inside me. The dual stimulation is too much. With a keening cry, I shatter, waves of ecstasy washing over me. Mason doesn't let up, drawing out my orgasm until I'm a trembling, oversensitive mess.

When he finally pulls away, I slump against him, boneless and sated. Mason scoops me up in his strong arms, carrying me to the bed. He lays me down gently, then stands to remove the rest of his clothes.

Mason climbs into bed beside me, his movements slow and deliberate. The mattress dips under his weight, and I feel the heat radiating from his skin as he settles next to me. For a moment, he simply looks at me, his eyes roaming over my face as if committing every detail to memory. Then, with a gentleness that surprises me, he wraps his arms around me and pulls me close.

I melt into his embrace, my body fitting against his like two puzzle pieces finally slotting into place. His chest is firm against my back, rising and falling with each steady breath. One of his arms serves as a pillow for my head, while the other drapes over my waist, his large hand splayed across my stomach. The calluses on his fingers create a delicious friction against my skin, sending little shivers through me.

Mason's scent envelops me—a heady mix of sandalwood, leather, and something uniquely him. I breathe it in deeply, letting it calm my racing heart. For a long moment, we simply lie there, skin to skin, the only sound our mingled breaths.

"Are you alright?" Mason murmurs, his lips brushing the shell of my ear.

I nod, not trusting my voice. The reality of what just happened is starting to sink in. I've never been this intimate with anyone before, never felt so exposed and vulnerable. Part of me wants to curl into a ball and hide. But a larger part revels in the warmth of Mason's body against mine, in the way his arms make me feel safe and protected.

"We don't have to go any further tonight," he says softly. "There's no rush."

His words surprise me. I turn in Mason's arms, needing to see his face. His eyes are dark, pupils blown wide with desire, but there's a tenderness there too that makes my chest ache.

So I don't speak. I can't. I just burrow my head in his chest and let him hold me.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

Mason

The moment we step out of the private jet, Harper's eyes widen, drinking in the Parisian skyline. I can't help but smile, remembering my own first glimpse of the City of Light.

"It's real," she whispers, her fingers tightening around mine. "I've dreamed about this for so long, and now..."

I squeeze her hand. "Now you're here. And I intend to show you every inch of it."

We start at the Eiffel Tower, of course. I've arranged for a private tour, and as we ascend, I watch Harper's face. She presses against the glass, her breath fogging the window as she takes in the sprawling city below.

"Mason, it's...I don't even have words," she says, her voice thick with emotion.

I pull her close, breathing in the scent of her hair. "You don't need them. Just feel it."

From there, we weave through the narrow streets of Montmartre. Harper's artistic soul comes alive among the painters and street performers. She stops to chat with a wizened old man creating intricate charcoal sketches, her eyes shining as they discuss technique.

We pause for lunch at a tiny café tucked away from the tourist crowds. Harper moans softly as she bites into a still-warm pain au chocolat, and the sound does things to me I can't quite explain.

"How did you find this place?" she asks, licking a stray bit of chocolate from her lips.

I smirk. "I have my ways."

The afternoon finds us strolling along the Seine, Harper's hand tucked into the crook of my arm. We cross the Pont des Arts, and I see her eyes linger on the remaining love locks.

As the sun begins to set, I lead her to my final surprise of the day. We enter the Louvre, now closed to the public, and I watch as realization dawns on her face.

"Mason, how did you...?"

I shrug, aiming for nonchalance even as my heart races at her reaction. "I may have made a few calls."

We wander the empty halls, our footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. Harper moves from masterpiece to masterpiece, her fingers hovering just shy of touching the canvases. When we reach the Mona Lisa, she stands transfixed, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Thank you," she whispers, turning to face me. "For all of this. For showing me Paris."

I cup her face in my hands, my thumbs brushing away the tears that have spilled over. "No, Harper. Thank you. For reminding me what it's like to see the world with fresh eyes. For making me feel..."

I trail off, suddenly overwhelmed by the intensity of emotion coursing through me. Harper's gaze locks with mine, her eyes searching. In this moment, surrounded by centuries of artistic genius, she is the only masterpiece I care about.

I lean in, my lips a breath away from hers. The air between us crackles with electricity. Just as I'm about to close the distance, a sharp noise echoes through the gallery. We both startle, turning towards the sound.

A security guard rounds the corner, his flashlight beam cutting through the dimness. "Monsieur Blackwood? You've got ten more minutes."

My jaw clenches. Of course something would interrupt this perfect moment. I look back at Harper, an apology already forming on my lips.

I nod curtly at the guard, then turn back to Harper. "Come on," I whisper, taking her hand. "I have one more surprise for you."

We slip out of the Louvre and into a waiting car. As we glide through the twilight-bathed streets, I can't help but watch Harper. Her face is illuminated by the passing streetlights, her eyes still wide with wonder.

"Where are we going now?" she asks, a mix of excitement and fatigue in her voice.

I smile, squeezing her hand. "You'll see."

The car pulls up to the Ritz Paris, its façade glowing golden in the evening light. Harper's mouth falls open as we step out onto the cobblestone drive.

"Mason, this is..."

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"Home for the next few days," I finish, guiding her inside.

The opulent lobby seems to take Harper's breath away. She turns in a slow circle, taking in the gilded moldings, crystal chandeliers, and priceless artwork. I lead her to a private elevator, keying in the code for the top floor.

As the doors open, I watch Harper's face. The Presidential Suite sprawls before us, a masterpiece of luxury and refinement. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panoramic view of Paris, the Eiffel Tower twinkling in the distance.

"Oh my god," Harper breathes, stepping into the suite. She moves from room to room, trailing her fingers over antique furniture and silk draperies.

I follow her into the master bedroom, where a king-sized bed draped in the finest linens dominates the space. "There's a second bedroom through that door," I say, gesturing. "I wanted to make sure you had your own space if you needed it."

Harper turns to me, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "Mason, this is...it's too much. I don't know how to thank you."

I close the distance between us, cupping her face in my hands. "You don't need to thank me, Harper. Seeing your face light up all day...that's all the thanks I need."

We stand there for a long moment, the air between us electric. I want nothing more than to pull her close, to feel her body against mine. But I hold back, not wanting to pressure her.

"It's been a long day," I say softly. "Why don't you get some rest? We can order room service if you're hungry."

Harper bites her lip, glancing at the bed behind me. "Actually," she says, her voice barely above a whisper, "I was thinking...maybe we could just stay here? Together?"

My heart races at her words. "Are you sure?" I ask, searching her eyes for any hint of hesitation.

She nods, stepping closer. "I'm sure."

I lean in, finally closing the distance between us.

Our lips meet, and the world falls away. Harper's mouth is soft and warm against mine, tentative at first, then growing bolder. I pull her closer, one hand tangling in her hair as the other slides down to the small of her back. She makes a small noise in the back of her throat, and I feel it reverberate through my entire body.

I deepen the kiss, tracing the seam of her lips with my tongue. She opens to me willingly, and I groan at the taste of her. It's intoxicating—sweet like the pain au chocolat from earlier, with an underlying flavor that's uniquely Harper.

We break apart, both breathing heavily. Harper's cheeks are flushed, her lips swollen. She's never looked more beautiful.

I kiss her again, and Harper's hands slide tentatively down my chest, her touch feather-light yet electric. My breath catches as her fingers graze lower, ghosting over my abdomen. She hesitates for a moment before cupping me gently through my pants.

That hesitant touch ignites something primal within me. A growl rumbles in my chest

as I thrust instinctively into her palm. "Harper," I groan, my voice rough with need. "You have no idea how long I've wanted this. How many nights I've lain awake, aching for you."

My hips roll forward again, seeking more friction. Harper's eyes widen at my confession, but her hand remains. "Tell me," she whispers.

"Since the moment I first saw you," I admit. "I've been beating off every night to thoughts of you. I don't know what you've done to me, baby, but I'm fucking obsessed with you."

I lean in, my lips brushing her ear as I murmur, "I want to worship every inch of you, Harper. To taste you, to feel you come undone beneath me." My hands roam her body, memorizing every curve. "And knowing I'll be your first...god, it drives me wild. You're mine, all mine."

Harper shivers against me, her breath coming in quick pants. "Mason," she whimpers, pressing closer.

I capture her lips again in a searing kiss, pouring all my pent-up desire into it. My hands find the zipper of her dress, slowly dragging it down. "May I?" I ask, waiting for her nod before easing the fabric from her shoulders.

The dress pools at her feet, leaving Harper in delicate lace underwear. My eyes drink her in hungrily. "Beautiful," I breathe, trailing reverent fingers along her collarbone.

Harper's hands fumble with the buttons of my shirt. I help her, shrugging it off before pulling her flush against me. The feel of her soft skin on mine is electrifying.

I guide her backwards until her legs hit the bed. Laying her down gently, I hover over her, taking in every detail of her flushed face and kiss-swollen lips.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask one final time, searching her eyes.

Harper nods, reaching up to cup my face. "I'm sure," she whispers. "I want you, Mason."

Those words shatter the last of my restraint. With a growl, I claim her lips once more as my hands begin to explore.

My hands roam Harper's body, savoring the silky feel of her skin. I trail kisses down her neck, relishing her soft sighs. As I reach the swell of her breasts, I pause to look up at her. Harper's eyes are heavy-lidded, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

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I unclasp her bra with practiced ease, tossing it aside. My mouth waters at the sight of her perfect breasts. I take one rosy nipple between my lips, swirling my tongue around the sensitive peak. Harper arches into me with a gasp.

"Mason," she moans as I lavish attention on her other breast. Her fingers tangle in my hair, holding me close.

I kiss my way down her stomach, dipping my tongue into her navel. When I reach the lacy edge of her panties, I look up at Harper. Her face is flushed, her lips parted. I hook my fingers under the delicate fabric.

"Wait," Harper says suddenly. I freeze, worried I've gone too far. But then she continues, "I want to try something."

She gently pushes at my shoulders until I'm lying on my back. With trembling fingers, she undoes my belt and zipper. I lift my hips, allowing her to tug my pants and boxers down.

Harper's eyes widen as she takes in the sight of me, fully aroused. She licks her lips nervously before positioning herself between my legs.

My breath catches as I realize what she intends to do. "Harper, you don't have to?—"

But then her warm mouth engulfs me, and coherent thought becomes impossible. A guttural groan escapes me as her tongue swirls around my sensitive head.

"Fuck," I hiss, fisting my hands in the sheets to keep from thrusting up into her

mouth.

Harper takes me deeper, her inexperience evident but more than made up for by her enthusiasm. The sight of her lips stretched around me is almost enough to make me come on the spot.

She pulls back, her tongue tracing the thick vein on the underside of my cock. When she reaches the tip, she swirls her tongue around it before taking me deep again.

"That's it, baby," I encourage her, my voice rough with pleasure. "Just like that."

Harper hums in response, the vibrations sending sparks of pleasure through me. Her hand wraps around what she can't fit in her mouth, stroking in time with the bobbing of her head.

I thread my fingers through her hair, not guiding, just needing to touch her. The wet heat of her mouth combined with the visual of her between my legs has me rapidly approaching the edge.

"Harper," I warn, tugging gently at her hair. "I'm close."

She looks up at me through her lashes, her lips still wrapped around me, and I nearly lose it right there. With a herculean effort, I gently pull Harper up, claiming her lips in a passionate kiss. The taste of myself on her tongue only heightens my arousal. In one fluid motion, I flip us over so she's beneath me again.

"As incredible as that was," I murmur against her neck, "tonight is about you."

I trail kisses down her body, savoring every inch of soft skin. When I reach the lace of her panties, I look up, silently asking permission. Harper nods, lifting her hips slightly.

I slowly peel the delicate fabric down her legs, drinking in the sight of her fully nude form. She's breathtaking—all soft curves and creamy skin. I position myself between her thighs, placing reverent kisses along the inside of each one.

"Mason," Harper whimpers, her hips shifting restlessly.

"Patience, sweetheart," I murmur. "I want to savor this."

I trace my tongue along her slit, groaning at her taste. Harper gasps, her back arching off the bed. I focus my attention on her clit, alternating between gentle flicks and firm circles. Her thighs begin to tremble as I slide one finger inside her tight heat.

"Oh god," Harper moans, her hands fisting in the sheets.

I add a second finger, curling them to hit that spot inside her that makes her see stars. Her hips buck against my face as I increase the pressure of my tongue on her clit.

"That's it, baby," I encourage her. "Let go. Come for me."

With a keening cry, Harper shatters. Her inner walls clench around my fingers as waves of pleasure wash over her. I work her through it gently, only pulling away when she becomes too sensitive.

I move back up her body, kissing her deeply. Harper responds eagerly, her hands roaming my back.

"Are you ready?" I ask softly, positioning myself at her entrance.

Harper nods, her eyes locked on mine. "I'm ready," she whispers.

I push forward slowly, groaning at the exquisite tightness. Harper winces slightly,

and I pause, letting her adjust.

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"You okay?" I ask, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

She nods again. "Keep going," she urges.

I continue my slow advance until I'm fully sheathed inside her. The feeling is indescribable—hot, tight perfection. I hold still, fighting every instinct to move.

"You feel amazing," I tell her, my voice rough with restrained desire. "So perfect. So tight."

Harper shifts experimentally, and we both gasp at the sensation.

I begin to thrust, setting a gentle rhythm. Harper's legs wrap around my waist, drawing me deeper.

I lose myself in the exquisite sensation of Harper's tight heat enveloping me. My hips snap forward with increasing urgency as primal need overtakes me.

"Fuck, Harper," I groan. "So tight, so perfect."

She whimpers beneath me, her nails raking down my back. The sting only fuels my passion.

"I can't get enough of you," I pant, my thrusts growing more forceful. "You're intoxicating. I'm addicted to you."

Harper's legs tighten around my waist, drawing me deeper. "Mason," she gasps. "Oh

god..."

The sound of my name on her lips drives me wild. I capture her mouth in a searing kiss, pouring all my pent-up desire into it.

"You're mine now," I growl against her neck. "All mine. I'm never letting you go."

My hand slides between us to circle her clit. Harper cries out, her back arching off the bed.

"That's it, baby," I encourage. "Come for me again. Let me feel you."

As her inner walls start to flutter around me, rational thought deserts me entirely. A torrent of heated words spills from my lips.

"Fuck, Harper. I'm obsessed with you. You've ruined me for anyone else. I'll never get enough."

Her climax washes over her and she clenches around me, triggering my own release. As ecstasy crashes through me, I continue my fevered confessions.

"I'm going to worship you. Spoil you rotten. Give you anything you want. You're mine forever, baby. You hear me?"

I come for what seems like forever until we collapse together, breathing heavily. As the haze of passion slowly clears, I realize what I've said. I tense, worried I've frightened her.

But Harper simply curls closer, nuzzling into my chest. "I'm yours," she murmurs sleepily. "And you're mine."

Relief floods through me as I wrap my arms around her. I press a tender kiss to her forehead, savoring this perfect moment.

As Harper drifts off to sleep, I lie awake, my mind racing. I meant every word I said in the throes of passion. She's changed everything for me. And I know with absolute certainty that I'll do whatever it takes to keep her by my side.

CHAPTER

NINE

Harper

As we stroll through the gallery, Mason's hand rests possessively on the small of my back, his fingers splayed wide as if to claim as much of me as possible. The warmth of his touch seeps through the thin fabric of my dress, a constant reminder of our passionate encounter just last night.

I can't help but notice how his eyes dart protectively around the room, assessing each person who comes near us. When an enthusiastic art collector steps a bit too close while gushing about a vibrant abstract piece, Mason smoothly maneuvers me to his other side, putting his body between me and the stranger.

"Fascinating perspective," he says to the man, his voice polite but clipped. "If you'll excuse us."

His hand slides from my back to grasp mine, our fingers interlacing as he guides me to a quieter corner of the gallery. The possessive gesture sends a thrill through me that I'm not entirely prepared for.

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"Are you alright?" Mason asks, his eyes searching mine with an intensity that makes my breath catch.

"I'm fine," I assure him, squeezing his hand. "Just a bit overwhelmed by...everything."

His thumb traces circles on my skin, and I feel my pulse quicken in response. "We can leave if you'd like."

The offer is tempting, but I'm not ready to be alone with him again just yet. My emotions are still too raw, too confusing. "Maybe later. I want to see the rest of the exhibit first."

Mason nods, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "As you wish."

We continue our tour, and I can't help but notice how he positions himself between me and other patrons, how his eyes constantly scan our surroundings. It should feel stifling, but instead, I find myself leaning into his protective aura.

When we pause before a hauntingly beautiful landscape, Mason releases my hand only to wrap his arm around my waist, drawing me against his side. I inhale sharply at the contact, my body remembering his touch all too vividly.

"What do you think?" he murmurs, his breath warm against my ear.

I struggle to focus on the painting, hyperaware of every point where our bodies connect. "It's...lonely," I manage. "Beautiful, but isolated."

Mason's arm tightens almost imperceptibly. "Not everything beautiful needs to be alone," he says softly, and I wonder if we're still talking about the art.

As we move to the next piece, I find myself leaning into his embrace, my earlier reservations fading beneath the weight of his attention. I can't say I hate this newfound protectiveness, this constant physical connection between us.

In fact, as Mason's fingers trace idle patterns on my hip, I realize with a start that I might be enjoying it far more than I should.

But just as I think that, Mason goes berserk. A waiter walks by us and does a double take. His eyes rove up and down me before he lets out a whistle. I hear Mason's growl deep in his throat before he's suddenly on the man, his fist landing square in the guy's jaw. I'm mortified.

The waiter stumbles backward, crashing into a nearby sculpture. The delicate glass piece teeters precariously before shattering on the polished marble floor. The sound of breaking glass seems to echo through the suddenly silent gallery.

"Mason!" I gasp, grabbing his arm as he rears back for another punch. "Stop!"

But he's beyond reason, his eyes dark with fury. "You dare disrespect her?" he snarls at the waiter, who's cowering on the floor, blood trickling from his split lip.

Security guards materialize from nowhere, converging on us. One grabs Mason's shoulder, trying to pull him back. Mason shrugs him off with ease, his muscles coiled tight beneath his tailored suit.

"Sir, you need to calm down," the guard says firmly.

Mason's jaw clenches. "Do you know who I am?"

The threat in his voice is unmistakable. I feel a chill run down my spine. This isn't the Mason I know—or thought I knew. This man is dangerous, unhinged.

"I don't care if you're the King of France," the guard replies. "You can't assault our staff."

Murmurs ripple through the crowd of onlookers. I catch snippets of whispered conversations?—

"Isn't that Mason Blackwood?"

"The billionaire?"

"What's he doing here?"

My cheeks burn with humiliation. This is exactly the kind of scene I never wanted to be part of. I tug on Mason's arm again, more insistently this time.

"Mason, please," I plead. "Let's just go."

For a moment, I think he hasn't heard me. Then, slowly, he turns to face me. The rage in his eyes fades, replaced by something softer, almost vulnerable.

"Harper," he says, his voice low. "I'm sorry. I just...I couldn't stand the way he looked at you."

I swallow hard, torn between understanding his protective instinct and being appalled by his violent outburst. "We need to leave. Now."

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Mason nods, his composure returning like a mask sliding into place. He turns to the gallery owner, who's hovering nearby looking distressed.

"I'll cover the damages," he says smoothly, pulling out a sleek black credit card. "And I trust this unfortunate incident won't find its way to the press?"

The owner's eyes widen at the implied threat—or perhaps it's the promise of Mason's money. Either way, he nods quickly.

As Mason deals with the fallout, I stand there, my cheeks burning with a mix of embarrassment and something else I can't quite name. The adrenaline is still coursing through my veins, my heart pounding.

I should be appalled. I should be running for the hills after witnessing Mason's violent outburst. But there's a traitorous part of me that felt a thrill at his possessive display, at the raw power he exuded.

When Mason turns back to me, his eyes are dark and intense. Without a word, he takes my hand and leads me swiftly through the gallery. I can feel the eyes of the other patrons on us, hear their whispers, but Mason's grip grounds me.

We burst out onto the Parisian street, the afternoon sun momentarily blinding after the dim lighting of the gallery. Mason doesn't slow his pace, guiding me purposefully down the sidewalk.

"Mason, where are we—" I start to ask, but he cuts me off by suddenly pulling me into a narrow alleyway between two buildings.

Before I can catch my breath, he has me pressed against the rough brick wall, his body caging mine. His lips crash down on mine in a bruising kiss that steals what little air I had left in my lungs.

I should push him away. I should be furious. Instead, I find myself melting into the kiss, my hands fisting in the lapels of his expensive suit.

When Mason finally breaks the kiss, we're both panting. His forehead rests against mine as he speaks in a low, gravelly voice. "I'm sorry you had to see that, Harper. But I'm not sorry for protecting what's mine."

A shiver runs through me at his possessive words. "Yours?" I breathe, my mind reeling.

Mason's hand comes up to cup my cheek, his thumb tracing my lower lip. "Yes, mine," he growls. "Tell me you don't feel it too. This connection between us."

I want to deny it. I want to be strong and independent and tell him he's crazy. But I can't lie, not when every nerve ending in my body is singing from his touch.

"I feel it," I admit in a whisper. "But you can't be acting like that."

A triumphant gleam flashes in Mason's eyes. He leans in close, his lips brushing my ear as he speaks. "Good. Because I'm not letting you go, Harper. Not now, not ever."

His words should terrify me. Instead, they send a thrill of excitement through my core. As Mason's lips find mine again in a searing kiss, I know I'm in way over my head.

But just as I start to lose myself in the kiss, a loud crash from the street startles us apart. We both turn to look, and I freeze in shock at what I see...

CHAPTER

TEN

Harper

My heart nearly stops as I see the cause of the commotion. A sleek black motorcycle has skidded to a halt at the entrance of the alley, its rider dismounting with fluid grace. As they remove their helmet, I catch a glimpse of familiar blonde hair.

Tyler. My best friend from art school. I haven't seen him since he moved off to California.

"Harper?" he calls out, his voice a mix of confusion and relief. "Oh my god, I've been looking everywhere for you!"

I'm frozen in place, caught between Mason's possessive embrace and the shocked face of my childhood friend. How did he find me here? Why is he in Paris?

Mason's arm tightens around my waist, and I feel the tension radiating through his body. His eyes narrow as he assesses Tyler, clearly seeing him as a threat.

"Who is this?" he asks, his voice low and dangerous.

Before I can answer, Tyler strides towards us, his face hardening as he takes in the scene.

"Get your hands off her," he growls at Mason. "Harper, are you okay? Is this guy bothering you?"

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. How can I possibly explain this

situation?

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Mason steps slightly in front of me, shielding me with his body. "I suggest you turn around and leave," he says to Tyler, his tone brooking no argument. "This doesn't concern you."

Tyler's eyes flash with anger. "Like hell it doesn't," he snaps. "Harper, come on. We need to talk. Alone."

I feel torn in two, my body yearning to stay pressed against Mason's warmth while my mind screams that I need to go with Tyler, to understand why he's here.

"I..." I start, my voice barely above a whisper. "I can't just..."

Mason turns to me, his eyes intense. "You don't have to go anywhere you don't want to, Harper," he says softly, but with an undercurrent of steel. "Say the word, and I'll have him removed."

The threat in his voice sends a chill down my spine. This is a side of Mason I'm not sure I'm ready to face.

Tyler takes another step forward, his hand outstretched. "Harper, please. You have no idea what's really going on. You're in danger."

My head spins. Danger? What could he possibly mean?

Mason's body tenses further, and I sense he's on the verge of doing something drastic. I have to make a choice, and fast.

With my heart pounding, I look between Mason and Tyler. The man who's awakened desires I never knew I had, and the friend who's always had my back.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself against the storm of emotions swirling within me. "Mason," I say softly, placing a hand on his chest. "It's okay. This is Tyler Morris. He's an old friend from art school. I need to see what he wants."

Mason's jaw clenches, his eyes never leaving Tyler. "Like hell I'm letting you walk away with some guy," he growls.

I gently cup his face, forcing him to look at me. "Tyler isn't just 'some guy.' He's my best friend. We've known each other for years."

Mason's gaze only burns hotter with jealousy, and the tension doesn't leave his body. I can see the struggle playing out across his face—his need to protect me warring with his desire to respect my wishes.

"Look," I say, pointing across the narrow Parisian street. "See that little café with the red awning and the flower boxes in the windows? We'll be right there, having coffee and catching up. You can watch us the entire time if you want."

The café is a charming spot, its outdoor seating area filled with wrought-iron tables and chairs. The scent of freshly baked croissants and rich espresso wafts across the cobblestones, a reminder of the simple pleasures that drew me to this city in the first place.

Mason's eyes flick between me, Tyler, and the café. I can almost see the gears turning in his head as he weighs his options.

"Please," I whisper, standing on my tiptoes to press a soft kiss to his cheek. "Trust me."

He lets out a long, slow breath. "Fine," he says finally, his voice tight. "But I'll be watching. If anything seems off?—"

"I know," I interrupt, giving him a small smile. "You'll come charging in to save me. I get it."

I turn to Tyler, who's been watching our exchange with a mixture of concern and impatience. "Shall we?" I ask, gesturing towards the café.

As we cross the street, I can feel Mason's eyes boring into my back. The weight of his gaze is almost physical, a reminder of the passion and possessiveness that both thrills and terrifies me.

Tyler and I settle at a table near the window, where I know Mason will be able to see us clearly. The waiter brings us two steaming cups of café au lait, the rich aroma filling the air between us.

"Alright, Ty," I say, wrapping my hands around the warm mug. "Start talking. What's this about danger? And how on earth did you find me in Paris?"

Tyler leans forward, his eyes intense. "Harper, there's so much you don't know. About Mason, about his business...God, I don't even know where to start."

As Tyler begins to speak, I can't help but glance out the window. Mason is still there, leaning against the wall of the alley.

My heart goes cold at Tyler's words, each revelation like a shard of ice piercing my chest. The café around us fades into a blur as I struggle to process what he's telling me.

"Harper, Mason Blackwood isn't just some benevolent patron of the arts," Tyler says,

his voice low and urgent. "He's a ruthless developer who's been systematically destroying artist communities all over California."

I shake my head, not wanting to believe it. "That can't be true. He's been so supportive of my work, of my dreams..."

Tyler reaches across the table, grasping my hand. "Listen to me. Remember that amazing gallery district in San Francisco? The one we always talked about visiting someday?"

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I nod, recalling our late-night conversations in art school, dreaming of the day we'd see our own work hanging in those hallowed spaces.

"It's gone, Harper. All of it. Blackwood Development bought up the entire block and tore it down. There are luxury condos there now, with a Starbucks on every corner."

My stomach lurches. I think of the sketches Mason had praised just last week, my plans for a series exploring the intersection of nature and urban decay. How could he have looked at those with such enthusiasm, knowing what he'd done?

"But that's not all," Tyler continues, his eyes never leaving mine. "Remember Joanna? The sculptor who mentored us during that summer workshop?"

My throat tightens. Joanna had been like a second mother to us, nurturing our talents and pushing us to explore beyond our comfort zones.

"Her studio was in an old warehouse in Oakland. She'd been there for twenty years, Harper. It was a landmark, a gathering place for the whole arts community." Tyler's voice breaks. "Blackwood bought the building, evicted everyone with barely a month's notice. Joanna lost everything—her workspace, her equipment, decades of unfinished projects."

Tears sting my eyes as I picture Joanna's warm smile, her hands always covered in clay. The thought of her life's work destroyed is almost too much to bear.

"And it's not just California," Tyler presses on. "He's been doing this all over the country. New York, Chicago, Austin—anywhere there's a thriving arts scene,

Blackwood swoops in and turns it into overpriced apartments and chain stores."

I glance out the window, my gaze finding Mason. He's still there, watching us intently. The man I thought I knew—passionate, supportive, with a deep appreciation for creativity—seems to dissolve before my eyes. In his place stands a stranger, cold and calculating.

"But why?" I whisper, my voice barely audible over the clinking of cups and saucers around us. "Why would he do this?"

Tyler's expression softens. "Money, Harper. It's always about money. Those funky old buildings artists love? They're sitting on prime real estate. Blackwood sees

I struggle to process Tyler's words, my mind reeling. Could it really be true? Had Mason been using me, manipulating my passion for art for his own gain this whole time?

"There's more," Tyler says gravely, leaning in closer. "Harper, he's dangerous. Like, seriously dangerous. I've been digging into his past, and there are rumors...people who've crossed him or gotten in the way of his developments have a way of disappearing."

A chill runs down my spine. I think of Mason's intensity, the barely contained violence I've sensed lurking beneath his polished exterior.

"What are you saying?" I whisper, though part of me already knows.

Tyler's eyes are filled with fear and concern. "I'm saying we need to get you out of here. Now. Before he realizes what I'm telling you."

I glance out the window again. Mason is still there, watching us like a hawk. His

piercing blue eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I see something dark and possessive flash across his face.

My heart pounds as I turn back to Tyler. "I can't just leave," I say, though my resolve is crumbling. "My art, my studio..."

"We'll figure it out," Tyler insists. "But right now, we need to go. I have a car waiting around the corner."

I nod, finally accepting the gravity of the situation. As we stand to leave, I cast one last look at Mason through the window.

His eyes narrow, sensing something is wrong. I watch in horror as he starts to move towards the café, his face a mask of fury.

"Run," Tyler hisses, grabbing my hand.

We burst out of the café and sprint down the cobblestone street, the sound of Mason's angry shouts echoing behind us.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

Mason

What the actual fuck? Is this dude really trying to run off with Harper?

My Harper?

I don't know what the fuck he said to her, but I see the fearful look in Harper's eyes

when she glances back over her shoulder at me.

It guts me. How can she be afraid of me like that?

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This guy doesn't know who he's messing with. I will burn down the entire world to get Harper back. I immediately place a call and get a contact to find out who the fuck this Tyler is and where he's staying. And God help him when I find him.

The phone barely rings once before my contact answers. I bark out orders, my voice low and dangerous. "I need everything on Tyler Morris. Now."

As I wait for the information, my mind races. I can still see Harper's face, the way she looked at me with those wide, frightened eyes. It's like a dagger twisting in my chest. I've protected her, given her everything. How dare this nobody swoop in and try to take her away?

My fingers drum against the steering wheel of the rented Bentley, the leather creaking under my grip. The streets of Paris blur past, quaint shops and manicured lawns that usually soothe me now just fuel my rage.

My phone buzzes. I snatch it up, drinking in every detail about Tyler fucking Morris. Trust fund kid turned starving artist. Renting a loft in LA. Known to frequent The Palette, a dive bar masquerading as an art gallery.

And then I see what I'm really after. Where he's staying in Paris.

I'll crush him, this boy who thinks he can play in my league. I'll show Harper the mistake she's making, remind her of everything I can give her that he can't.

I spin the Bentley around, tires squealing on pristine asphalt. The setting sun paints Paris in shades of blood red and deep purple. It feels like an omen, a promise of the

storm I'm about to unleash.

Tyler Morris has no idea what's coming for him. By the time I'm done, he'll wish he'd never set eyes on Harper. And she'll realize that there's no escaping me, no matter how far she runs.

She is mine.

Harper

My heart races as Tyler and I dash through the winding streets of Paris, the cobblestones uneven beneath our feet. The City of Light feels more like a shadowy maze as we duck into narrow alleys and slip between buildings older than time. I can still feel Mason's eyes on me, burning with possessive fury.

We finally reach Tyler's rented flat, a cozy garret tucked away in a quiet corner of Montmartre. As soon as the door closes behind us, I slump against the wall, my legs shaking. Tyler wraps me in a tight hug, and for a moment, I let myself believe we're safe.

The flat is small but charming, with slanted ceilings and dormer windows that offer glimpses of the Parisian skyline. Canvases and art supplies are scattered everywhere, evidence of Tyler's latest creative burst. In any other circumstance, I'd be itching to pick up a brush myself.

Instead, I pace the worn wooden floors, hugging myself tightly. "He'll find us," I whisper, more to myself than to Tyler. "He's rich."

And obsessed with me, I can't help thinking. Didn't he admit as much?

Tyler tries to distract me, pulling out a bottle of wine and two mismatched glasses.

We sip the rich Bordeaux as the sun sets, painting the sky in hues that would make Monet weep. For a brief moment, I allow myself to relax, to imagine a life free from Mason's suffocating grip.

But even as I try to villainize him, I can't forget how gentle he was with me. How his hands and mouth felt on me when we made love.

But then I remember his possessive fury when he assaulted that waiter for whistling at me. There are definitely two sides to Mason. I just don't know which one to trust.

As night falls, the flat takes on an almost magical quality. Moonlight streams through the windows, casting long shadows across the floor. The distant sounds of Parisian nightlife drift up from the streets below—laughter, music, the clinking of glasses. I hate myself for wondering what Mason and I would be doing right now if I hadn't fled with Tyler.

But I did the right thing, right? Because I can't stay with Mason if what Tyler said about him is true, and Tyler wouldn't make something like that up.

Tyler and I talk late into the night, reminiscing about our days in art school, dreaming of the future. Talking more about Mason.

Just as I'm starting to believe that maybe, just maybe, we've given Mason the slip, there's a sharp knock on the door. I look at Tyler with wide eyes. I already know it's Mason. He's found me already.

My breath catches in my throat as the knocking grows more insistent. Tyler and I exchange panicked glances, frozen in place like deer in headlights. The old wooden door rattles on its hinges with each thunderous blow.

"Harper!" Mason's voice booms from the other side, a mixture of fury and

desperation. "I know you're in there. Open the door!"

My heart pounds so hard I can feel it in my fingertips. I grab Tyler's arm, my nails digging into his skin. "What do we do?" I whisper, though I already know it's hopeless.

Before Tyler can answer, there's a deafening crack as the door splinters. It flies open, revealing Mason silhouetted in the doorway like an avenging angel. His eyes lock onto mine, dark and stormy with barely contained rage.

"Harper," he growls, striding into the room. His presence seems to fill every corner, making the cozy garret feel claustrophobic.

Tyler steps in front of me, arms spread wide. "Leave her alone, man. She doesn't want to go with you."

Mason's laugh is cold and humorless. "Is that what you think?" He brushes past Tyler as if he's nothing more than an annoying insect. "Harper belongs with me. Always has, always will."

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I back away, bumping into an easel. Tubes of paint clatter to the floor, splattering vibrant colors across the worn floorboards. The scent of linseed oil fills the air, mingling with the tension.

"Mason, please," I plead, hating the tremor in my voice. "Just go. We can talk about this later."

His eyes soften for a moment, and I catch a glimpse of the man I fell for. But then his jaw clenches, and that tenderness is replaced by steely determination.

In two long strides, he closes the distance between us.

I yelp as he grabs me, easily lifting me off my feet. The world spins as he throws me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. My fists beat uselessly against his broad back.

"Put her down!" Tyler shouts, lunging forward.

Mason turns, keeping me balanced effortlessly. "Stay out of this if you know what's good for you," he snarls at Tyler. "This is between me and Harper."

As Mason carries me out of the flat, I catch one last glimpse of Tyler's stricken face.

I kick against Mason's muscular back, my heels drumming a frantic rhythm. It's like striking a brick wall—he barely seems to notice. The Parisian night air is cool on my flushed skin as he carries me down the narrow staircase, my hair brushing against the peeling wallpaper.

"Let me go!" I yell, my voice echoing in the stairwell. An elderly woman pokes her head out of her apartment, eyes wide with alarm. Mason flashes her a charming smile, as if this is all perfectly normal.

"Newlyweds," he explains smoothly in flawless French. "Too much champagne."

The woman tuts sympathetically and retreats back inside. I want to scream for help, but the words stick in my throat.

Outside, the streets of Montmartre are alive with tourists and locals enjoying the balmy evening. Cafés spill out onto the sidewalks, the clinking of glasses and bursts of laughter a stark contrast to the tension thrumming through my body. A street artist is capturing the scene in bold strokes of color, and for a surreal moment, I wonder if we'll end up immortalized in his painting—the furious billionaire and his unwilling captive.

Mason strides purposefully towards a sleek black car idling at the curb, its engine a low purr. With one fluid motion, he opens the passenger door and deposits me inside. Before I can even think about escaping, he's efficiently buckled me in, the seatbelt a restraint I can't break free from.

I'm still struggling when he slides into the driver's seat, the leather creaking beneath him. The car's interior smells of expensive cologne and new leather. It's achingly familiar—the scent of wealth and power that always clings to Mason.

"Where are you taking me?" I demand, hating how small my voice sounds.

Mason's eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror as he pulls away from the curb. The glow from the dashboard casts shadows across his face, making him look even more dangerous and alluring.

"Back to the Ritz," he says, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. "Where else?"

The car glides through the Parisian streets, a bubble of luxury insulating us from the vibrant nightlife outside. We pass the Moulin Rouge, its famous windmill casting red light across our faces. Tourists crowd the sidewalks, oblivious to the drama unfolding mere feet away.

I press my forehead against the cool glass of the window, watching my breath fog the pane. The Eiffel Tower looms in the distance, a glittering sentinel over the city. It feels like a cruel joke—I'm in one of the most romantic cities in the world, trapped with a man I both desire and fear.

Mason's knuckles are white on the steering wheel, the only outward sign of his tension. The silence between us grows until he finally breaks it. "Why did you run from me?"

I scoff. "As if you don't know."

"I don't," he deadpans. "Tell me."

I stare at Mason in disbelief, my mouth hanging open. The lights of Paris streak past us, casting alternating shadows and illumination across his chiseled features. His dark eyes remain fixed on the road ahead, but I can see the muscle in his jaw working.

"Are you serious?" I finally sputter. "The artist communities, Mason. The ones you've systematically destroyed with your 'urban renewal' projects."

He glances at me, brow furrowed in genuine confusion. "What artist communities?"

I feel like I've been doused in ice water. Could Tyler have been wrong? No,

impossible. I press on, the words tumbling out in a rush.

"The Warehouse District in Chicago. That collective in Brooklyn. The entire Arts Quarter in San Francisco. Your company swoops in, buys up property for pennies, and then forces out all the artists and small business owners to build luxury condos and artisanal coffee shops."

I gesture wildly, nearly smacking my hand on the leather-wrapped ceiling of the car. "Hundreds of people lost their homes, their studios, their livelihoods. And for what? So you could turn a bigger profit?"

Mason's grip on the steering wheel tightens, his knuckles turning white. We glide past the illuminated facade of the Louvre, its pyramid glowing like a beacon in the night. The juxtaposition of ancient and modern architecture seems fitting for this surreal conversation.

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"Harper," he says slowly, as if explaining something to a child, "I have no idea what you're talking about. My company doesn't do urban renewal projects. We're primarily in tech and finance."

I blink rapidly, trying to process this information. "But...but Tyler said..."

Mason's laugh is sharp and humorless. "Tyler? You mean the guy who's been trying to get into your pants since art school?"

I open my mouth to protest, but Mason continues. "Just because you friend-zoned him years ago doesn't mean the guy won't stop trying."

He takes a hand off the wheel to run it through his hair in frustration. "Christ, Harper. Did it ever occur to you to fact-check before running off with him?"

We're approaching the Place de la Concorde now, the obelisk at its center stretching towards the star-studded sky. The car slows as we hit traffic, giving me a moment to collect my scattered thoughts.

"But...Tyler wouldn't make up something like that," I say weakly.

Mason's eyes flicker to me, a mixture of frustration and something softer—hurt, maybe?—in their depths. The Ferris wheel of the Place de la Concorde looms before us, its lights reflecting off the Seine like scattered diamonds. He maneuvers the car smoothly through the roundabout, the Arc de Triomphe rising in the distance like a ghostly sentinel.

"Harper," he says, his voice low and intense, "I don't think Tyler intentionally lied to you. But I think he made a crucial mistake."

We turn onto the Champs-Élysées, the famous avenue stretching before us like a glittering ribbon. The trees lining the street are festooned with twinkling lights, creating a magical canopy above. Late-night shoppers stroll past haute couture boutiques, their windows gleaming with the latest fashions.

"What do you mean?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Mason sighs, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. A street performer on the corner is breathing fire, the flames casting eerie shadows across the faces of the gathered crowd. The scent of roasting chestnuts wafts through the car's vents, a jarring contrast to the tension inside.

"The company Tyler's talking about? It's called Blackwood Realty, not Blackwood Industries," Mason explains. "They're a massive private equity firm, and yeah, they've been involved in some controversial urban development projects."

My mind reels as I process this information. We pass the ornate facade of the Petit Palais, its golden gates gleaming in the moonlight. A group of laughing tourists spills out of a nearby brasserie, the clinking of their champagne glasses barely audible over the purr of the car's engine.

"But...but they sound so similar," I stammer, feeling a cold knot of dread forming in my stomach.

Mason nods, his expression grim. "Exactly. It's an easy mistake to make, especially if you're not familiar with the business world. Realty, Industries, but both Blackwood...to an outsider, they probably sound like the same company."

We turn onto a smaller street, the grand buildings giving way to charming sidewalk cafes and intimate wine bars. A street artist is capturing the scene in watercolors, his brush dancing across the paper in fluid strokes.

"So Tyler just...jumped to conclusions?" I ask, my voice small.

Mason's hand leaves the wheel, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. The gentle gesture is at odds with the frustration evident in his voice. "It looks that way. He probably heard about Blackwood's projects, made the connection to my last name, and assumed the worst without bothering to verify anything."

We pull up to the grand entrance of the Ritz, the hotel's facade glowing warmly against the night sky. A uniformed valet approaches as Mason brings the car to a stop.

My mind reels as I try to process everything Mason has just told me. Could it really all be a misunderstanding? Did I flee based on false information?

As the valet opens my door, I hesitate, unsure if I should get out. Mason comes around and offers his hand. His eyes are intense, searching my face.

"Harper," he says softly. "I know you're confused right now. But please, come upstairs with me. Let's talk this through."

I bite my lip, wavering. I feel like a piece of shit. I jumped to conclusions too and left him for no reason.

With a shaky breath, I place my hand in his. His fingers close around mine, warm and familiar.

We move through the opulent lobby in silence, the plush carpet muffling our

footsteps. In the elevator, Mason stands close, his presence both comforting and overwhelming. The air feels charged between us.

When we enter the suite, I'm struck anew by its luxury—the silk drapes, the crystal chandeliers, the sprawling view of Paris twinkling beyond floor-to-ceiling windows. It's a far cry from Tyler's cramped garret.

Mason pours us both a drink, handing me a crystal tumbler of amber liquid. I take a sip, welcoming the burn.

"Harper," he begins, running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry for how I acted earlier. Seeing you run off with Tyler...it made me crazy. The thought of losing you?—"

He breaks off, jaw clenching. When he continues, his voice is raw with emotion.

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"You have to know how much you mean to me. This time with you has been the happiest of my life. I've never felt this way about anyone before."

My heart races at his words.

Mason sighs heavily. "And I know I got angry, but all I knew was that the woman I care about deeply was fleeing from me in terror. It gutted me, Harper."

He moves closer, cupping my face in his hands. His touch sends shivers down my spine.

"I'm not perfect," he murmurs. "I know I can be intense, possessive even. But everything I do, I do out of love for you."

My breath catches at that word. Love. We've never said it before, always dancing around the depth of our feelings.

"Mason, I?—"

But before I can finish, his lips are on mine in a searing kiss. All my doubts and fears melt away as I mold my body to his, losing myself in his passionate embrace.

And then he hoists me into his arms, and my legs wrap around him. I feel his cock prodding against me through our clothing. He unzips himself, hikes my dress up and pulls my panties to the side. In an instant, he's inside me.

I cry out at the sudden fullness as he sets a punishing pace. His hand fists in my hair,

and his eyes blaze into mine with an almost feral intensity. “Don’t you ever fucking run from me again, do you hear me, baby? I would never fucking hurt you. Don’t you know that?”

My head spins as Mason thrusts into me, his words and actions overwhelming my senses. The intensity in his eyes both thrills and frightens me. I cling to his broad shoulders, my nails digging into his skin through his shirt.

"I'm sorry," I gasp, my voice breaking. "I didn't mean to?—"

He cuts me off with another bruising kiss, his tongue demanding entrance. I yield to him, moaning into his mouth as he hits that perfect spot inside me. The mix of pleasure and lingering anxiety has me trembling in his arms.

Mason breaks the kiss, his breath hot against my ear. "You're mine, Harper. Only mine. Say it."

A small part of me wants to resist, to assert my independence. But a larger part craves his possession, his all-consuming desire. "I'm yours," I whimper, arching into him. "Only yours, Mason."

His pace quickens, and I can feel myself hurtling towards the edge. The Parisian skyline blurs beyond the windows as he presses me against the cool glass. I'm vaguely aware that anyone could look up and see us, but I'm too far gone to care.

"That's my good girl," Mason growls, his voice thick with lust and something darker. "Come for me, baby. Show me who you belong to."

His words push me over the precipice. I cry out as waves of pleasure crash over me, my inner walls clenching around him. Mason follows moments later with a guttural groan, burying himself deep inside me as he finds his release.

We stay like that for a long moment, our ragged breathing the only sound in the room. Slowly, Mason lowers me to my feet, keeping me steady as my legs threaten to give out. His hands frame my face, and when I meet his gaze, I'm struck by the vulnerability there.

"I can't lose you, Harper," he says softly. "You have to know that."

I nod, unable to find my voice. The enormity of what just happened—of everything that's happened today—crashes over me. Tears well up in my eyes, and Mason pulls me close, cradling me against his chest.

"Shh, it's okay," he murmurs, stroking my hair. "I've got you."

And I can't help but feel like I don't deserve his forgiveness. How could I ever think he would hurt me?

CHAPTER

TWELVE

Mason

I stand in the corner of the gallery, watching Harper as she moves from piece to piece. Her eyes are wide, drinking in every brushstroke and splash of color. This is her moment, her triumph, and I've made it happen.

My cock twitches as I imagine claiming her right here, marking her as mine in front of all these cultured Parisians. But I hold back. For now.

"What do you think?" I murmur in her ear as I come up behind her.

She startles, then relaxes as she realizes it's me. "It's...overwhelming," she admits. "I never thought I'd see my work like this."

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"Get used to it," I growl. "This is just the beginning of what I have planned for you."

Harper shivers, and I'm about to suggest we slip away to celebrate privately when a man approaches, eyeing Harper's latest piece with interest. He introduces himself as a local collector, and I feel my fists clench as he begins chatting with Harper.

But I force myself to relax. This is what she's here for. To sell her art to collectors. Get her name out.

This is why I made this happen. To see her shine.

I'm about to interject when a familiar figure catches my eye. Tyler. Damn it. How did he get in here?

He saunters through the gallery like he owns the place, his paint-splattered jeans and ratty t-shirt a stark contrast to the refined Parisian crowd. A few guests wrinkle their noses as he passes, but Tyler pays them no mind. His gaze is fixed on Harper.

My jaw clenches as he approaches. The collector excuses himself, sensing the tension crackling in the air.

"Harper!" Tyler calls out, his voice carrying across the hushed gallery. "This is incredible!"

Harper's face lights up, and something twists in my gut. "Tyler! I can't believe you're here!"

I know they've talked since the mishap where he completely misrepresented me to my girl, but I'm not fool enough to believe Tyler has let it go. Maybe the guy made a legitimate mistake. I've yet to get an apology from him and don't expect one.

A man knows when another man wants his girl, and this Tyler? He wants Harper.

Over my dead body.

They embrace, and I have to restrain myself from yanking them apart. When they separate, Tyler's eyes narrow as they land on me.

"I see your sugar daddy made it happen," he says, his tone dripping with disdain.

Harper frowns. "Tyler, don't start?—"

"No, I'm serious," he presses on, gesturing around the ornate gallery. "All this fancy bullshit? It's not you, Harper. He's trying to mold you into something you're not."

"That's enough," I growl, stepping forward. "I think it's time for you to leave."

Tyler ignores me, focusing on Harper. "Can't you see what he's doing? He's controlling you, manipulating your art?—"

"Stop it!" Harper's voice rings out, silencing us both. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes flashing with anger. "Tyler, I appreciate you coming, but you don't get to decide what's best for me or my art."

I blink, surprised by her vehemence.

She turns to me, her gaze softening. "And Mason, I know you arranged all this because you believe in me. Thank you."

Tyler opens his mouth to argue, but Harper cuts him off.

"This is my night," she says firmly. "My art. My choice. And I choose to celebrate it, here and now, with both of you—if you can behave like adults."

I'm stunned into silence, arousal and pride warring within me.

Tyler looks like he's swallowed something sour, but he nods grudgingly.

As Harper leads us both towards her next piece, explaining her inspiration, I can't take my eyes off her. She's radiant, confident, commanding the room.

And I can't fucking wait to get her alone.

I keep looking at the way her hips swap in that dress I had made specially for her. The exposed expanse of her back. The delicate curve of her neck.

My cock is going to be making an obscene tent in my trousers if I don't do something soon.

I can't take it anymore. The sight of Harper glowing with confidence, commanding the room, is too much to resist. As she finishes explaining her latest piece, I grasp her hand and tug her away from the crowd.

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"Mason, what—" she begins, but I press a finger to my lips, urging silence.

I lead her down a dimly lit hallway, away from prying eyes. My heart pounds as I scan for a secluded spot. There—an alcove partly hidden behind a large abstract sculpture. Perfect.

I pull Harper into the shadowy space, pressing her against the wall. Her eyes widen in surprise, but there's a flicker of heat in their depths.

"Shh," I murmur, covering her mouth with my hand. "We need to be quiet."

She nods, her breath hot against my palm. I trail my other hand down her side, savoring the silky feel of the dress I had made for her. My fingers find the slit in the skirt, slipping underneath to caress her thigh.

Harper's eyelids flutter closed as I stroke higher. When I reach the lace edge of her panties, she lets out a muffled whimper. I growl low in my throat, torn between the need to claim her and the thrill of our clandestine encounter.

"Do you want this?" I whisper, my lips brushing her ear.

She nods frantically, her hips pushing forward. I smirk, then yank her panties aside. In one swift motion, I lift her up, pinning her between my body and the wall. Harper wraps her legs around my waist as I free myself from my trousers.

With a stifled groan, I thrust into her welcoming heat. Harper's cry is muffled by my hand as I begin to move, setting a demanding pace. The risk of discovery only

heightens our shared pleasure.

I bury my face in her neck, inhaling her intoxicating scent. Mine, I think fiercely. All mine.

I drive into Harper with relentless intensity, savoring every muffled gasp and shudder. The thrill of potentially being caught only fuels my passion. I can feel her tightening around me, her climax building.

"That's it, sweetheart," I growl softly. "Let go for me."

I angle my hips, hitting that spot deep inside her that makes her see stars. Harper's eyes go wide, her body tensing. I clap my hand over her mouth just as she comes apart, stifling her cry of ecstasy.

The pulsing of her inner walls around my cock is exquisite torture. I grit my teeth, fighting my own release as Harper trembles in my arms. Her nails dig into my shoulders as waves of pleasure crash over her.

When the aftershocks subside, I slowly remove my hand from her mouth. Harper gulps in air, her chest heaving.

"Mason," she breathes, voice husky with satisfaction. "That was..."

"We're not done yet," I growl, still aching hard inside her.

I pull out, ignoring her whimper of protest, and set her on shaky legs. In one smooth motion, I spin her to face the wall. Harper braces herself against the cool surface as I enter her from behind.

The new angle draws a strangled moan from us both. I set a punishing rhythm, one

hand gripping her hip while the other tangles in her hair. The quiet sounds of skin on skin seem deafening in the secluded alcove.

I lean in close, my lips brushing the shell of her ear. "You're mine, Harper," I rasp. "Say it."

She shakes her head, stubborn even now. I tug gently on her hair, changing the angle of my thrusts. Harper gasps, her hips bucking back against me.

"Say it," I demand again, feeling my own release approaching.

"Yours," Harper finally whimpers. "I'm yours, Mason."

Her admission sends me over the edge. With a final, deep thrust, I bury myself inside her and come with a muffled groan. Harper shudders against me, her body milking every last drop.

We stay like that for a long moment, both panting and trembling. Finally, I ease out of her and help her straighten her dress. As I tuck myself away, reality starts to seep back in.

The sounds of the gallery filter down the hallway—soft music, the murmur of conversation. Harper's cheeks are flushed, her hair slightly mussed. She's never looked more beautiful.

And I know with every fiber of my being that I'm only going to get more obsessed with her every day for the rest of our lives.

EPILOGUE

One year later

Harper

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The city lightsparkle below as I step onto the rooftop of Mason's penthouse. My heart races, remembering how we first met a year ago. Now here I am, on his private terrace, the cool night air raising goosebumps on my bare arms.

Mason emerges from the shadows, his intense gaze raking over me. "My perfect wife," he says, his deep voice sending shivers down my spine.

Mason did make my career take off. I'm one of the most renowned artists in the world now, but he gave me an even greater gift.

His love.

And I can't wait to share my news with him.

Mason closes the distance between us, his strong arms encircling my waist. His lips find mine in a searing kiss that sets my body aflame. I melt against him, savoring his familiar scent and the solid warmth of his chest.

"I've missed you today," he murmurs against my neck, trailing kisses down to my collarbone.

My fingers tangle in his hair as he lifts me, carrying me to a plush lounge chair. He lays me down gently, his eyes dark with desire as he slowly undresses me under the starlit sky. Soon we're skin to skin, his muscled body covering mine.

Mason enters me with a deep groan of satisfaction. We move together in perfect sync, our bodies joining again and again as the city bustles far below. His possessive

touches and whispered words of adoration push me closer to the edge.

"I want to get you pregnant," Mason growls, his hips snapping against mine. "I want to see you round with my child."

Breathless, I manage to gasp out, "I'm already pregnant."

Mason stills for a moment, his eyes widening in wonder. Then he crushes his mouth to mine, thrusting deep as he finds his release. The intensity of the moment sends me spiraling into ecstasy alongside him.

As we lay tangled together, Mason's hand rests protectively over my still-flat stomach. I see a vulnerability in his eyes I've never witnessed before.

I feel Mason's hand trembling slightly against my skin. His voice is uncharacteristically soft as he asks, "You're certain?"

I nod, a smile tugging at my lips. "I took three tests this morning. All positive."

Mason's eyes shine with an emotion I can't quite place—joy mixed with something deeper, almost primal. He presses a reverent kiss to my forehead, then my lips. "You've made me the happiest man alive," he murmurs.

I run my fingers through his hair, savoring this tender moment. But a flicker of uncertainty gnaws at me. "Are you really okay with this? It's happening so fast..."

Mason's gaze sharpens, his jaw tightening. "Of course I am. This child is ours, Harper. A piece of you and me." His handsplay possessively across my abdomen. "I'll give you both the world."

There's an edge to his voice that sends a shiver down my spine—not entirely unpleasant, but intense. I try to lighten the mood. "Well, let's start with a crib and

some onesies. We can work our way up to world domination."

Mason doesn't smile. Instead, he pulls me closer, his muscled arm a steel band around my waist. "I'm serious, Harper. Nothing will ever harm you or our child. I'll make sure of it."

As I drift off in Mason's embrace, lulled by the city sounds far below, I know that Mason's obsession will keep me—and our baby—safe.

Forever.