



# Wanting Her Boss

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Madison Dunne has it all at forty-four: She thrives in the high-stakes realm of reputation management, enjoying a life others envy.

A lavish wedding invite from Madison's ex-wife arrives, and the thought of attending solo is unthinkable.

In a bold move, Madison enlists her dedicated twenty-eight-year-old assistant, Payton, to play the role of her girlfriend. But this charade is more than just an act—it's a dance with forbidden desires.

Little does Madison know, Payton has been silently wanting her for the last year.

This fake relationship, as brief as it is, brings Payton's hidden passions to the forefront, and an electrifying connection emerges.

As the lines between make-believe and reality blur, will Madison and Payton risk it all for a chance at true love?

**Total Pages (Source):** 54

As soon as Payton entered the swanky hotel, she could almost smell the money. And she didn't think she'd ever been this self-conscious in all her life. The bar staff were better dressed than she was.

"Payton," Ashley said, waving her inside, her dark hair straight tonight. "Come on."

Payton hadn't even realized that she hadn't made it beyond the entrance, her feet stalling as she took in the extravagance. The chandeliers, the champagne, the suits. And this was just the lobby.

She sucked in a breath, running her hands down her simple black dress. She might not feel like she belonged, but Ashley had invited her to this party of sorts. Payton hadn't crashed it.

And as she followed Ashley away from the lobby and into one of the large ballrooms, she didn't know why this display of wealth seemed to take her aback tonight. She was used to being around rich people. Her days were spent as a personal assistant to one of the most successful women in New York City. The amount of money that her company pulled in each week, each month... Payton struggled to comprehend it. That there was even a market for it. Managing reputations?

It was all so beyond Payton, and it had nothing to do with the business degree she'd studied for, but her job paid well and, while it was hard work and it could sometimes be trivial, it was rewarding more often than not.

Payton caught up with Ashley, doing her best to tap into her acting skills from all those plays she did in high school. She could play the part tonight. Pretend she was the heir to some hotel fortune or that she was the next great tech genius.

“Drinks?” Ashley asked, and Payton followed her over to a long table against the wall full of trays of champagne and wine.

Payton picked up a champagne flute, figuring she might as well indulge while she was here. She did have work tomorrow, so she couldn’t do too much damage. She took a sip, letting the fizzy, sweet taste hit her tongue.

“I love coming to Brian’s work stuff,” Ashley said with a grin. “I get to pretend for three hours that I’m not a struggling artist. That I’ve made it.” She flashed her a smile before picking up a glass of wine and taking a drink.

“Yeah, but was this worth missing Pride for?”

“It’s one night,” Ashley said with a laugh.

“Yeah, but it’s Pride,” Payton fake pouted.

“Well, thank you for taking the time.” Ashley shook her head as she spoke. “Seriously, I’m glad you were willing to come with me and keep me company. Brian’s always schmoozing at these things, and I barely see him. But it’s not like you were actually going to hook up with someone.”

Payton took another sip of champagne. “What? Why not? I’ve been single for almost two years. So, I am very much looking. When did I say I wasn’t?”

Ashley chuckled. “It’s not that you said you weren’t. It’s just that you’re a small bit obsessed with your boss. And I think she’s distracting you enough that you’re unable

to even think about anyone else.”

“Woah.” Payton knew she had a crush on her boss. She joked with Ashley about it right from the start. But Madison Dunne was not preventing her from dating. “That’s some psychoanalysis there. Didn’t know you had a side-hustle as a shrink.”

Ashley playfully bumped her shoulder. “It’s true, and you know it. So, don’t pretend that you’re actively looking for a girlfriend and that tonight you might have found her.”

“Excuse me. I just need to go find a new best friend. Maybe even a new housemate.” Payton even took a few steps toward the door before Ashley reached out and caught her arm.

“Always so much drama with you.”

Payton shrugged. “We can’t all have amazing partners and chase our dreams.”

When Payton answered Ashley’s ad for a housemate four years, they’d clicked instantly. And in those four years, so much had changed. More for Ashley than Payton.

Ashley had met Brian almost two years ago. They were serious, but neither of them was willing to give up their independence, so they hadn’t moved in together yet and didn’t really look like they would anytime soon. Ashley had also made progress with her music. She went from giving piano lessons and taking the most random gigs, to actually having a pretty steady circuit between three bars, a jazz club, and a few private gigs for weddings or parties.

Ashley had done really well for herself. Not financially. She hadn’t got a record deal or anything, but she was doing what she loved, and she met a guy that seemed like

the perfect match for her.

Payton was... Well, she was stuck.

She'd just turned twenty-eight. She was five years out of college, and she still hadn't used her business degree. She'd worked all kinds of odd jobs. Waitressing, dog walking, tour guide, dish washer... The list went on and on.

This last year was actually the most stable of her life. The only problem was she was someone's P.A. and while it paid well, it wasn't really setting her up for anything in life. Yeah, the company name might look good on her resume, but she still hadn't had any real responsibilities there.

"Thank you for coming," Ashley said, taking her away from her thoughts. "I'm only joking with you. Kind of," she said after a pause. "What are you going to do when you're not working for her anymore?"

Payton took another drink. "It's just a crush, and I'll get over it when I don't see her every day. That simple."

## Page 2

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Ashley eyed her but didn't challenge her on that statement. "Whatever you say, Payton. Now, come on. We need to see who's here. You never know who you might meet at these things."

"The kind of people who have millions to drop on an apartment?"

Ashley swatted at her. "Yes. Obviously. Considering that Brian is trying to sell out this building tonight. At the launch."

"See, that's crazy. That people have that much money."

Ashley leaned in as they started to move through the crowd, the musky scents of dozens of brands of colognes mixing together. "And that's why you have to mingle. Because you never know who you might meet."

Payton doubted that she'd meet anyone who would change her life here, but she knew what Ashley meant. She was looking out for someone in the music business or someone adjacent to the music industry. All she needed was a foot in the door. Or at least, that's what she kept saying.

Payton didn't think she could live like that. Yeah, she hadn't found her ideal career yet, but she'd find something. Eventually. She wasn't afraid of going back to bartending or cat sitting. But Ashley might have to. Or at least be happy with always moving from gig to gig.

Payton apologized to a man who she'd accidentally bumped into, and although she kept moving to keep up with Ashley, not wanting to lose her in the crowded room,

she could have sworn that was Jack Lowe. He was the co-owner of the company where Payton worked.

Why was he here? Although, he would have that kind of money to buy one of these apartments.

And if he was here... Was Madison?

Payton's eyes moved around the room as she followed Ashley over to where Brian was talking to a group of people, but Payton couldn't see her.

She inhaled a deep breath before she knocked back what was left of her champagne. She wasn't even sure what she'd say to her boss if she did see her out in the wild like this.

Payton spent long hours with that woman, from getting her early morning coffee to late nights at the office going over the next day's itinerary, but it had always been in a work capacity.

Payton didn't know what she'd say to her if she was here. Because as confident as Payton could be around women, and usually it was older women, there was just something about Madison Dunne.

She had the most captivating hazel green eyes. Expressive. She could have this serious expression on her face, a mask almost, but her eyes always had so much going on. And Payton would know. She spent far too long looking at her boss, staring into those mossy green eyes.

And Madison Dunne just had swag. There was no other way for Payton to describe it.

Confidence. Fashion sense. Ruthless negotiating skills.

It was no accident how Madison got to where she was.

So, Payton had a crush on her boss, but she would argue that it was a healthy crush. And even though she showed Ashley pictures, Payton knew she didn't get it. Photos didn't do Madison justice.

Because Payton was sure that if Ashley saw her, she might cut her some slack.

It was more than Madison's perfectly tailored skirts or blazers. Everything looked good on her.

It was more than her glossy black hair and the way it was always styled immaculately. Whether her hair was straight and sleek, or she came into the office with loose curls that fell across her shoulders, Payton desperately wanted to know what it was like to run her hands through her hair.

Madison Dunne was sixteen years older than her, and if Payton had thought that this crush was something she'd get over in a few months of working with her, she was sorely mistaken.

One year later, and Payton would do anything for a chance with her gorgeous boss.

2

Madison didn't know why she'd agreed to come to this launch. She had no interest in buying an apartment. She'd found the perfect penthouse within walking distance of the office almost ten years ago, and she had no intention of ever leaving it. Even if it was worth a fortune now.

But Jack wanted to buy a two-bed that overlooked Central Park, and apparently, he trusted her judgment for more than just business decisions. So, here she was,



spending a Thursday night mingling with politicians and sports stars, lawyers and bankers.

It was a funny business, what her and Jack did. They never had to advertise, not in the last decade anyway. And yet, they still had more work than they could take on.

Turns out that a lot of people have reputations to fix. And a few of them were here tonight. Sometimes, that made it awkward. Sometimes people embraced the fact that they had to do some damage control. Maybe, it made for a good story. She didn't know. But it did pay the bills, and their company had grown year on year since they'd started working together almost twenty years ago.

Madison sipped her champagne, hovering by the piano player tucked into the corner of the room. Despite making a living working with people, she was an introvert, and after a long day at the office before coming straight here, she was tired of making small talk.

## Page 3

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Thankfully, Jack was coming her way, a grin on his face, his full, dark hair neatly styled. “I’m in. Two bedrooms with a view of the Park.”

“Congratulations,” Madison said, giving him a quick hug.

“I know I probably should have bought a beach front property in Miami or San Diego, but man... There’s something about that address. About that view. I got up there when it was still a construction site, looking over Central Park like that, waking up to that every day... That makes it all worth it.” He lifted two glasses of champagne off of a passing waiter’s tray and handed her one.

“To your new apartment,” Madison offered when she’d finished her glass and left it on the table beside her.

“To us and our company,” Jack countered. “And another twenty years of success.”

Madison clinked her glass gently against his before she took a drink, the cool citrus flavors refreshing, but she savored it, knowing she had to be at the office early the next morning.

Jack did a double take and Madison followed his eyes.

“I thought that was her,” Jack said when he turned back to look at Madison.

She was about to ask him who he was talking about, but then their eyes caught. Madison knew she should look away, but her gaze lingered, taking in the black dress, her blond hair falling over her shoulders in loosely styled waves.

She'd never seen her P.A. in anything more than slacks and a blouse. Sometimes she wore sweaters in the winter. The most dressed up Payton got for the office was putting a blazer on.

Not that she was complaining. Madison had said that as long as Payton came into the office looking professional, she didn't mind what her personal assistant wore.

Payton darted her eyes away first, and Madison kept looking, vaguely aware that Jack was trying to have a conversation with her.

"I've never seen her away from the office," Jack said. "I nearly didn't recognize her."

Madison took another sip of champagne. What was she doing here?

Madison's gaze fell on the woman beside her. They were about the same age, late twenties, and from across the room, Madison couldn't tell whether they were a couple. They were standing close enough together, but she couldn't see any body language, any hint that they were dating.

Not that it mattered.

It would only matter if Madison was crazy enough to go through with the idea that had been floating around in the back of her head for the last year.

And she still hadn't decided if she was.

Payton had been her P.A. for just about a year now, and that was the longest that anyone had ever stuck with her. Usually, for one reason or another, Madison was looking for a new personal assistant every six, maybe nine months. She was demanding, and she worked long hours, so it was hard to find people who could stay with her for more than a few months.

Madison was surprised that Payton had made it this far, that Payton put up her. Madison had no idea why she did. Surely, there were other jobs Payton could be interviewing for. She had qualifications.

Although, Madison did have an idea why Payton was still coming into work each day. It was obvious that Payton had a thing for her, and it was a nice ego boost for Madison, because it didn't affect the job that Payton did for her. So, Madison considered it a harmless crush.

"Aren't you going to go talk to her?" Jack asked.

Madison pressed her lips together, about to say that they saw enough of each other at work, that she'd see her tomorrow, but maybe Madison should go over there. It would give her a chance to see if her idea had any real potential.

Because she was running out of time.

And if Madison was going to make that crazy suggestion, she had to do it away from the office.

"Yeah," Madison said, taking another drink. "Yeah, I think I will."

3

Payton forgot to breathe when her eyes met Madison's across the room. Ashley was still talking to her, but because they were in the middle of a conversation with Brian and some of his colleagues, she didn't notice how little Payton was paying attention.

Payton saw this woman six days a week. She'd seen her hair up, down, straight, styled. She'd seen skirts, pants, blazers, but nothing could have prepared her for seeing Madison Dunne wearing a scarlet red dress, her black hair falling across her

shoulders in loose curls. She was standing beside Jack now, over by the piano, and Payton barely registered the soft jazz music coming from it, because all of her attention, all of her focus was on Madison, who was looking right at her.

And then Payton had to look away, her heart racing, her palms sweating. She gulped her drink, doing her best to listen to the conversation going on around her.

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What was that?

Why had Payton been so entranced by someone she saw just about every day for the last year?

And why had Madison been staring at her?

Payton had found her across the room, already looking in Payton's direction.

She took a steadying breath and turned her body, in what she hoped was a casual move to look around the room, just to see...

Payton darted her eyes away as soon as she met Madison's again.

What was going on?

Payton tuned into the conversation going on around her again, just in time to say 'It was nice to meet you,' and Ashley arched an eyebrow at her.

"Are you okay?" Ashley asked. "I know you'd rather be at Pride, but I'm sure there's gotta be someone here who'll make it worth your while. Any of the baseball players?"

"Oh, there is."

Ashley's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

“By the piano. Red dress.”

Ashley discreetly looked past Payton and her eyes widened. “Is that...?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, okay. I take back everything I said about you having a borderline obsession with that woman. She deserves it. Wow.”

Payton exhaled, willing herself not to look over there again. “Yeah.”

“Too bad she’s straight.”

“Hmm.” Payton had always thought her gaydar could be trusted, because she’d never really been interested in a straight woman before, but maybe Madison was the exception.

“Even more reason to get back out there,” Ashley said, taking two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter. “And definitely a reason to drink.”

Payton took the glass from Ashley. “I still have work tomorrow.”

“As do I.” Ashley was in the process of bringing her glass to her lips when she stopped halfway. “Payton, I think she’s coming over here.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I’m just going to...”

“No. Ash. Wait—”

Payton nearly reached out for her arm, but she stopped herself, not wanting to look like a panicking fool. She inhaled a shaky breath, willing herself to stay calm. She spent hours with this woman every day. She could have a conversation with her outside of work.

Nothing was different.

Well, except for the fact that Madison looked like she belonged on the red carpet.

“Payton.”

Payton swallowed, recognizing her boss’s husky voice coming from somewhere behind her. She slowly turned, biting the inside of her cheek to keep her jaw from falling or from a silly smile coming to her lips.

Because either of those things was possible. Madison was standing three feet away from her, and she was easily the most beautiful woman in the room.



## Page 5

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“Hi,” Payton said, trying to tap into her old acting skills, trying to put up a shield of confidence, anything to hide the fact that she hadn’t been this nervous since she’d sat down in Madison’s office for an interview a year ago.

“Isn’t it funny how big this city is, and yet you still always manage to find a familiar face.”

Payton wasn’t about to disagree with her, because while it wasn’t true for her, it was absolutely true for someone like Madison. Someone who knew so many people from so many different walks of life.

Payton had never found much information about her online. She had tried to search for her when she applied for the job, but any information Payton could find was all in relation to Madison and Jack’s company. Their charity work. The occasional article about how they managed to save someone’s reputation.

Beyond what Payton saw at the office, she didn’t really know that much about Madison, and that somehow made her even more attractive.

“Buying an apartment?” Payton asked instead, because isn’t that why everyone was here? Well, except for Ashley and her.

“No. But Jack did.” She brought her glass of champagne to her lips and took a sip. Payton couldn’t resist stealing a glance at her long fingers, taking note of the manicured yet short nails and the nearly black polish on them. “I don’t think I’ll ever leave Chelsea.”

Payton shifted her focus back to Madison's eyes, although that was just as dangerous. It might keep her mind out of the gutter, but it was so easy to get lost in those deep greens and flecks of golden brown when Payton wasn't trying to remember every detail of what Madison was saying and quickly typing up a to-do list on her phone.

Now, she could just admire.

"What about you?" Madison asked. "What brings you here tonight?"

Payton appreciated the carefully worded question. Obviously, she was not here to buy, but Madison didn't outright say it, nor did she assume that Payton wasn't here to do just that. She simply asked a question, and now that Payton thought about it, she wasn't sure that Madison had ever asked her anything that wasn't work related.

"See the dark-haired woman in the white dress? That's my housemate, Ashley. Her boyfriend, Brian, is one of the real estate agents selling the apartments. And I'm here to keep her company, because he's busy trying to close deals, and while she wants to be supportive and be here for him, she also knew she'd hardly see him tonight. So, that's why I'm here," Payton finished, aware that she'd rambled on unnecessarily.

Payton couldn't decipher the look on Madison's face. It was almost like she was studying her, but that didn't really make sense when, again, they spent so much time together. And Madison knew a hell of a lot more about Payton than she did about her boss just from her resume alone.

Madison knew Payton grew up about two hours away, in upstate New York. She knew that Payton had a love for acting, for theater, for old movies. She knew her entire, varied work history. She knew where she went to college and what she'd studied.

Payton wished she knew just one thing about Madison. Something personal.

Something that might surprise her. Like in her spare time she went to art galleries or that she knew every Mexican restaurant in town because that was her favorite cuisine. Payton knew nothing like that. And it should have worried her how much she wanted to.

“I’m not surprised,” Madison said. “You seem like you’d be a good friend to have. Loyal.”

Payton searched Madison’s eyes. Was that a compliment?

Madison looked like she was about to say something else, but Jack appeared out of nowhere. He said hello to Payton before telling Madison that he had someone he wanted to introduce her to, and that was the end of their conversation.

Ashley winked at her from across the room, and Payton didn’t know what to think as she spent the rest of the night trying not to look for Madison and wondering how exactly she was going to go to work tomorrow and pretend that she hadn’t seen this version of Madison Dunne.

4

Rarely did Madison have days that dragged on like this, because she loved what she did. And because she could see the difference she made in a client’s life, she never dreaded going into the office.

She pushed back her black leather office chair and stood to shake her client’s hand across the desk, a woman in her thirties trying to put her past career and husband behind her. They’d spent the last two hours going over a plan that Madison was confident she could execute in the next six months, carefully reestablishing this woman’s online presence in the coming months to create a new image.

Once the door shut behind her, Madison sank back into her chair and let out a long exhale.

Today was the first day in a long time that she was struggling to push through. Maybe it was the four glasses of champagne she'd had last night. It might have something to do with the ticking clock and the wedding invitation that was poking out from her top drawer. She really needed to figure out what she was going to do about that.

A light knock on her door kept her from dwelling on that problem, at least for the time being. "Yes," she called, knowing it was either Jack or Payton. Nobody else bothered her without making an appointment.

Payton's bright blue eyes met hers. "Hi. You've got a meeting with Nina in ten minutes."

Why didn't she look rough this morning? When Madison had slipped away around ten, Payton and her friend were at the bar doing shots.

Madison nodded, motioning for her to come in, and Payton closed the door behind her, taking her usual seat across from Madison. "I need you to call Elena. See if she has any availability in the next month. Tell her I need to look better than I ever have." She waved off Payton who had looked up from her phone, her thumbs flying across the screen as she took notes. "She'll know what I mean."

Madison hadn't gone dress shopping in years. She'd found a stylist who understood her, and she had no intention of ever letting her out of her sight.

Because if she was going to this wedding, she needed to look amazing.

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Madison sighed as she checked the clock on her desktop. Now she had seven minutes until her next meeting, although it was just with the head of her social media team, so she knew it wouldn't take up too much of her time.

Madison sat back in her chair, watching Payton, a lock of her blond hair falling across her eye as she looked down at her phone.

"Anything else?" Payton added, her gaze lifting to meet Madison's.

"Yes." Madison needed to start dealing with the wedding invitation in her drawer. It had been sitting there for weeks, and she knew it was taking up valuable space in her head. "I need you to book some flights."

Madison reached for her mouse and pulled up her calendar on her desktop. "To London." She sat back, staring at the screen. She could just go for the wedding, but it made sense to make use of her time while she was there and meet with some potential business partners in London. "From August 10th. One week."

"Okay." Payton tapped away on her phone. "One first class ticket to London. Any hotel preferences?"

Madison started typing out an email, pasting the link to the hotel where the ceremony was on. "I've sent you the link. You can book a suite for the week."

Madison absently drummed her fingers on her desk. This was crazy. "Book two tickets."

Payton arched an eyebrow.

“I want to line up some meetings while I’m there,” Madison said quickly. “And I’ve grown accustomed to having you with me. To take notes.”

Payton stared at her. She still hadn’t said anything.

“You do have a passport?” Madison asked.

“Yeah. Yes.”

“Perfect.”

Payton cleared her throat. “You said, ‘While I’m there...’ Those meetings aren’t the main purpose of your trip?”

Madison held her gaze. “No. My ex-wife is getting remarried. Her fiancé is from London, and I’m not going that far without making it worth my while.”

Madison watched Payton’s mouth fall open. She tried to recover, sweeping a hand through her hair and looking out the window as if she was thinking about the logistics, but Madison could only guess that this reaction had everything to do with Payton’s crush on her and the fact that it was very unlikely that Payton had any idea she was gay.

5

Payton ran her hand through her hair, looking anywhere but at Madison because there was no way that she was keeping her expression neutral.

In Payton’s head, she was in the middle of the dance floor at a night club and her

favorite song that she hadn't heard in at least a decade had just come on.

Adrenaline was coursing through her veins as Madison's words seemed to run on a loop in her head ever since she'd said them.

'No. My ex-wife is getting remarried. Her fiancé is from London.'

Her ex-wife.

Madison had been married to a woman.

But she wasn't now.

So... She was single?

Madison Dunne had been married to a woman. Holy shit.

Madison's voice took her away from her thoughts. "Would you be willing to come to London with me?"

"Yes." Payton spoke as she turned her head, the answer coming without hesitation. She had no life currently, so what were the chances that she would in August?

Madison opened her mouth and closed it, pushing herself out of her chair with a sigh, and before Payton could ask what was bothering her, she was pacing in front of the floor to ceiling windows that took up the entire wall.

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“Do you any plans tonight?” Madison asked after a moment, her hands on her hips as her steps slowed, and she turned back to face Payton.

“Plans?” Payton echoed, her pulse jumping, her mind racing.

Why would Madison be asking her if she had any plans? There was nothing in her calendar beyond seven o’clock. No charity events. No business functions.

“Yes. Are you free tonight?”

A knock on the door interrupted them.

“Come in!”

Payton turned to see Nina hovering in the doorway, and she got up off the chair that Nina would be occupying.

“Payton, we’ll talk later,” Madison said as she returned to her desk, and Payton nodded before showing herself out, her heart hammering against her ribs, her legs a little wobbly.

What had just happened?

She barely made it to her desk, ignoring the other six people who she shared the room with, all of them furiously typing away or busy on the phone.

Payton flopped onto her chair, slouching, her arms limp against the arm rests,



hanging over the side as she leaned back, her eyes closed, her lips spreading into a stupid grin.

Madison Dunne was into women.

6

Madison was already dreaming of a relaxing bubble bath, a glass of wine in her hand. Maybe a good book.

But when she left her office that evening, she stopped in her tracks in the hallway. Through the glass, she could see that Payton was the only one left in her shared office space.

She normally didn't wait for Madison to leave. They had a fairly loose arrangement about work hours, because Madison was known to stay late and work weekends. Payton had always been generous with her time, and Madison paid her well for that loyalty, but she didn't usually wait for Madison to leave the office before she did.

And that meant that she was most likely still here because Madison had told her that they'd talk later.

And they never had.

Jack had ended up in her office for much longer than their scheduled thirty-minute meeting, and by the time she wrapped up her work, she hadn't given Payton another thought. Not until now.

Payton looked up from her desk. It was Friday night. During Pride Week. And Payton was here. Working.

Madison opened the door. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Payton glanced up at her with tired eyes, folding her laptop closed as she sat back in her chair. “Do you still want to speak with me?”

Madison leaned against the doorframe. Even though this would be a work proposition, she didn’t feel comfortable making it at the office. “Yes.” She cleared her throat. “You never answered my question earlier, about whether you were free tonight. But I’m guessing you are if you’re still here.”

“No. I had no plans for tonight.”

“No plans during Pride Week?”

Payton’s eyes widened for a second, but she recovered quickly. “I might end up at a bar at some point tonight, but I honestly don’t have any plans. Why were you asking?”

Madison adjusted the strap of her handbag before folding her arms across her chest, still wondering if she was really going down this road. “I was wondering if you’d have dinner with me tonight? Nothing fancy,” she added. “Just order some food in. I have something I want to talk to you about. A job of sorts.”

“Okay.” Payton held her gaze.

“Do you want to come back with me now? My driver’s downstairs.” Madison could feel her heart beating a little faster. “Unless you want to go home first. I don’t mind.”

“No. I’m good. And hungry. So, yeah. Let’s go.”

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Madison glanced over at Payton who was typing away on her phone as her driver pulled onto her street. She could still back out of this. Find some other job to give Payton. But then what?

And as Madison nodded to her doorman and strode through the lobby, she tried one last time to come up with an alternative plan that didn't involve Payton.

There just wasn't one.

In the last year, Payton has been an invaluable part of her work-life. Madison knew she needed a personal assistant. She'd grown too accustomed to having certain things done for her to ever go back, but Payton had always exceeded her expectations, which was surprising, because as far as Madison could see, this was Payton's first time working as one.

When they stepped out of the elevator and directly into Madison's apartment, she shrugged out of her blazer and slid her feet out of her heels, carrying both down the hall as she told Payton to make herself at home. It wasn't the first time Payton had been here.

Madison quickly changed into casual clothes, swapping her slacks for jeans and her blouse for a white tank top, turning the AC up a notch before she went into the bathroom to touch up her makeup.

When she came back out to the living room, Payton was sitting on the couch, her eyes

on her phone, although when she looked up, that crush that Madison was banking on was clear to see.

Payton's appreciative gaze swept over Madison before she cleared her throat. "What kind of food were you thinking of ordering?"

"Chinese?" Madison asked on her way into the kitchen, returning with a menu of her favorite place along with two glasses of water.

Madison sat down beside her, both of them looking over the menu. She would go with her usual order, so her mind wasn't on the menu. She was thinking about the way that Payton had just looked at her, and how potentially easy this could be.

Madison called in their order, trying to decide if she should wait until she had food to distract her or if she should just launch straight into it now.

Payton had wandered over to the floor to ceiling windows while Madison had been on the phone, and she'd pulled her long blond hair into a messy bun with a few strands hanging loose.

The age difference wasn't ideal. That was the latest thing that had her questioning this whole scheme. It didn't bother her personally. It was more the impression she would be giving others. And since this was all for the purpose of others, particularly her ex-wife, then shouldn't it be a factor?

Or she could just own it. Own the age difference. It could even be seen as a good thing.

"Madison?"

Payton was staring at her and judging by the look on her face, that hadn't been the

first time she'd said her name.

"Sorry." Madison shook her head. "I was a million miles away."

"I was just wondering what you wanted to ask me about tonight. What the job was?"

Madison inhaled a deep breath. "Why don't we sit down?" She motioned for Payton to move ahead of her, and they both took a seat. "So..." She smoothed her hands down her jeans. "I just want to start out by saying that the only reason I feel like I can offer this sort of job to you is because you've been an exceptional P.A. for me this last year, and I trust you."

Payton nodded. And then visibly swallowed. "Thank you for saying that." There was a quiver in her voice.

Madison knew she had Payton on edge and that she'd better just say it in case Payton was dreaming up all kinds of shady business practices that Madison might ask her to partake in. "So... This might sound a little bit strange, but this is going to be more of a personal request. It's still very much a job. I will pay you. Generously."

7

Payton could barely hear what Madison was saying over the pounding of her heart. Why was her boss being so mysterious? What kind of a job was it that she had to invite her here for dinner to ask her?

Was it something illegal? Something she couldn't ask her to do while they were in the office?

Did Madison think she had to persuade her to do whatever this job was? Was that why it was taking her so long to ask?

Payton couldn't keep her foot from bouncing, and she was on the verge of asking Madison to just say what she was trying to say, but Payton managed to be patient for a few seconds longer.

And when Madison did finally ask her, she nearly fell off the couch.

"So," Madison said as she took a deep breath. "I'm looking for someone to take to my ex-wife's wedding. A date." She bit her lip for a second before she kept going. "But it's more than that. I know it's incredibly childish to be going down this route, but I can't seem to help myself. I'm competitive, just like she is. And I refuse to go to that wedding alone. So, what I'm asking you, Payton... Is would you be willing to go to the wedding with me, not only as my date, but also as my girlfriend as far as everyone there is concerned? Someone I've been seeing for the last year."

Payton was pretty sure her jaw had fallen open. She pushed herself off the couch because she suddenly felt like she couldn't sit still. And she couldn't handle Madison's intense eye contact. Not now.

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Not when Payton could feel her mind and her heart already waging war.

She had to stop herself from immediately saying yes.

It would be so easy to say yes.

But then the sensible side of her kicked in and that's why she was standing by the windows again, her hands on her hips while Madison kept talking.

Payton might as well hear the full story, everything Madison was asking of her, before she agreed.

But Payton's heart was racing all the same, because while she was still coming to terms with the unbelievable news that Madison was interested in women, this was almost too much to register.

Playing the part of Madison's girlfriend?

Her mind was jumping from one image to the next.

Hand holding.

Madison's light touch on the small of her back.

Constant proximity.

An ex-wife to potentially make jealous.

It was dizzying.

Madison stayed where she was, crossing one leg over the other, her voice bringing Payton out of her dream montage. “I know it’s insane, but that’s why you’re the only person I could ask.”

Payton wiped her hand across her face as she turned back to face Madison. Fuck. Why was she so attractive? And she was asking her with so much confidence. Although, Payton had never heard that hint of desperation in her voice, there was still this air of confidence about her as she sat back on her couch, her arm draped over the back of it.

“What are you thinking right now?” Madison asked, her eyes locked onto Payton’s.

Payton sucked in a breath. “I don’t know. Surprised, I guess. I...” She couldn’t tell her boss that she was trying to keep her mind from conjuring up more images of the two of them together. “I hadn’t realized that you were married.”

Madison nodded slowly. “I tend to keep my personal life well away from work.”

“I know. I tried to look you up when I went for this job, but I couldn’t find much.” Payton made her way back over to the couch and sat down again. “But I guess it’s more surprising to me that you needed to ask me. That you’re not seeing someone.”

“Not that I feel the need to pretend that I am?”

“No.” Payton could feel her heart rate starting to return to normal. “I get that. I think I’d probably do the same thing if I was in your position. You can’t really not go but going on your own would be difficult on so many levels. Your friends or her family might assume that you’re heartbroken, that you never got over her.” She hesitated. “But I doubt that’s the case.”



“No. Not at all.”

Payton reached for her glass of water and took a drink, still not really believing they were having a conversation like this. Payton was learning more about Madison today than she had in the last year.

“Do you think you could do it?” Madison asked. “Or that you’d even be willing to? I know it’s a strange job description and obviously, completely off the record. I’ll pay you four times your weekly salary that week though.”

Payton blinked. She’d forgotten that, yes, this would be a job and that she’d therefore get paid. Madison had no idea she’d do it for free. Heck, she might even have paid Madison for the privilege of pretending to be her girlfriend for a week.

Yeah, she definitely would have.

Payton took another drink to gather her thoughts and give Madison a normal response. “That’s a really generous offer.”

Madison’s eyes studied her own, still waiting for some kind of indication that Payton would take this job.

Payton pressed her lips together. “Yes.” She paused for effect, as if she was really thinking this through. “Yeah. I think I could do it.”

Meanwhile, she was fist-pumping the air in her head like she’d just landed a twenty-five-foot putt on the eighteenth hole in front of thousands of people to win a golf tournament.

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The celebrations in her head were fucking epic, but Payton's face, hopefully, remained neutral.

“Okay,” Madison said with what sounded like a sigh of relief. “We’ll have to go over the details. Which is why I asked you here tonight. I mean, to ask you, of course, but assuming you agreed, I wanted the time to lay out the ground rules or the expectations. Because you know how crazy it can get at work. I didn’t see you all afternoon after you left my office.”

Payton was about to open her mouth when the intercom buzzed, and when Madison got up to get their food, Payton fell back against the couch, her hands covering her face, a grin coming to her lips.

Wait until she told Ashley.

8

Madison suggested they eat in the living room, their food on the coffee table as they sat on cushions on the floor. She wanted this to be as casual and easy going as possible. And the way Payton had looked at her when she’d gotten changed after work made Madison remember that Payton had probably never seen her in jeans before.

If this was going to be at all realistic, and it had to be or Madison didn’t know what she’d do, they had to figure out how to be friends as well as boss and employee.

And sharing food while sitting on the carpet in her living room felt like a way to start

that process.

They were nearly done eating now, with just casual conversation while they ate. Payton had asked her about her ex, and Madison had explained that she'd been married to Jennifer for five years and that they'd been divorced for two.

"And the woman she's marrying?" Payton asked as she tucked her knee into her chest.

"Hazel. She's from London and that's why they're getting married there. I think they split their time between both countries. I'm not sure."

Payton nodded. "Okay. Are you uh... Surprised by how quickly all this is happening?"

Madison sighed. "No. I mean, yes, we were married for five years, but I'd say things were only good for maybe three. Jen met Hazel while we were still in the process of getting divorced, so... And she told me that she'd proposed more than a year ago. So, no. Not really."

"Can I ask you something?"

Madison wiped her mouth with her napkin. "Please. And you can ask me anything. I'm aware that this is a big job, that I'm asking a lot of you, so if you want to ask me anything, just say it."

"When did you start thinking about asking me? Were you seeing someone a few months ago and assumed that you'd be bringing her and now you're panicking? Or had you been thinking about this for a while?"

"I know I keep my personal life away from the office, but we spend a lot of time

together. I think you'd know if I had a girlfriend."

Payton smiled. "Well, I didn't know you were gay, so..."

Madison returned her smile. Her heart was beating fast in her chest. Was she going to tell Payton the truth?

Madison reached for her glass and took a drink. "So, I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but..." She exhaled. "Jen told me that she was getting married right around the time my last P.A. handed in her notice, so... When I saw your resume, and your theater background, the idea popped into my head, and I couldn't seem to forget about it."

Payton shook her head as she wrapped her arms around her leg, her chin briefly resting on her knee before she sat up straight again. "I don't believe it," she said, a smile on her lips.

"I only seriously thought about it in the last two months. The time crept up on me, and I realized that I had to do something. But it was more that I could trust you than that you had acting experience. That part just planted the seed. It was much more about how good of a job you've done in the last year. That's what made me feel comfortable enough to even suggest this."

Payton wet her lips. "I'm glad you felt like you could ask. And I'd be happy to do it."

"I also figured that all of my personal assistants over the years haven't made it past a year. So, if this goes horribly wrong and I have to find a new P.A. then at least I've had a great year with you, and it wouldn't be unusual for me to start searching for a new one again."

Payton's lips curved into a smile. "How would it go horribly wrong?"

“I don’t know. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Well, I don’t think that’s going to happen.” Payton tilted her head. “But what’s the plan? You haven’t really said what this job entails.”

Madison nodded. “Yeah. Well, we’re flying out on Sunday. We’ll get there early Monday morning. Probably jet-lagged. And I’m going to line up some meetings throughout the week. And then the wedding is on Friday. I’ve been invited to the afters the next day. Just a night out at a bar I’m guessing. And then fly back Sunday.”

Payton looked like she was waiting for her to continue. “Okay, but what about me specifically. My job. What’s the goal? Are we making Jennifer jealous, or do you just want to be seen with me, you know, holding hands or whatever.” Payton’s voice trailed off at the end, almost as if she thought she might be crossing a line.

And that was exactly what Madison wanted to get out of the way now. Any kind of awkwardness. That had to be long gone by the time they boarded that flight.

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Madison sat back, leaning on her hands stretched out behind her. “I just want to appear settled, happy. So, yeah. That would mean some handholding. But nothing that you’re uncomfortable with. It can be really subtle. Nothing over the top.”

“And we’ve been dating for a year?”

Madison nodded. “Yeah. It just makes it easier to limit the lies. So, we did meet a year ago.”

“Okay. And we’re working as normal during the week we’re over there in the lead-up to the wedding?”

“Yes.” Madison watched Payton, trying to detect any signs that she might be thinking about backing out, but she didn’t think she saw anything.

“Is that why you asked me to book a suite? Knowing that we couldn’t be seen having two separate rooms.”

“Yes.” Madison swallowed. “A suite will have a living area, and I’ll take the couch. It’ll be like we have two rooms. So yes, I didn’t want anyone to think that we weren’t staying in the same room.”

“And will you know a lot of the people there?”

“Yeah. All of the people on Jen’s side. Sure. I’ve never met Hazel before. Jen’s a sports journalist and Hazel’s a soccer player. That’s how they met.”

“Are you nervous?”

Madison exhaled. “Now? I don’t think so. Knowing that you’re willing to do this. But it has been keeping me up at night these last few weeks. Just because I didn’t know what I was doing. If you’d, I don’t know, threaten to sue me or something. I kept going back and forth about whether or not to even ask you.”

“What made you?”

“Seeing you out that night, away from the office. You looked like you belonged at that event. And seeing you in a dress instead of business casual made it easier to see us going to this wedding together. I was tempted to ask you that night, but I never got the chance.”

As they carried their plates into the kitchen and Madison loaded the dishwasher, she met Payton’s eyes. “Thank you. For coming tonight. I probably could have waited until next week to ask you. I know I kept you from going out tonight.” She glanced down at her watch. It was almost ten o’clock. “You still could.”

Payton folded her arms across her chest, leaning against the counter. “Could I though? You might not be on social media, but I am.”

Madison inhaled a sharp breath. “That was the other thing that I wanted to ask you tonight. We spent so much time talking about me. What about you? Are you seeing someone?”

Payton shook her head. “No. And I can go another few weeks without seeing anyone.”

Madison opened and closed her mouth again. Why hadn’t she thought about that aspect of this? That Payton would have to limit her own social life. And what about

the last year? Had she been dating someone? Were there pictures of the two of them online that Jen would see if she did one search for Payton?

“Madison,” Payton said, stepping towards her to lightly wrap her hand around her forearm. “Hey, it’s fine. Don’t worry about me. I’m single, and I’m okay with that.”

Madison met Payton’s eyes. “And the last year?”

“I haven’t dated anyone in two years.”

“Really?” Madison asked, unable to filter her thoughts.

“Yeah.” Payton dropped her hand, waving her off. “I’m sure you remember how scattered my resume was. I worked a lot of jobs and did some strange hours over the years. I love living with Ashley, and I’ve never wanted to worry about being able to pay the rent, so I made sure to always be at least six months ahead. It didn’t leave much time to be a decent girlfriend to anyone.”

Madison nodded. “Still, this is an even bigger ask than I thought it was.”

“It’s not. I promise.”

“Okay.” As she walked Payton out, taking the elevator down with her, Madison felt better about this whole wedding thing than she had since Jen had called her to give her the news that she was engaged.

Even with Payton’s help, it would still be challenging, but at least she had someone to help her save face and maybe even make that weekend in August an enjoyable one.



Payton pushed her shades on top of her head, glad to be out of the heat. She closed her eyes for a second, letting them adjust to the dim lighting inside the busy bar.

“Beer?” Ashley asked, already squeezing in by the bar.

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“Yeah.”

The parade was over, and both of them had been out since ten o'clock that morning. Even though Ashley was seeing Brian, she'd never miss a Pride Parade.

Payton stepped in front of the fan that was blowing air from the corner of the room, needing that temporary relief. Her feet ached, and a trickle of sweat ran down her back, but she'd had a great day.

“Here you go,” Ashley said as she handed her a bottle of beer.

Payton pushed the lime down the neck before she knocked her bottle against Ashley's. “Thanks, and cheers.”

“To another Pride.” Ashley winked. “Even if you can't technically hook up.”

“It's not even like that,” Payton said, rolling her eyes.

Payton hadn't seen Ashley Friday night or all day yesterday, so she spent most of today filling Ashley in on what happened with Madison after work on Friday.

“You said,” Ashley said, pointing a finger at her. “You told her that you'd been single for the last two years and that you didn't mind staying that way for this little charade.”

Payton sighed. “You were the one that said that I wasn't going to meet anyone anyway. Now you're complaining?”

“I’m just saying that this is an unusual situation.”

“And you can’t tell anyone about it. Not even Brian. I mean it,” Payton added, eyeing her best friend. “Seriously.”

“I won’t tell anyone.” Ashley took another drink. “God, I needed that. Fuck, it’s sweltering out there.”

“Not much better in here.” There was no AC, just the fan, and she couldn’t keep standing in front of it.

“So, back to your boss crush.”

“She has a name.”

Ashley smiled. “I prefer boss crush. But, seriously, how are you going to do it?”

Payton shrugged. “Well, she thinks I’m going to be acting, but obviously I’m not. I mean, I think I just have to act like myself for the weekend. I’ve been doing more acting this past year... I even managed to draw out giving my answer.”

“You mean you didn’t blurt it out and give her a demonstration of how well you’re going to play the part of her loving girlfriend.”

“What? No.” Payton wondered if Ashley was being serious.

“I can’t believe you missed that opportunity. You should have put on those seductive eyes and brushed her hair away from her eyes, leaning in and acting as if you were going to kiss her. You know, drop your gaze. Just as a flavor of things to come.”

“No. That was not something I was even thinking about. And I don’t need to give her

a demonstration. Restraint. That's what I need. I need to make sure that I don't get carried away."

"And that's what I meant," Ashley said as they made their way back outside, standing in the shade outside the bar. "How are you going to do this? Without getting hurt."

"Oh." Payton blew out a breath. She hadn't really thought that far ahead. "I don't know. It's not something I could turn down, and it pays really well. I'll figure out that part the week after. When we're back in New York."

"I know you're happy about this. I can't even believe that she needs a fake date, but you've got to look after yourself. You already have it so bad for her, and after that week in London, it's not going to be an innocent crush. She's going to look at you like she really cares about you. She's going to have her arm around you. You're probably going to dance together. Hell, she might even kiss you. How are you going to go back to normal after that?"

Payton took a long drink, her heart racing. She'd thought of a lot of those things, but hearing Ashley say them out loud, hearing her say that they might kiss, it just made it even more real, and Payton knew that there was no way she was coming out of this unscathed.

10

Madison had spent all weekend worrying if she'd done the right thing by asking Payton to come with her to Jen's wedding.

She'd paced her office between meetings today, going through their conversation, wondering if she should have said things differently or left parts of it out.

But it had gone much better than she'd anticipated. Part of her could easily have seen

it going wrong and her having to backtrack and pretend that she was joking or something awkward like that. Another part of her had expected Payton to be more eager, to say yes before Madison had barely gotten the question out, because Madison knew that Payton had a thing for her.

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But Payton seemed to weigh it up and think it over before agreeing, and that was really the best outcome that Madison could have hoped for.

She imagined that Payton's crush would make this so easy, that they would just have to show up together and it would be the most obvious thing how much they cared about one another.

Madison had never acted before, but she could manage to look at a beautiful, young woman like Payton with a loving gaze. That wouldn't be hard either.

The part that had kept her up half the night last night was when she thought about having to find a new P.A. after this was all said and done, because she had no idea how they would go back to their normal, working relationship after spending a weekend pretending to be a couple. Not when Madison could almost guarantee that Payton had feelings for her.

And that might have contributed to her sleepless night. Guilt. The idea that this was crossing a line, that she might be using Payton.

But Madison had laid out the plan. And Payton had agreed to it. Whatever else happened when they got back to New York after their week away wasn't on Madison.

She just couldn't see things being the same.

But maybe Madison would be wrong. After all, today had run really smoothly. It was almost five o'clock, and more than once today, Madison had questioned whether she'd really asked Payton to do this on Friday night, because it was like nothing had

changed. Payton hadn't brought it up, and neither had Madison.

That was the idea though. That this agreement would just be an extension of Payton's job. And that meant that the next few weeks would be perfectly normal.

11

Payton took a deep breath before knocking on Madison's office door. It was after six o'clock, and everyone else had gone home.

She'd surprised herself these last few weeks. July had gone by without incident. Neither her nor Madison had brought up London beyond scheduling a few meetings.

And now it was August, their flight just a week away. Payton had done her best not to think about the trip, about what might happen and how difficult it would be to go back to their normal working relationship.

But now that it was August, Payton couldn't ignore it anymore, and all the practical things started to flood her mind.

What was she going to wear? What was Madison wearing? She didn't want to match or clash with whatever she was wearing.

Were they going to practice looking like a couple? It sounded silly, but if Madison slid her hand over Payton's right now, she didn't think she'd be able to hide her reaction. Just thinking about it sent a shiver through her entire body.

Yes, Payton had acting experience, but for her, this was a serious challenge. She had to pretend that Madison's touch wouldn't have an effect on her.

"Come in."

Payton pushed the door open. “Hey. Sorry to bother you.”

“No, you’re not. Take a seat.” Madison sat back in her chair, her dark hair straight today. She slid off her reading glasses and left them on the desk. “What did you need?”

Payton sat down across from Madison. “I just wanted to talk to you about next week. About the trip.”

“Okay.” Madison gave Payton her undivided attention.

Payton cleared her throat. “So, I was wondering what you were wearing. Just so I don’t clash.”

“Oh.” Madison frowned. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask my stylist to meet with you too.”

“No, no.” Payton was waving her off. “I didn’t mean that. Just I don’t want to pick the wrong dress. The wrong color. Depending on what you’re wearing.”

“It’s black tie. And I’m going with a teal dress.”

“Okay.” Payton mentally ran through her closet and hoped that Ashley would have something, because she didn’t think any of her clothes would work with that dress code. “And... I’m a little bit worried about this looking real.”

“How so?” Madison clasped her hands in front of her on the desk, looking every bit the professional despite what they were talking about.

“Well,” Payton started with a deep inhale. “I’m used to you being my boss. And I’m not sure how easy it’s going to be to just flip a switch. I do have my tiny bit of acting experience to fall back on, but it’s not the same when right now you’re my boss and



in two weeks you'll be my boss. But somewhere in the middle I'm supposed to be your adoring girlfriend."

"What are you suggesting?"

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Payton bit the inside of her cheek. “I’m just wondering if we should spend some time together this weekend.”

Madison nodded. “I was thinking that too. For a while, actually. It’s just that things have been so busy here. Were you thinking tonight?”

Payton hadn’t thought that far ahead. “Tonight, or tomorrow. I don’t mind.”

“What would we do?”

Payton blinked. She should have thought this through. Ashley played at a swanky wine bar last night. Maybe they could go there? Payton wasn’t exactly familiar with the more upscale establishments that this city had to offer. She went to gay bars and sports bars. “What about just going to a wine bar and having a few glasses? Maybe some food?”

“Okay. Yeah. Do you have somewhere in mind?”

“Yeah. It’s not too far from here. I can text you the address?”

“Please. Will I meet you there?”

“Yeah.” Payton could feel her throat tightening. This was fake, but it was still a date with Madison Dunne. “Around nine?”

“Perfect. Whoever’s there first can grab a table.”

“Okay.” Payton pushed herself out of the chair. She had more to say, but it could wait until tonight. What was she even going to wear?

“I’m leaving in a few minutes. You don’t have to wait for me.”

“Thanks.” Payton left, a mixture of nerves and excitement with her the whole subway journey home.

12

Madison surveyed the wine bar, a quiet hum of chatter greeting her as soon as she entered the cozy venue. Just about every table was full, but she found a table for two tucked away in the far corner, and before she’d even sat down, her eyes caught Payton’s as she entered.

Madison had spent nearly an hour getting ready, trying on four outfits, finally settling on black jeans and a red scoop neck blouse. She’d ignored that little voice in the back of her head, the one asking her why she cared so much. This was just a few hours out with her assistant. Very casual. And yet she couldn’t wear the first thing she’d tried on.

Payton made her way over to the table, a smile tugging at her lips. Her blond hair had been straight earlier. Now, it fell across her shoulders in loose waves. She’d swapped her gray slacks and white button-up blouse for jeans and a dressy white tank top with a black blazer over it.

“Hey,” Payton said as she took a seat across from Madison.

“Hi.” Madison decided then and there that she’d made the right decision. Payton would be able to pull this off, and Madison knew she’d be happy to have anyone she met at that wedding think that they were really together.

“What do you normally drink, or does it change?” Payton asked, glancing up from the menu.

Madison hadn’t even looked at it yet. She picked it up now, scanning over the list of wines. “I usually ask what they recommend and go with that unless it’s something I know I don’t like. You?”

“I’m not exactly a wine connoisseur, but I usually go with a Shiraz or a Malbec. Play it safe.”

The waiter came over, and Madison went with his recommendation. Payton asked which Shiraz he’d suggest and went with that one.

“So,” Madison said, throwing a glance around the room before her eyes settled on Payton’s. She didn’t recognize anyone here. Not that it mattered, but it made it easier, somehow. No one was going to come over to their table and force Madison to introduce Payton. “I’m no longer your boss. Not until Monday morning, anyway.”

“Okay,” Payton said with a shy smile.

“And we might as well apply the same rules to the entire trip. I know I have a few meetings lined up, but I want you to enjoy the week in London, and if we’re going to be putting on a show Friday night, we could use the week leading up to it like we are tonight. As friends. Getting to know one another better.”

Payton nodded and their waiter returned with their wine. “I can drink to that,” she said, lifting her glass, and Madison leaned forward to clink her glass lightly against Payton’s.

“Cheers,” Madison murmured, before she took a sip, the rich flavors hitting her tongue, and she immediately tasted the cherries.

“So, how did we meet?”

Madison took another drink before leaving her glass down, her fingers lazily moving along the stem. “Keep it simple? At work?”

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“Is that believable for you? Would anyone question that?”

Madison pressed her lips together. “No one would believe that I’d date my P.A. so...”

“What does that mean? Should I pretend I’ve been working for you in a different role?”

Madison really should have thought this through, because that was a question that would almost certainly come up. “I just meant that I wouldn’t cross that kind of a professional line. One where I might use my authority...”

“As in, it’s not a good look.”

“No.” Madison held her gaze. This was all true, but it felt like the right thing to say it out loud like this. To remind Payton that this was not going to happen. Because sitting here, with a candle flickering between them, tucked away in the corner of the bar, it would be easy to forget that this wasn’t a date. “How do you feel about saying that you’ve been working in marketing?”

Payton gave her a hint of a smile. “I think I could make that work.”

“Okay. First problem solved. What else?”

Payton took a sip of wine. “Well, I went back over my social media posts last night, just to make sure there wasn’t anything...You know... That might cause me problems, but it’s all fine. Mostly just photos of me and Ashley. But there’s also an

obvious lack of photos of me and you. Seeing as we've been together for the last year."

"Hm." Madison brought her glass to her lips and took another drink. "I don't see the point in documenting my life online for everyone to see."

"I imagine that you've seen all of the trouble that can lead to."

"Oh, that is a fact." Madison still couldn't get over some of the things that clients of hers had posted online.

"And I get that, but I think it still looks strange that there's no photos of us together on any of my profiles."

"Should we take one before the night's over?"

Payton opened her mouth to answer just as their waiter appeared to ask them if they'd like another glass. They both agreed and before he left, Payton asked him if he'd take a photo, handing him her phone as she stood up to come around to Madison's side of the table.

Madison was about to stand up, but Payton's voice was in her ear. "Stay there." So, she did. And then she felt Payton's hair tickling her cheek as her arms came around Madison, encircling her, Payton's forearms resting lightly against her chest.

Madison sucked in a breath, unable to remember the last time someone had been in her personal space like this. She glanced down to see Payton's hand clasped around her other wrist. Madison reached up to wrap her fingers around Payton's forearm, her lips sliding into a smile as the waiter took their photo, the sweet scent of Payton's perfume invading her senses.

Payton thanked him and took a seat, a satisfied smile coming to her lips. “We might just look good together,” she said, looking up from her phone.

Madison held out her hand, and Payton passed her the phone. She dismissed that funny feeling of missing having Payton that close.

She knew she wasn’t the kind of person who could devote hours of her life to a relationship, and this was the consequence of that. Any contact from an attractive woman had her nerves firing, her skin breaking out in goosebumps. Because one-night stands involved too much risk with regard to her reputation, so this was what she was left with. Overreacting to a fake moment that she was responsible for in the first place.

Although, Payton might have a point.

Madison casually extended the phone a little further away from her to get her eyes to focus on the image in front of her. Payton knew she needed reading glasses, so she didn’t know why she was trying to hide it now.

But they did look pretty good together.

Believable.

And that was the important part. Madison took one last look before returning the phone to Payton.

“Well?” Payton asked, her thumbs flying across the screen.

“I agree.”

Payton arched an eyebrow. “And is it okay if I post this? I wouldn’t write anything



about our relationship. Anyone who thinks we're together will be able to see it, and anyone who doesn't, like someone from work, will just see it as us enjoying a night out, away from the office."

Madison pushed down that uneasy feeling, knowing that Payton was right. Jen could very easily search for Payton's name, and it would be strange not to see at least one photo of them together.

"Yeah, go ahead." Madison finished her wine just as the waiter returned with two more glasses.

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She hid a wry smile as she thanked him. Her biggest fear with this whole charade was what Jen and her friends and family would think. Would they believe that Madison was in a happy relationship?

But sitting here now, with soft jazz surrounding them, the candle giving off a warm glow, Madison knew the biggest challenge would be making sure that Payton didn't get hurt.

Madison could handle having to find a new personal assistant. That was something she was used to doing at least once a year.

But she didn't think she could live with the guilt of having Payton really fall for her because Madison had put them in a position for it to happen.

Glasses of wine. Traveling together. Staying in the same suite. All while pretending that they cared about one another?

It was a dangerous game, and Madison hoped that by the end of it, Payton would see beyond Madison's style and success.

Because if she did, she'd realize that Madison wasn't worth the effort.

13

Payton pushed back the curtain and stepped out of the fitting room, and Ashley jumped up from the ottoman.

“That’s it!” Ashley practically dragged her over to the mirror. “That’s the dress.”

Payton took a deep breath as she took in her reflection in the wide full-length mirror. This must have been the eighth or ninth dress she’d tried on today, and while she was losing patience, Ashley had enough determination for the two of them.

“You can’t go wrong with black,” Ashley said behind her. “But this is what you need. It’s floor-length, but that slit running up the side? Madison will be fucking drooling by the end of the night.”

Payton turned, getting a look at the very open back. It was classy with a lot of sexiness. She just wasn’t sure she could pull it off. And when they started shopping today, Ashley had been on a mission. She didn’t want Payton to find a suitable dress. She wanted Payton to find a dress that would make Madison see her as more than her personal assistant who was playing her fake girlfriend.

“Yeah, I’m not sure,” Payton said, pulling her hair up with one hand to see the full effect of the halter neck.

“No, Payton. This is it.”

“I’ve never worn anything this nice. This sophisticated.”

“And that’s why you need it.” Ashley walked around her, studying her from every angle. “Yeah, I’m not letting you leave without this dress. What are you doing with your hair?”

“I don’t know.” Payton stared at her reflection. Could she really pull this off?

“And you have heels you’re comfortable in?”

“Yeah.” Payton let her hair fall again, running her hands over the smooth material.

“We’ll figure that out later.” Ashley’s smile was infectious. “I wish I could be there. I’d love to see the look on her face when you knock on her door, and she sees you in the hallway wearing this.”

Payton’s pulse sped up. She’d had so much to tell Ashley. And it had all been so crazy and unbelievable. But she must have left out the part where they weren’t staying in separate rooms.

“Ash...” Payton wet her lips as she padded back towards her fitting room. “We’re staying in the same room. Otherwise, it would look strange. But it’s a suite.”

Ashley’s eyes went wider than Payton had ever seen them, and Ashley wacked her on the arm. “Why didn’t you tell me??”

Payton shrugged. “I don’t know. I forgot.” She slipped behind the curtain and carefully got undressed, changing back into her jean shorts and tank top.

When she came out, Ashley was pacing the floor. “This changes everything.”

Payton shook her head as they headed out into the store to pay. “It doesn’t. She said she’s taking the couch, but there’s no way. She’s going to be the one in the bed.”

Ashley chuckled. “Where can I place my bet that both of you will be in that bed?”

“No.” Payton held up her hand. “No. Keep those thoughts to yourself. I’m not getting carried away, okay? This is still a work thing. It’s just going to be fun. And that’s the attitude I’m going to have. This is fun. I get to relax for one whole weekend and let myself gaze at Madison with my unfiltered heart eyes. Besides, where is all this enthusiasm coming from? I thought you were worried about me.”

Payton appreciated Ashley's encouragement, but it was hard enough for her to be realistic, to get it through her own head that nothing was actually going to happen with Madison.

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"I am," Ashley said. "And having Madison fall for you is the only good outcome here."

Payton knew that Ashley was right. Obviously, she would love for something to happen, but the chances were so slim. Madison had said it herself. That she wouldn't cross that line with an employee. So, even if she ended up feeling something at some point, Payton believed that Madison had a lot more self-control than she did.

Payton would say screw their working relationship if it meant that Madison looked at her differently. She'd go hand in her notice right now.

But Madison wasn't like that. She was a rule follower. Which made this whole pretend girlfriend thing even more intriguing. From what little Payton knew about her boss, it seemed so out of character for her.

Payton would have assumed that Madison would have gone to that wedding alone with zero issues. She had that kind of confidence, and as far as Payton could tell, Madison didn't normally care what other people thought of her.

So, what was this really about?

Did things end badly with Jennifer?

Payton had spent the last few weeks trying to calm her racing thoughts and keep her mind from going to places that she knew it shouldn't. She'd only been thinking about herself and how she was going to get through the week in London while also trying not to enjoy herself too much.

But what about Madison?

Was she going to struggle seeing her ex get remarried? Who was she most concerned with impressing? Jennifer or some of their friends?

And what kind of pretending were they really going to be doing? They'd never ironed out the details. The best they'd managed to do was spend some time together last night, and while they made progress, learning a bit more about one another and piecing together their story, Payton still felt those butterflies in her stomach when she thought about dancing with Madison or...

She swallowed.

Payton could so easily see Madison leaning in for a kiss.

But how the hell was she going to restrain herself? Because if there was anyone around, and there would be since it was for their benefit, it was going to be a chaste kiss.

Except Payton wanted so much more than that.

"Payton!"

She blinked. The two women behind the counter and Ashley were staring at her. How long had they been waiting for her?

"Sorry," Payton said, her cheeks hot.

"I know what you were thinking about," Ashley muttered beside her, and Payton could hear the smile in her voice.

One week.

In one week, she'd be packing her bag and heading off to London for a week that she couldn't wait for and equally dreaded at the same time.

14

Madison took her earbuds out and glanced over at Payton who was reading, the warm glow of her e-reader illuminating her face, the steady hum of the plane's engines drowning out the few conversations going on around the cabin. Payton's blond hair was put up in a messy bun, and she wore a black hoody that looked soft and cozy.

They were somewhere over the Atlantic and about four hours into their flight. It was coming up to midnight, and Madison was finally tired enough to think about falling asleep. If she didn't, she knew she'd waste tomorrow being jetlagged.

"Hey," Madison said when Payton turned her way to open her bottle of water and take a drink. "You should probably think about trying to sleep."

"I know. I want to. I just never seem to be able to sleep on planes though."

"Have you ever flown first class?"

"No." Payton took another drink and rested the bottle of water on the table between them.

"That might make the difference. No one's going to bother you and ask to get out to go to the bathroom."

"True."



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Madison didn't want to assume that Payton had never flown first class, but it was plain to see when Payton realized how much space she'd have, that she could actually lie down if she wanted to. Payton had been almost wide-eyed, taking it all in while trying to play it cool.

"I'm going to try and sleep," Madison said, checking her watch. "It's almost midnight, and it'll be seven-thirty in the morning their time when we land."

"Okay. I'll see if I can." Payton slid her e-reader into her handbag. "Is it okay if I wake you if you're snoring?"

Madison whipped her head around to look at her fully, sitting forward with her hands on her knees. "What makes you think I snore?"

"I don't know," Payton said with a shrug. "A lot of people do. And I'm just wondering if it's okay if I wake you. You know, so you're not bothering anyone."

"I don't snore."

Payton pressed her lips together and didn't say anything else.

Madison ran through their last year together. Was there ever a time that Payton had been around her when she'd been sleeping? As far as she knew she didn't snore. But now Payton had her paranoid.

"I'm joking with you," Payton said a few seconds later. "And I'm trying to lighten things up a bit. Since you're not my boss anymore. Not for the next week."

Madison stared at Payton. “You have a strange sense of humor.”

“Well, at least you know that now.”

Madison rolled her eyes as she got comfortable, sinking back into the chair and reclining it a few more inches. She didn’t have a sleep mask with her, but she should be tired enough to sleep for even just a few hours.

She took a deep breath as she tried to drift off to sleep, but thoughts of how the wedding would go started running through her head. She could see Jen’s eyes narrowing, judging her for dating someone younger than her, even when Hazel had only just turned thirty.

Madison had resisted the urge to look up Jen or Hazel for the last year, but for some reason, she’d stayed up late Friday night scrolling through all of their social media feeds.

She’d been slightly buzzed after the three glasses of wine she’d shared with Payton, and it oddly didn’t feel like stalking. It felt like research, like how she would deal with clients, needing to have the full picture before she could even think about trying to make their problems disappear and save their reputations.

Madison had poured herself another glass of wine that night, and stretched out on the couch, she’d spent at least an hour looking through their last few years together.

Madison hadn’t even realized that Hazel was that much younger than her. She’d done the quick math. Sixteen years.

So, Jen couldn’t say anything when Madison introduced Payton as her girlfriend, because they had the very same age gap funnily enough.

And before Madison had gone to sleep last night, she found the picture of the two of them on Payton's profile. She'd studied it, allowing herself to think about what it would take to put herself out there again, about how, since the divorce, she hadn't felt like she'd ever want to be in a serious relationship again.

She wasn't heartbroken. Far from it. But relationships were a lot of work, and Madison had always been more committed to her business and her clients than anyone she'd ever dated, even her wife.

And until she was willing to change that, Madison knew that she'd be happy staying single. She'd always hated that guilt, that juggling of commitments, of always feeling like she wasn't putting enough time and energy into either her business or her relationship.

It wasn't worth it.

At forty-four years old, Madison could safely say that her priority was her company, and that wasn't going to change anytime soon.

15

Payton wheeled her suitcase into the suite, a garment bag thrown over her shoulder as she followed Madison inside. Once again, she was trying to dampen her reaction as she took in the luxurious king-sized bed, the white sheets covered with at least ten navy and mustard yellow pillows of all sizes.

She glanced into the massive bathroom on the left, the chrome rainfall shower head catching her eye against the gray tiled wall before she spotted the jacuzzi bath opposite the double sinks. The bathroom was nearly as big as the living room in her apartment.

And as Payton moved further into the suite, she realized that while the living area was off to the right, it wasn't a completely separate room. There was no door between the bedroom and the living area, just a large archway. In fact, the cream couch was in the middle of the space, directly opposite the bed, because this was one of those hotels that were too fancy to have a tv.

Payton sucked in a breath. She'd already been nervous about spending so much time with Madison, about sharing a suite, but now there wouldn't even be a door between them for the next week.

Madison was standing in front of the windows, the morning sunshine pouring in, and not for the first time since they'd made this agreement, Payton had to remind herself that this was just an extension of her job, that she shouldn't be looking at Madison the way she was right now. That Payton shouldn't notice the way Madison's gray slacks fit her so well or the way her dark hair tumbled over her shoulders in that messy, slightly disheveled kind of way after a night spent on a plane.

It was almost ten o'clock now, and Payton's stomach rumbled, cutting through the silence, although Payton had started wheeling her suitcase across the carpet as soon as she felt that tug in her stomach, hoping to cover up the sound with her movements.

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She wandered into the living area and left her suitcase beside the coffee table. Madison appeared in the archway just as Payton had finished looking around, and Payton had no idea how she could be this put together after a long flight like that.

Payton was just about to go freshen up, and she had to hope that she didn't look as ragged as she felt. She hadn't actually managed to sleep on the flight like Madison had.

"How do you feel about going out and finding somewhere to get breakfast?" Madison asked.

"Yeah. Just give me five minutes to freshen up."

"Okay. I have a phone call to make, so take your time."

Payton lifted her suitcase onto the coffee table and unzipped it, taking out a pair of army green shorts and a black top. The weather forecast today was sunny and highs of about eighty.

She brought her clothes with her into the bathroom along with her toiletry bag and did the best she could in ten minutes, letting her hair down, adding a little life to the loose waves from her bun, and putting on fresh makeup.

Madison was just ending her call when she came out of the bathroom, and Payton's chest constricted when Madison did a double take.

Was she dressed too casually? Was there a meeting today that Payton wasn't aware

of? Should she not be wearing shorts? All these thoughts were running through her head, and she couldn't stop herself from asking Madison if everything was okay.

"Yeah," Madison said with a quick shake of her head as she went through her own suitcase that was open on the bed. "Just uh... Yeah, give me a minute to get changed too."

Payton wanted to ask her what was really bothering her. Maybe it had nothing to do with her, and it was something from that phone call? It was just weird the way Madison had looked at her. She'd stopped what she was doing. It was like she'd been frozen in place for a few seconds.

Payton shook off that feeling.

The week would probably be full of moments like that. Moments where she didn't know if she'd crossed a line. Moments where she forgot that they were going to be equals for the week, and that Payton needed to not look like her assistant.

16

Madison had been distracted since they left the hotel, letting Payton take the lead in finding a place to eat. Even throughout breakfast, she couldn't stop feeling guilty.

Now, they were walking through Hyde Park on their way back to the hotel. The sun's rays were warm against her skin, and the grass was dotted with people stretched out on blankets, enjoying the sun.

Madison spent the whole morning thinking about it, and she still didn't know what had happened with her when Payton had come out of the bathroom.

Madison had stopped in her tracks, momentarily forgetting what she was doing, and

she knew she'd been caught staring because Payton had looked at her with concerned eyes. And then Payton even had to ask her if everything was okay.

And four hours later, Madison still wasn't okay. She'd seen Payton in a dress, so it wasn't that Madison had just been thrown by the fact that Payton wasn't wearing business casual. Was it the shorts?

How could seeing Payton in shorts have stirred up something inside of her that seeing her assistant in a dress hadn't? It didn't make sense.

So, Madison had looked for any other reason for that reaction, but there really only was one. In that moment, when Payton had emerged from the bathroom, with her hair down and light makeup that made her blue eyes even more vibrant, Madison had been attracted to her.

But it was just a moment, so it was okay.

Hiding behind her shades, Madison glanced at Payton as they walked. Their hands had brushed accidentally a few times, so now there was a safe two or three feet between them as they followed the wide path.

Yes, Madison could safely say that right now, she wasn't attracted to Payton. That had just been a blip. A strange moment when Madison hadn't expected to see her tanned legs or her beachy blond waves.

Nothing to worry about.

Payton turned, and thankfully, Madison's shades were hiding her eyes. "Have you been to London before?"

"Seven or eight times over the years," Madison said as they continued to walk,

moving to the right of the path as a group of cyclists rang their bells from somewhere behind them, whizzing past them a second later. “But it was always business. A conference or to meet with a client.”

“How did you even start the company? I still can’t believe it sometimes. How many people end up needing that kind of help.”

Madison drew a deep breath. “Well, I met Jack in law school, and we both kind of dreaded going out and trying to find the right firm, the one where we could work our way up the ladder and make partner before we went gray. It’s such a long and uphill career path. There are no shortcuts. And we were both miserable before we’d even been accepted to any of the firms we applied to.”

“So, you never practiced law?”



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“No. I can’t even remember how we heard about it. Someone in our class had been consulting on the side. Nothing illegal. They made it known to their clients that they were only law students. They hadn’t passed the bar yet. But what they knew was still valuable for that particular client who happened to need some advice. I think it was a local politician. They wanted to revamp their image and try to figure out how to make any previous stories about them go away essentially. This was before the internet or at the very early days of it, so it was different, but that idea just stuck with me.”

“That there was money in helping people restore their reputations?”

“Yeah. It was certainly a lot easier back then, but at the same time, in those days, it was really only politicians and high-profile people who were worried about their image. So, while it’s harder now to make things go away. You can’t really. It’s more about pushing them onto the seventh page of the search results. But now, just about anyone can see the value in maintaining a good image, especially online, where one post or one comment can really damage you.”

They were back to a main road, and Madison hadn’t felt the last half hour go by, but at least she felt better about this morning. She’d just been surprised. That’s all. Nothing more and definitely nothing to worry about.

17

Payton slid her shades onto her head as they entered the busy hotel lobby. It had been quiet this morning, but now more people were probably checking out, others arriving. It was almost one o’clock, and although Payton never napped, she was seriously considering testing out that couch as soon as they got back to the room.

Payton looked down when she felt Madison's hand on her arm, and when she lifted her eyes to meet Madison's, there was a hint of fear or shock in them, her eyes darting towards the other end of the huge lobby and back to her again.

"Jen's here," Madison said, keeping her voice low.

They were just inside the door, standing beside a potted plant, almost hiding behind it. They could leave.

"Okay," Payton said, ignoring the tingling feeling that swept up her arm as the heat from Madison's hand permeated her skin. "Do you want to go?"

Madison inhaled a deep breath and swore as she exhaled. "She just saw me. Fuck."

Payton kept her gaze locked on Madison. "Okay. We should probably stop standing here. Is it okay if I take your hand?"

Madison bit her lip for a second before her own hand slid down Payton's arm and found hers, their wrists turning as they interlaced their fingers, and Payton felt that touch in every cell in her body.

God, this was going to be a long week.

"I'll let you take the lead, okay?" Payton said as they moved through the lobby, trying to keep Madison calm, because she'd never seen her this on edge before. "I don't even know what she looks like, so let's just walk towards the elevators, and you can lead us over to her or keep going? Yeah?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Payton wanted to pick Jen out, but she didn't want to look suspicious, so she kept

looking straight ahead, a confidence coming over her, because right now, she was holding Madison Dunne's hand, and that felt pretty fucking good.

"Madison?"

Their steps slowed as they turned towards the voice, and there was a woman about Madison's age, standing by the entrance to the restaurant, her blond hair falling just above her shoulders, straight and sleek.

Payton hadn't really thought much about what Madison's ex-wife would be like, but she certainly fit the bill. She was in her mid to late forties, stylish, and beautiful.

"Jen," Madison said in what Payton had realized in her first few weeks working together was her fake, cheerful voice reserved for meeting difficult clients again months later, doing her best to smile and pretending to be happy to see them.

Payton let Madison's hand fall away when Jen stepped forward with an outstretched arm, pulling Madison into a hug, and wrapping both arms around her.

Payton felt a little sick to her stomach watching the exchange. Almost like it was a private moment that she shouldn't be witnessing, but she also couldn't deny that it stirred up a hint of jealousy inside her.

"Sorry," Jen said as she stepped back. "I knew you had a plus one, but I didn't know you were seeing someone."

"Jen, this is Payton."

Payton tuned out the rest of Madison's introductions, very aware of the way Jen was looking her over, almost certainly judging her for something. Whether it was her age or her clothing, Payton didn't know.

“Nice to meet you,” Payton said, pushing down her nerves and tapping into that confidence that seemed to be so readily available now that they were actually doing this, pretending to be together. She never expected to feel so... Proud. That was it.

Even though this was entirely fake, Payton was proud to be with Madison, or at least have Jen think she was, because it was like stepping out into that warm sunshine. It made her feel like she was actually glowing.

A ghost of a smile appeared on Jen’s lips, but Payton couldn’t decipher its meaning.

“I’m surprised to see you here a week ahead,” Jen said, her gaze returning to Madison.

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“Just wanted to get away for a few days,” Madison replied smoothly, and Payton couldn’t believe it when she slid her arm around Payton’s waist. “You know how crazy work can get, so we thought we could use the break.”

Jen’s smile turned into a chuckle. “Oh wow. Madison taking a vacation. Well, it must be love.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm, but it seemed like it was in good fun even though Payton sensed that Jen would have loved to have seen this side of Madison years ago.

“What about you?” Madison asked. “You’re a week early too?”

“Oh, Hazel’s meeting me here. We’re just going over everything one last time so that we can relax and enjoy the lead-up to the ceremony.” Jen’s eyes moved beyond them, a wide smile coming to her lips. “And there she is.”

Madison’s hand was resting on her hip, and before Payton had a chance to turn, a young woman about her age joined them, her hand sliding into Jen’s.

What?

Payton hoped she didn’t look like a deer in the headlights, because that was exactly how she felt.

Why was she looking at a woman her age? She’d just assumed that Jen would be marrying someone else in her forties.

Payton blinked, nearly missing the introductions, saying hello to Hazel, struggling to

process it all.

“This was a nice surprise,” Jen said. “Getting to meet like this before the wedding. Maybe we should have dinner this week?” she asked, turning to Hazel who nodded. “Yeah, that would be a great way to catch up.”

Payton barely registered Madison agreeing, saying that they’d both check their schedules and be in touch, because what the actual fuck. That would be a whole other level of pretending.

Payton’s understanding of this situation was that they would look the part of a happy couple at the ceremony and the reception along with the celebrations the next day. That was all across the room kind of stuff.

Dinner with Jen and Hazel? Who were very clearly in love?

How were they going to compete with that?

They said their goodbyes, and Payton made the short walk to the elevators in a daze, Madison’s hand finding hers again, although once the doors slid closed, her hand fell away, reminding Payton that this was only a job, and it just got a whole lot harder.

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Madison leaned her head back against the metal, her eyes falling closed. “I’m so sorry.”

They were the only ones in the elevator, and Madison’s heart was still racing after that unexpected interaction.

She knew she’d have to talk to her ex-wife for the first time since their divorce

became official, and while things had never really been messy or ugly between them, it was still hard to see a woman who once had meant so much to her be so happy with someone else.

It brought up all kinds of thoughts and fears about her own future, and if she really was happy being married to work and maybe never having a connection like that again.

If Jen had been surprised to see that Madison was also with someone so much younger, she hid it well, although she'd definitely given Payton a once over.

"It's fine," Payton said, taking her away from her thoughts as the doors opened to their floor, and she stepped out ahead of her, taking her keycard from the back pocket of her shorts as she walked.

Madison thanked her as she unlocked the door and held it open for her. "I didn't think I'd see her. Or them. Before the wedding."

Madison sat on the edge of the bed, running a hand through her hair, exhaustion from the trip and the morning walking all over London setting in.

"Did you know?" Payton asked standing opposite her.

"Know what?"

"That Hazel was my age."

Madison bit the inside of her cheek. There was no point lying. "Yeah."

Payton smiled. "Is that one of the reasons you asked me?"

Madison arched an eyebrow. “What do you mean? Like I'm competing with Jen, and I also need to have a beautiful woman on my arm that's almost half my age?”



Payton blinked.

Madison stared back at her. Shit. She'd just said that Payton was beautiful.

She'd said that out loud. Fuck.

"That's bad math," Payton said with a completely neutral expression. "But yeah, I guess?"

Madison shook her head. "No. I told you why I picked you. Because I needed someone I could trust. Your age has nothing to do with it. Well, I hesitated to ask you because of it if you really want to know, so no. I didn't purposely try and find a date that was significantly younger than me."

"So, my age does bother you? You know, if this was a real thing," Payton said, motioning between the two of them.

Madison ran a hand over her face. Why did it feel like they were about to have an argument?

She pushed herself off the bed, her hand resting on Payton's arm. "We're both tired. That was a shock. And I'm going to take a shower."

She left Payton standing there, because she really did need to take a shower. The few hours of sleep she got weren't enough, and she felt like a long, hot shower would make things a lot better.

Payton gave Madison some space, because whatever had happened between them after returning to their room was strange and entirely unnecessary.

Things had gotten a little edgy, and they were probably both just jet-lagged and maybe nervous about the wedding, so Payton left Madison a text that she'd gone out.

The hotel where they were staying was a short walk to Hyde Park, and Payton found herself heading back there again, although she took the path to the right this time.

After a while, she took a seat on a bench and checked her emails, replying to Ashley's ten-plus messages looking for an update.

Payton blew out a breath as she typed out a reply, hardly believing the words she was sending her best friend.

I met her ex-wife and she's fucking gorgeous. How am I supposed to compete with that?

Also, the woman she's marrying now is our age.

And we're going to dinner with them some night this week.

Payton slid her phone back in her pocket and did some people watching, her foot bouncing, a mixture of nervous energy and anticipation running through her body.

The show would be starting before the weekend then.

Payton blew out a breath, not even knowing if she was more scared or excited. The feeling of having Madison's hand in hers, even for those few minutes earlier, still

made her heart swell.

This was sad.

Payton was painfully aware of that, but this was where she was in life right now. Crushing on her very unavailable, but at least gay, boss.

Payton's phone chimed in her pocket, and she slid it out, a smile coming to her lips as she read Ashley's message.

ASHLEY

Go for it!! Lay it on thick! But maybe agree to it first? That way it'll be entirely acceptable behavior, even if you are dying inside.

Payton stared at her screen. She could have so much fun with this if she could only put any actual feelings she had for Madison aside.

And there was a strange part of her that kind of wanted to protect Madison? To make her ex jealous even if Madison didn't care about that.

She started typing.

PAYTON

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I need the practice. I nearly died today. Just a few minutes pretending has my head all over the place. I'm like an addict Ash. I want more and I know I shouldn't.

ASHLEY

Like you said. Have fun. When will this ever happen again?

PAYTON

Yeah. I know. I'm afraid of what kind of friend I'll be when I get back though.

ASHLEY

Oh, I've got the bucket of ice cream ready.

PAYTON

Miss you.

ASHLEY

Miss you too. Enjoy yourself, okay?

Payton pushed herself off the bench and walked a few more minutes before turning back, stopping to make friends with a black and white French bulldog who seemed to take a liking to her.

By the time she was back at the hotel and swiping her keycard, she felt better. Less edgy. Those two hours out and about in the afternoon sunshine did her good, and right about now, a nap sounded like an amazing idea.

She opened the door, nearly tripping over her own feet when her eyes landed on Madison stretched out on the bed on her back, her eyes closed, one arm thrown behind her head. Her hair was dry, but she was still in the white robe that she must have put on after her shower.

Payton swallowed, knowing that she shouldn't be invading Madison's privacy like this, but they were sharing a suite, and she had to walk by her, except Payton couldn't make herself keep going.

Her eyes drifted from her bare feet to her toned calves, the robe falling just above her knees. It was tied at her waist, but it had fallen open slightly, and Payton's legs went weak when she realized that she was staring at a hint of cleavage and the slight curve of her breast, her dark hair tossed over one shoulder.

Payton practically stumbled as she retreated into the living area, her heart pounding in her chest, her palms clammy.

She paced the carpet, wiping her hand across her face. There was no way she was sleeping now. That image would be burned across her eyelids for the rest of the day.

Why did Madison have to be so fucking hot?

Payton eventually collapsed onto the couch, her head in her hands as she tried to get a grip.

She knew they'd be sharing the same space for a week, but somehow, she hadn't factored in close encounters like that, and a part of her was thankful that Madison was

asleep.

What exactly would she have done if she'd walked in, and Madison was brushing her hair or on the phone looking like that? Payton wouldn't have even trusted herself to speak.

Payton had no idea how she was going to take her own advice and just have fun, because this crush was turning into something that she was afraid she wouldn't recover from.

She'd have to quit and never see Madison again when they got back to New York if the rest of the week went like this, because how was she ever going to go back to treating her like her boss?

And they hadn't even gone to dinner with Jen and Hazel.

God, that was going to be torture.

But Payton couldn't wait for it.

What the fuck was wrong with her?

20

Madison woke up disorientated, blinking until her eyes adjusted enough to read the clock beside her bed. 5:21PM.

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She pushed herself up until she was leaning against the headboard. That was just meant to be a quick twenty-minute nap, but she must have needed more. She stretched her arms over her head, and the sound of a phone beeping in the other room let her know that Payton must be back.

The conversation that they'd had before Madison had a shower came back to her. She couldn't even remember how it started, but Payton's voice was in her head again.

'So, my age does bother you? You know, if this was a real thing.'

Madison shook her head as she got off the bed and padded into the living area, stopping in the doorway, not wanting to go in without Payton knowing, but she was looking back at her from where she was sitting on the edge of the coffee table, her forearms on her thighs as she glanced down to finish typing before putting her phone face down on the table beside her.

"Hey," Madison said, running a hand through her hair. She probably should have taken a look in the mirror first, but it was too late now.

"Hi." Payton looked tired, but it wasn't just her eyes. It was something about her body language. She looked defeated almost. "Did you get my message?"

"Yeah. Did you have a nice afternoon? Sorry, I didn't mean to sleep like that."

"No, it's fine. And yeah. I did. Went back to Hyde Park for a while." Payton stood up. "I'm sorry about before. I don't even know... I shouldn't have been quizzing you like that. It's none of my business what your thought process was for this."

Madison folded her arms across her chest. Why hadn't she gotten changed before she came in here? She glanced down to see that she could have done with tightening the robe, but she couldn't really do it now without flashing Payton.

"No," Madison said with a sigh. "I was tired and getting cranky, so look, let's just forget about it."

"Any idea what night this dinner will be?"

Madison wet her lips. "I actually got a text before I took a nap. She wants to know about tonight."

"Oh."

"Yeah, but I can put her off if you want. We don't have plans, but if you'd prefer to go back with another day, or skip it altogether? I mean, we could already have plans."

"No." Payton's hand was on her forehead as she went over to her suitcase that was open on the couch. "Where?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Somewhere fancy, I'm going to guess," Payton said as she looked at her clothes, taking a white blouse out and a dark pair of jeans. "I didn't really pack for that. Just business casual for the few meetings and summer clothes."

"It won't be that fancy." Madison smiled. "Is that the impression you got from meeting her?"

Payton shrugged. "I mean, Hazel seems like someone I'd hang out with, but yeah. Jen is definitely from the same sort of social circle as you. So, yeah, fancy."



“Do you think I’m a snob?” Madison asked, genuinely curious.

“No. I didn’t say that. It’s just... You know, kind of intimidating when someone’s always so well put together. And I imagine Jen is like you in that regard.”

Madison took a deep breath. “Yeah. I guess she is. But like you said, Hazel isn’t. I’m sure she won’t suggest anything too exclusive. So, what do you think? Will I say we’re free?”

Payton visibly swallowed. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Really?”

Payton met her eyes. “Yeah. Definitely.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know what time and where, so you can Google it.”

Payton smiled shyly. “Thanks.”

Madison returned to the other room before she paused and turned around. “Hey, I said I’d take the couch.”

“No. I don’t want to argue about this with you. Seriously, take the bed. I’m fine on the couch. I promise.”

“Okay,” Madison said, still not entirely sure what was going on with Payton. She seemed different today. She was great earlier, when they’d met Jen.

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She should probably thank Payton for that. How swiftly she'd played the part of her girlfriend, and from what Madison could tell, Jen had bought it.

So, at least, that was a good sign that tonight would go smoothly.

Madison picked up her phone from beside her pillow and typed out a message to Jen, telling her that they were free, to pick a time and place.

She went over to her suitcase, going over her own choices for tonight. She'd obviously want to look good, but at the same time, she didn't want to try too hard or to make Payton feel uncomfortable by getting too dressed up, although Madison had a feeling that whatever Payton chose to wear, she'd look amazing.

Madison didn't dwell on that thought, her phone buzzing against the sheets as Jen's name popped up with an address for an Italian restaurant.

Madison went back to the living room where Payton was still going through her clothes. "How do you feel about Italian?"

"Love it."

"Good. I forwarded the text to you so you can check it out, but it looks pretty casual. She's making a reservation for seven, so I'm going to get ready."

"Okay. Mind if I take a shower?"

"No. Of course not. Go ahead."

Madison left her to go find something to wear. She'd do her makeup when Payton was done in the bathroom. She should probably be nervous about tonight, but she was kind of looking forward to it. She had no hard feelings when it came to Jen, but this would just cement the fact that they'd both moved on. Which was true, except not in the way that Jen might think. Not with Payton.

21

Payton had no idea where the last two hours had gone, but between taking turns in the bathroom and doing her hair, they were barely on schedule now, the black cab they were in slowly making its way through busy streets. It had taken them a while to flag a taxi down, eating into the extra time they'd allowed.

And that meant that she hadn't had a chance to ask Madison about what the game plan for tonight was.

Payton ran her hands over her dark-wash jeans, checking the maps app on her phone. They would be arriving in four minutes.

She cleared her throat. "Hey, um, what's my job here tonight?"

"Hm?" Madison asked, turning to look at her.

"Have I permission to go with the flow? I don't want to upset you by, you know, putting my arm around you or..." She swallowed down the lump in her throat, leaving out the words 'kissing you.' She wouldn't have been able to say it. The words would have died on her lips.

"So, the way I'm viewing this is... We've just sped up the timeline. This was supposed to happen at the wedding, but now it's happening tonight."

“Okay.” Payton tried not to get lost in Madison’s hazel-green eyes.

“So, you have permission to do whatever you were planning to do at the wedding. I would never have been one for public displays of affection, so if we want Jen to believe this, I wouldn’t... Kiss you while we’re sitting at the table, let’s say. But you know, within reason. We do still need to look like a happy couple. And I trust you. I’m sure I’ll be able to convey any awkwardness with a hard squeeze on your leg or something like that. I don’t know. I don’t think it’ll get to that.”

Payton nodded. “Yeah.” She could do this. She basically just had to be herself for the next few hours. She could let her gaze linger on Madison. She could put her hand on the small of her back as they entered the restaurant.

She took a steadying breath, telling herself for what felt like the hundredth time not to get carried away.

“You good?” Madison asked before opening the door and stepping out, holding out her hand for Payton.

“Yeah.”

They were right outside of the restaurant, and through the glass windows, Payton saw Jen and Hazel speaking with a waiter inside the front door.

“They’re here,” Madison said, taking a second to give a gentle tug to the lapels of her black blazer. “You ready?”

“Yeah.” Payton let her lips slide into an easy smile. Madison was gorgeous. She’d gone with black jeans and a dressy white tank top underneath the blazer, her hair down in loose waves, her eyes dazzling.

Madison looked down at the hand she'd extended toward Payton. "Let's go then," she said, flashing her a charming smile, and Payton wished she'd meant it.

Payton took her hand again, the warmth spreading up along her arm as she tried not to get used to this, to feeling like she was really with this woman.

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“Hey,” Jen said with a smile as they entered the restaurant, and they dropped hands so that they could both hug Jen and Hazel.

“Hope this is okay,” Jen said once their waiter led them to their table. “Hazel got me hooked on this place, and now every time I’m in London, I have to fit in a trip here.”

Hazel pulled out the chair opposite Payton, and Jen took the one across from Madison.

Payton picked up her menu, her stomach rumbling despite her nerves. “Where are you two living now?”

Hazel took a sip of water. “We don’t actually have a permanent home right now. My season finished up in May, and we’ve spent some time in California, but we flew in last week from Miami.”

“Oh wow.” Payton was impressed.

“Yeah. It’s not ideal,” Hazel said, “But I don’t know where I’m playing next year, so... But Jen can work from anywhere, and sometimes we end up spending a few weeks in a particular country following a tournament or whatever she’s covering.”

Their waiter returned, and they ordered a bottle of wine to share along with some appetizers.

“Well,” Jen said once they all had their wine. “I have to say, I’m so thrilled for you, Madison.” She lifted her glass as she spoke. “I know this should be awkward, but I’m

so glad that you decided to come to London and celebrate with us. And I'm even more happy to see you with someone as lovely as Payton. Cheers. To both of you."

"Cheers," Payton said, leaning in to gently knock her glass against theirs before taking a sip.

The waiter came back to take their orders, and Payton felt herself relaxing as she took another drink. This was fine. Dinner wouldn't offer too many chances to really play up their supposed relationship, and that was probably for the best.

22

"Any advice for me, Madison?" Hazel asked during dinner, a smile on her lips.

Madison exhaled as she sat back, bringing her napkin to her lips. "Well," she started off dramatically, but she returned Hazel's smile. "No. You don't need my advice. Jen's wonderful, and I was not a good partner." She bit the inside of her cheek, feeling Payton's eyes on her. "I barely know you Hazel, but I can already see how happy you make her, so... No advice from me."

Jen lifted an eyebrow. "I have to say, I like this side of you."

"What side is that?" Madison asked as she picked up her wine glass, lightly drumming her fingers against the glass before she took a drink.

"Content. Settled? I don't know." Jen studied her. "And I obviously mean settled in a good way. I honestly didn't think you'd commit to anyone again. Just because of where your priorities lie."

"Fair enough," Madison said, finishing her wine.

Tonight had gone surprisingly well, but this conversation was making her nervous, and she tried to think of something to say to steer it well away from her.

“What about me?” Payton asked. “Do you have any advice for me, Jen?”

Madison refrained from throwing Payton daggers, instead letting her eyes fall on Jen, her heart thumping in her chest. They were on good terms it seemed, but she could still throw Madison under the bus. Highlight all her shortcomings.

Jen glanced at her before giving Payton her attention. “When you want to talk about something, and she doesn’t? Don’t let her get away with it. Because she’s an expert at deflecting, at running away from a conversation, and she always seemed to have a good excuse too. It was only looking back that I realized that she had no idea how I was feeling. I wanted to tell her. I kind of felt like I was, because I thought about it a lot, and I tried to have the conversation with her a dozen times, but they never actually happened.”

Madison sucked in a breath, wishing she still had some wine left in her glass. She knew she’d been a shit wife, but once she knew it was over, she never really thought about all the ways that it had gone wrong. And this was clearly one of them. A lack of communication.

Payton cleared her throat. “I will take that onboard.” Payton turned to look at her, and Madison forced herself to hold her gaze. “But so far, I feel like we’ve had a really good habit of checking in with one another, especially when our schedules get busy.”

“How long have you two been living together?” Jen asked, glancing between them.

Payton’s eyes grew wide as they held her gaze.

Madison really should have thought more about the details of this fake relationship.



“How long has it been?” she asked Payton, giving them time to come up with an answer, although she’d just confirmed that they were indeed living together.

“Must be six months.”

Madison nodded. “Yeah, next week, I think. Six months,” she said, giving Jen her attention.

“Again, I’m shocked,” Jen said with a crooked smile as she brought her glass to her lips. “In the best possible way.” She looked at Payton now. “It took me nearly two years to convince Madison that moving in together was a good idea. So, we were nearly three years together before we finally moved in.”

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“Wow.” Payton reached for her drink, and Madison needed to get the conversation off them.

“So,” Madison said. “Where’s the honeymoon?”

Madison nodded and smiled in all the right places as Hazel explained the three-week trip that would take them from Portugal to Spain. Madison was tipsy, and she could feel herself struggling to focus on the details, her mind trying to file away the details of their relationship that they’d just invented in case they came up again at the wedding.

She inhaled a sharp breath when Payton came back from the restrooms, her seat a little closer to Madison now and she draped her arm along the back of Madison’s chair, her fingers briefly brushing along her neck where she’d gently eased Madison’s hair out of the way.

Madison covered it well enough, grabbing her wine again and downing what was left in it. With Payton this close, her thigh was pressed along Madison’s, the heat radiating through their pants, and Madison had to suppress a shiver.

She had not accounted for this. For these internal reactions that she couldn’t seem to stop. At least that would be the end of them until the actual wedding, because Madison couldn’t do this all week.

It was exhausting trying to keep her body in check, and at this point, she was wondering what the point even was, because clearly, she had no control over it.

Madison turned to look at Payton as the waiter returned with the bill. Thankfully, this dinner was wrapping up, but of course, Payton didn't seem to be struggling one bit. In fact, she was more than likely enjoying this. And that was exactly why Madison had picked her.

Payton's eyes met hers, a hint of amusement in them as her gaze flickered down to her lips, and Madison's heart jolted, her pulse tripping as it raced ahead.

There was no way Payton would kiss her. Not when Madison had said that it wasn't something that would be expected tonight.

But the moment was gone just as soon as it had started, Payton talking to Hazel as Madison snapped out of her daze and insisted on paying.

Hazel asked Payton if they'd be interested in going to a bar just a few minutes' walk from here, and thankfully, Payton didn't agree without asking her, although with three sets of eyes on Madison, she could hardly decline.

"Sure," Madison said, and they followed Jen and Hazel out, who were walking hand in hand ahead of them, and Madison reached for Payton's, mirroring them, deciding that at this point, another glass of wine would make this night a little easier.

23

Payton was sitting across from Hazel while Jen and Madison were at the bar. They'd found a booth at the back of a cozy pub, an old wooden table between them.

"This should be weird, shouldn't it?" Hazel asked. "I mean, if someone told me last week that I'd be spending the evening with my fiancé's ex-wife and her girlfriend, I think I would have run. But I've had a lovely time. Genuinely."

“Me too,” Payton agreed. “And it really should have been awkward at the very least, right? But honestly, I’ve had a nice time too, although I imagine that this is strange for them,” Payton said, glancing towards the bar where Madison and Jen were deep in conversation while they waited for their drinks.

“Yeah. It’s been a bit surreal. Getting to see Jen’s former life in a way. I forget sometimes that she’s been married. That she’s done all this before. And willing to do it again. Must be the same for you too, right? Not the marriage part. But the rest.”

“Yes,” Payton said, resting her arms on the table. “It’s kind of made me wonder what Madison sees in me.”

“Are you kidding?”

Payton shrugged. “No.”

“Well, I’ll admit that when I met Madison earlier, I had a similar thought. Jen hadn’t kept her past a secret or anything, but I hadn’t seen any photos of Madison, and I guess I was shocked that she was so... Not like me,” Hazel finished with a sigh.

“And that’s exactly how I felt. But I guess, they weren’t right for one another, and we must be doing something right,” Payton said with a smile to cover up her own insecurities.

If meeting Jen earlier had thrown her, Payton had spent the evening doubling down, beating herself up for ever thinking that she might have a chance with someone like Madison, because while Jen was completely in love with Hazel, Payton knew that Madison had zero feelings for her.

Payton had noticed that anytime she’d gotten close to her that Madison almost flinched, or her body stiffened. It was subtle. But it was definitely there. And Payton

hated that she thought she could use this trip to give her a chance, to get Madison to see her in a different light, but she was failing miserably.

Payton thanked Madison when she returned with a glass of wine for each of them, sliding into the booth alongside her.

Payton's breath hitched when Madison's warm hand landed on her thigh, her fingers giving her leg a gentle squeeze, and she dared herself to look at Madison.

And that little bit of hope faded when Payton realized that Madison was tipsy. That's all it was. Madison was finally ready to play the part. Now that she'd had a few drinks.

Payton pressed her lips together, doing her best to not let it get to her that Madison needed to be intoxicated to start acting like her girlfriend. That stiffness was gone, and Madison sat close to her now, their sides flush.

"Okay," Jen said, her eyes moving between them. "I have to know. Who made the move here? I'm nearly certain it was you, Payton, but Madison's been throwing every assumption I've made about her out the window. How did this start?"

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Payton inhaled a shaky breath, her eyes firmly on Madison, letting her take the lead again.

“I asked Payton out,” Madison said, her eyes eventually leaving hers as she faced Jen and Hazel again.

Payton blinked, taking a second to catch up. “My gaydar actually failed me,” Payton said with a smile. “I mean, I thought it did. I was interested in her for months, but I had assumed that she was straight.”

“Ohh,” Hazel said with a grin. “Did you know Madison? That Payton was interested in you?”

Madison didn’t hesitate. “Yes. I probably wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t so sure.” She gave Payton’s leg another squeeze, and Payton reached for her drink, heat flooding through her.

“Madison,” Jen said with a slow smile. “You’re a changed woman. And I’m sorry that it’s taken us this long to be friends again.”

“I think we needed that time apart, but yes,” Madison said, lifting her glass. “It’s good to be able to put the past behind us. To start again.”

“Cheers,” Jen said as they all leaned in, knocking their glasses together.

Payton only half-listened to Hazel tell them about her future plans, about what team she wanted to play for, because her head was spinning. Not from the alcohol. She

actually felt fine. Maybe a little tipsy. But she couldn't stop thinking about what Madison had said.

"I probably wouldn't have asked if I wasn't so sure."

It could have just been Madison's first thought, making it up as she went along.

But what if it wasn't?

What if that was exactly why Madison had asked her to do this? Because she could see that Payton was attracted to her.

Payton could feel the heat coming to her face, embarrassment taking over.

She was such a fool.

Madison was never going to see her as anything more than her personal assistant, and Payton couldn't believe it had taken her this long to see the full picture, that this really was only ever an extension of her job.

And how easy Payton had made it for Madison to ask.

24

Madison let the hotel room door close behind her, her eyes falling to Payton's jeans and the way they hugged her ass.

Too much wine.

She exhaled softly as she lifted her pajamas out of her suitcase and zipped it back up again, leaving it in the corner of the room.

She was aware of Payton, half in the living room and half in the bedroom, as if she wanted to talk.

Madison could have ignored her, retreating into the bathroom to get changed but she turned instead, meeting her eyes, unable to read them.

She'd been so caught up in herself, in dreading what Jen would ask next, in hating the way her body responded to Payton's touch, something Madison had told her was okay, but what had tonight been like for Payton?

"I know that was longer than expected," Madison said, noticing on the way up in the elevator that it was after eleven. "But did you have an okay night?"

"Yeah." Payton visibly swallowed. "Yeah, I did. It was strange how not weird that was, if that makes sense."

Madison shrugged.

"Or was it? For you," Payton said, her hands in the pockets of her jeans, still hovering under the archway.

"It was..." What had tonight been? Difficult in some ways, more because she didn't want Jen asking her about her life now. But in other ways, it was good to see that Jen had moved on, that she didn't seem to harbor any resentment towards Madison. "Fine."

"Fine?"



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Madison left her pajamas on the bed behind her, her hands on her hips. “I’m glad we got it out of the way. That we won’t have to do any of that ‘catching up’ business during the wedding.”

“Okay. I think it’s safe to say that we passed the test. I’m pretty sure Jen bought it.”

“Hm.” Madison was not interested in a play-by-play of the evening’s events.

“You seemed to get into it, at the end.”

Madison inhaled a shaky breath. Had Payton noticed how she’d reacted every time Payton touched her?

“Think you need the help of alcohol though,” Payton added when Madison remained silent. “Might need to start early at the wedding.” She was smiling, but Madison took it as criticism, that she hadn’t done as good of a job tonight as Payton had.

“Yeah, well,” Madison said with a sigh. “We can’t all be actresses.”

“Except you knew that I wasn’t acting.”

Madison blinked. “What?”

“That’s the real reason you asked me to do this, right? Because you knew I was attracted to you.”

Madison raked a hand through her hair. What made her think that Payton wouldn’t

see through her plan? “I’m sorry.” That was all she could manage to say. Because it was true. She had been feeling guilty, and there was no point in denying it now.

Payton nodded. “I can see how easy this made things for you. Choosing me.”

“Unless, of course, you hate me by the end of this trip,” Madison said.

“I should probably be mad at you.” Payton took a few steps into the room. “But like I said, I get it. It was an easy way to make this look real.”

“I still shouldn’t have done it. And just to be clear, I’ve never...” Madison’s voice trailed off. Was she really going to get into this now? When she was exhausted and a little drunk?

“What?”

“It was always fine.” Madison forced herself to meet Payton’s eyes. “I didn’t feel like you once looked at me inappropriately is what I’m trying to say. I could see it, but it was entirely innocent.”

Payton exhaled a slow breath. “Well, we haven’t even been here twenty-four hours, and already this has been an eventful trip.”

Madison couldn’t read Payton’s expression, but she put herself in Payton’s shoes for a second, and she knew exactly how she’d feel. “Are you embarrassed?”

Payton nodded. “Extremely.”

“Don’t be. I’m flattered.” Madison felt her lips curve into a smile. “Honestly.”

“I still shouldn’t have made it so obvious.”

“You didn’t. Not really. I’m just good at reading people. And I haven’t had anyone look at me like that in years, so I guess I saw it right away.”

“Okay, well that can’t be true,” Payton said, smiling again, her eyes bright.

Madison had to look away. “From women I mean.”

“Ah.”

Payton’s perfume filled the air around her. When had she gotten so close? If Madison reached out, she could easily grab a fistful of Payton’s shirt and... Wait, what?

“Is everything okay?” Payton asked softly, her eyes searching Madison’s.

Madison blinked. She had no idea how she’d let her imagination go there. She was going to blame it on the wine, and while Payton had a point that this was easier for her with a few glasses of wine, it was a dangerous game to play with someone who hadn’t been with anyone in years.

“Yeah,” Madison said. “I’m fine.”

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Payton gave her a half smile. “You’ve used that word more in the last few days than I’ve heard you say it in an entire year. I feel like you’re far from fine. Do you want to talk about it? Or should I just go to sleep,” Payton said, motioning behind her. “I’m okay with either answer. I just don’t know you well enough to know which it is.”

Madison swallowed, her mind going back and forth. Forget it and move on or use this moment to make some kind of progress for part two of this charade?

Neither.

Madison would regret this in the morning, but she couldn’t stop herself from asking what had been on her mind for the last year.

“What do you see in me?” Madison asked, holding Payton’s gaze, her voice almost cold.

Payton lifted an eyebrow. “You can’t be serious.”

Madison’s heart pounded against her ribs. She hated that she’d asked, but it was out there now. She couldn’t just take it at face value. She had to go and analyze it, take it apart.

Because, by the end of the week, she wanted Payton to realize that whatever she saw in her wasn’t going to be enough. That Madison had never been relationship material, and she never would either.

Payton struggled to keep her heart rate under control.

Madison's eyes locked on hers. "What do you see in me?" she asked, her voice low and gravelly.

Payton lifted an eyebrow at those words. "You can't be serious."

Madison's eyes challenged her. "I meant it when I said I was flattered, but I don't know what you see in me."

Payton just stared at her, her pulse jumping as she tried to comprehend this situation. She searched Madison's eyes and hated the uncertainty in them.

"You are always the most beautiful woman in the room," Payton said, willing her voice to remain steady. "But it's so much more than that. I may have only been working with you for a year, but I've seen you do enough little things for the people who work for you, and they're almost always anonymous. You're not manipulating anyone or looking for credit. You're simply a genuine person who truly cares about their employees."

Madison looked like she wanted to say something, but Payton kept going. "You're hardworking. You're loyal. You're generous with both your time and your money. And I can confidently say all that without even really knowing you. So, I can't even imagine what I'd be saying right now if I did."

Madison looked away. "Thank you. For saying that. But I think that's the point. That you don't know me."

"But those things are all still true. So, unless you've done a number on your own reputation and you're covering up some huge scandal, I don't know what's going to change that," Payton said, her lips easily sliding into a smile. "Look, I'm not trying to

convince you to go on a real date or anything. I'm just stating the facts. And I really think that you shouldn't be so shocked by the fact that I would absolutely ask you out if I thought you'd give me a chance."

"My track record when it comes to relationships is awful," Madison said with a long exhale. "I don't think I'd let myself go there again. It's never ended well."

"Did you ever think that it had nothing to do with you? That maybe you just weren't a good match?"

Madison gave her a wry smile. "It's happened too many times, and when I thought I had met the right person, I couldn't even stay married to them for more than a few years. I'm just not worth the time or effort."

Payton couldn't stop her hand from going to Madison's wrist, her fingers loosely wrapped around it before sliding her hand down, over her palm, until their fingers were interlaced. "Madison, that's ridiculous. You have to know that. There is somebody out there for you. You can't let a few bad experiences keep you from finding them."

Madison quirked an eyebrow. "Speaking from experience?"

Payton laughed softly. "No. But that's my own fault for always falling for unavailable women." Her stomach lurched when she realized what she'd just admitted to. That she was basically doubling down. Madison knew Payton had a crush on her, and it seemed like Payton was incapable of doing any kind of damage control.

"Oh?"

"I don't think I'll ever learn." Payton shook her head. "This is the worst one though."

She'd said that last sentence so quietly, she wasn't sure if Madison had even heard her.

"Why?"

"Because you know." Payton was aware of the fact that she was still holding Madison's hand, that she hadn't pulled away. "Usually, it's uh, more of an across-the-room kind of thing. This is... Different. I know I don't have a chance. Normally, because I don't act on it, I don't get rejected, and I get to cling to that hope that maybe I really would have a chance."

"Who said you've been rejected?" Madison asked, a glint in her eyes that Payton might just be imagining.

"You're my boss. I'm your P.A." Payton pressed her lips together. Even saying it out loud didn't snap her out of this daydream, this fantasy that this could actually happen. "So that means that this is never going to happen. Even this week, when things are so far from normal."

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Payton's words lingered in the air, as if this was a moment that they were both aware could change everything.

Madison's eyes never left hers, and Payton could barely hear anything over the thundering swoosh of her pulse in her ears.

What was the worst that could happen if she really did what she wanted to do?

Madison would hardly kick her out. She still needed Payton for Jen and Hazel's wedding.

Would Madison fire her when they got back to New York?

Quite possibly.

And was this worth that risk?

That was the question that Payton was wrestling with when Madison's free hand grabbed a fistful of Payton's shirt and tugged her close, eliminating the space between them, and then Madison's soft lips were crashing against her own.

Payton sighed into the kiss, her hand on Madison's hip, and when Madison didn't pull away, Payton tilted her head, deepening the kiss, savoring the feeling of Madison's lips against her own, because this was so much more than anything Payton had ever let herself daydream about.

Madison's lips were hot, possessive. This wasn't a tentative first kiss. This was



hungry. Passionate. And when Madison let out a breathy sigh, Payton's hand found Madison's cheek, bringing their lips back together, their tongues searching.

A chill chased up Payton's back as she lost herself in the kiss, pushing all the questions swirling around in her head aside.

What was this for Madison?

Was this entirely fueled by alcohol?

Whatever was going on with Madison, Payton could safely say that she'd never been kissed like this before.

She was also sure that she'd never wanted someone to kiss her as much as she'd wanted Madison to. Payton had been painfully aware of her crush on her boss for the last year, but this was... This was so much more than she'd ever allowed herself to imagine.

Payton could have sworn the ground tilted when Madison's tongue glided over her own, and then she felt a weight against her chest as Madison pulled away.

Madison's palm was resting on her chest, her fingers splayed, her arm extended. Her eyes fluttered open as she put enough space between them to meet Payton's eyes.

"We can't do this," Madison said with a sigh as she caught her breath.

An ache started deep within her chest when Payton realized how much she wanted this to be real. She searched Madison's eyes, trying to figure out what she could say to change her mind, to make her see that they could be mature about this, all without sounding desperate.

Madison's hand left Payton's chest, shaking her head as she ran that hand through her hair, looking away from Payton. "We just can't." She'd said it so low that Payton had to wonder if she was saying it more to convince herself than Payton.

"Talk to me," Payton said, taking the chance that it would be better to let Madison explain than to try and convince Madison that this was worth pursuing.

Madison's gaze found her own, studying Payton, but it only took a second for Madison's eyes to drop from her shoulders, boldly assessing her with a seductive gaze, and then Madison muttered a curse as she leaned in to kiss Payton again, her hand sliding through Payton's hair as she brought their lips together.

Payton couldn't contain the moan that escaped from her lips, every nerve firing as Madison kissed her with even more passion, even more certainty after she'd just told Payton that this couldn't happen.

Payton was on a rollercoaster, and she was here for every twist and turn, no matter how jarring, because Madison drove her crazy, and Payton seemed to have no self-control when it came to her boss.

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Madison knew she had to stop this. But every time she tried to pull away, she was drawn back in, into another heart-stopping kiss.

And even when she had managed to put some space between them, to say out loud that this couldn't happen, she still couldn't stop herself from kissing Payton.

Madison fisted Payton's shirt again as their tongues danced, the chemistry off the charts.

Her mind screamed at her to get her shit together. That this was the kind of thing she'd seen dozens of men do over the years. So how was she going to let herself do that? To sleep with her personal assistant. To throw away more than twenty years of a flawless reputation. For what? One night?

Madison's mind wasn't in control here though. Her body had taken over. She felt helpless, like she couldn't do anything other than give into this.

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Madison's body hummed as Payton's hand slid behind her neck, their lips meeting again and again, neither of them satisfied, but Madison found one last bit of strength, breaking the kiss, although she couldn't manage to pull away, their foreheads pressed together.

"We can't," Madison murmured, although she didn't believe it. She knew that they shouldn't. On so many different levels. Not just with work. This was supposed to be a fake relationship for the benefit of her ex, but she'd gone into this knowing that Payton had feelings for her.

The question was, when had she become this attracted to her personal assistant?

"You keep saying that," Payton said softly, her breath warm against Madison's lips, their mouths still so close, their foreheads touching. "But your actions say something else completely."

Madison exhaled as she took a step back, putting just a little bit more space between them, her hand still clutching Payton's shirt.

"You know why we can't," Madison said, knowing her voice held no conviction.

"Then why are you still holding onto me? Like you're afraid to let go?"

Madison searched Payton's eyes before letting her gaze fall to where she was still gripping Payton's shirt. "Because I don't want to stop. But we have to."

"Do we though?"

Madison's heart had barely slowed when it started racing again, her eyes snapping back to Payton's. "This never ends well."

"I'm not going to file a complaint if that's what you're getting at."

Madison let out a slow breath, finally dropping her hand so she could fold her arms across her chest. "This is easily the most common reason someone comes to my company. To fix a workplace problem. And they're almost always affairs with their assistants or secretaries."

"This is nothing like that." Payton took a step forward, her hands were on Madison's hips. "I'm not being taken advantage of or coerced into something I don't really want. You know how much I want you. Apparently, I've done a terrible job of hiding it," she said, a smirk tugging on her lips. "And we happen to be away from our lives in New York for a week. We also happen to be sharing a hotel room."

Madison inhaled a shaky breath, her short fingernails digging into her skin as she tried not to grab a hold of Payton again. She'd never had to exercise this much self-control before, and it was simultaneously thrilling yet terrifying.

"What are you saying?" Madison asked, her voice wavering slightly.

"We're here in unusual circumstances. I agreed to pretend to be your girlfriend at this wedding, yet I'm playing the part already. Happily, I might add. And somehow, while pretending to be together, you've seemed to have forgotten that we're faking this." Payton's voice was calm, her eyes never leaving Madison's, challenging her. "You were the one who started this."

Madison pursed her lips. That was true. And she had no one to blame but herself. Payton had only done everything that Madison had asked of her. She was the one who crossed that line.

“Not that I’m complaining,” Payton added, a smile on her lips. “I’m just laying this out there.” She paused, almost as if she was questioning whether or not to continue. “There’s something going on here. I don’t know what this is for you or when things might have changed. I’m not worried about that right now. Tonight, we’re two people who can’t seem to take our hands off one another. We’re sharing a hotel room for the rest of the week before we go to your ex-wife’s wedding where we’re supposed to look like we care about one another. Does that sound accurate?”

Madison sighed. “Yes.”

“So, we’re not in your office right now. No one from work is going to know. And if I turn around and walk over to that couch and get ready to go to sleep, I don’t think you’d let me.”

Madison couldn’t miss the daring look in Payton’s eyes. “You’re making a lot of assumptions.”

Payton shrugged, an effortless smile on her lips. “Okay. I’ll say goodnight then.”

Madison bit the inside of her cheek, her fingernails digging in again to the point where she was wondering if there’d be a mark on her bicep in the morning. “Goodnight.”

Payton turned without another word, and Madison sucked in a breath, her mind and body at war. Her competitiveness should keep her from following Payton.

She couldn’t let Payton know how much she wanted this.

Because how would she come back from this? How would they work together again next week?

Madison's eyes fell to the curve of Payton's ass, and she felt her legs moving before she could even register what she was doing, and when she could, when she was reaching out to catch Payton's wrist, Madison consciously wrapped her fingers around Payton's forearm, gently spinning her around.

Madison expected an 'I told you so,' but there was only a ghost of a smile on Payton's lips as she moved into her space, her hand on Madison's cheek as she leaned in, parting her lips against Madison's.

A sigh left Madison's throat as she finally gave in. She'd take Payton's lead and figure this out next week, because right now, there was no denying that something had changed between them, and even though Madison had no idea how or when it had happened, she couldn't deny how much she wanted Payton.

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Heat flared through Payton's body as she guided them back towards the bed. So many times, she'd found herself thinking about a moment just like this, but she'd always stopped herself from letting those daydreams get too far. Because Madison was her boss, and she couldn't be thinking about what it would be like to push her back against the bed.

But right now, that was exactly what Payton did, breaking the kiss to gently push Madison onto the bed. Madison's hands were on her, bringing her back into her space, her lips crashing against Payton's, neither of them willing to give up control. Not yet anyway.

Payton lost herself in the kiss, in the feeling of Madison's lips against her own.

Payton pulled away, looking down at Madison sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands moving to her blazer.

"Do you have any idea how hot you look in a blazer?" Payton murmured before she eased the expensive fabric away from her shoulders and down her arms.

Madison's lips quirked into a smile as she gripped Payton's hips, wrapping her arm around Payton's waist, guiding her onto her lap, and Payton gasped at the feeling of their bodies pressed together.

Payton brushed a piece of Madison's hair away from her eyes before lowering her mouth, their lips meeting in another scorching kiss, their tongues moving in a seductive dance.



Payton moaned into the kiss as the ache between her legs grew, and she couldn't stop the gentle rock of her hips as Madison's fingers dug into her lower back.

The muscles in Payton's stomach jumped as Madison's hands skating along the waistband of her jeans, coming to the front, her fingers popping open the button. The sound of the zipper lowering filled the room as Payton sighed into the kiss, her lower abdomen quivering as Madison's warm palm slid over her skin and into her underwear.

Payton broke the kiss, struggling to breathe as the sensations overwhelmed her. Her hands were on Madison's shoulder and neck, her thumb lazily stroking along Madison's jawline as their gazes locked.

"Is this okay?" Madison asked as her fingers went lower.

"Yes." Payton's eyes fluttered closed and her hips surged forward as Madison's fingertips skimmed her clit, moving lower where she would surely find the evidence of Payton's arousal.

"Fuck," Madison groaned. "You're so wet."

"You know how much I want you," Payton said, her lips brushing over Madison's hair as she spoke, her other hand lost in her silky-smooth hair, her body lifting to meet Madison's touch.

Madison's fingers returned to her clit, teasing her with light circles, her lips hot against Payton's neck.

Payton moaned with each pass of Madison's fingers, her hips moving of their own accord, and she was getting to the point of desperation, where she thought about guiding Madison's hand further down, needing more than this, but she held on for

another moment, not wanting to be so out of control.

Payton tilted her head to find Madison's lips to distract herself, parting her lips and gliding her tongue across Madison's, eliciting a throaty groan, temporarily slowing Madison's fingers.

A smile tugged at Payton's lips as she managed to pull back, meeting Madison's eyes. "I want to see you," she said softly. They were still both fully dressed and as hot as this was, it would be so much more intense if both of them were naked.

Madison's thumb traced a line over Payton's bottom lip as she carefully withdrew her hand from Payton's underwear, bringing her glistening fingers to her own lips, and Payton forgot to breathe as she stood up, her eyes locked on Madison.

Payton lifted her shirt over her head, and Madison pushed herself off the bed, her arms encircling her, her hands finding her bra clasp and swiftly opening it, guiding the straps down Payton's arms, the light touch leaving a trail of goosebumps behind.

Madison's hungry gaze dropped to Payton's chest as she palmed one breast in her hand while she lowered her head to the other, her lips hot against Payton's skin, her tongue expertly bringing her nipple to life with just a few quick flicks.

Payton shuddered, her hands on Madison's hips, swaying into her as Madison tortured her with her tongue, sucking and battering over her before moving to the other. If Payton was wet before, she was soaked now.

"Madison," Payton breathed, a hand on her cheek to guide their lips back together, and Madison opened up to her, their tongues searching.

Payton didn't even know it could be like this. That simply kissing someone could be this intoxicating. All-consuming. She slipped her hands beneath Madison's top, her

fingernails lightly dragging over her skin before she broke the kiss.

“This has to go,” Payton said, her hands already on the hem, lifting the top over Madison’s hair and letting it fall to the floor. “You’re beautiful,” she said with a breathy sigh, her eyes sweeping over the swell of her chest, the white lacy fabric barely containing her full breasts.

Payton dipped her head to trail kisses along Madison’s neck while she unhooked her bra. Madison let it fall away, and Payton’s hands covered her breasts, her lips traveling over her collarbone on their way down to her already-hardened nipples.

Payton’s pulse thundered in her ears as she took Madison’s nipple into her mouth, loving the way Madison moaned, her fingers raking through Payton’s hair, keeping her there while her tongue circled and flickered over it.

Madison’s breath was hot against her ear as Payton switched to the other, and Madison leaned into her, her grip tight on her hair. “I can’t stay standing. You’re driving me crazy,” she panted as Payton teased her other nipple.

Payton’s hands found the button on Madison’s pants and opened it, guiding the fabric down, letting gravity take care of the rest, while she snaked her hand around, her palm sliding over the curve of Madison’s ass, clutching her through the lacy fabric of her panties, another moan escaping Madison’s lips.

Payton lifted her head to find Madison’s lust-filled eyes on her.

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“What are you doing to me?” Madison whispered, her hands on Payton’s cheeks, her thumb caressing Payton’s skin, before her eyes fluttered closed, and she kissed Payton with so much passion, so much want, that Payton had to swallow down the emotion that was threatening to bubble up.

While Payton was struggling to comprehend what was happening to her, Madison pushed her jeans over her hips, and Payton stepped out of them. Madison’s hands came back for her underwear, and Payton had to break the kiss to get them off, the chill of the air-conditioning hitting her skin.

A soft moan left Payton’s lips when Madison leaned in to kiss her, one hand on her cheek, their naked bodies pressed together, just Madison’s underwear left between them. The sensation of Madison’s breasts and hard nipples brushing across her own as they deepened the kiss left Payton wanting so much more.

Madison pulled away, taking off her panties before reaching for her hand and leading her around to the side of the bed. Madison somehow gracefully maneuvered herself into the middle of the bed with her back against the headboard, sitting up as she tugged Payton’s hand.

Payton did not need any encouragement to resume their previous position, this time with nothing between them. She inhaled a shaky breath as she swung her leg over Madison, straddling her hips, lowering her head to find Madison’s lips.

This kiss was something else entirely. Their hands roamed, and Madison’s fingers raked over her back as the kiss turned heated. Payton’s hands ran over her shoulder and down her chest, filling her hand with Madison’s breast, her thumb toying with

her nipple. Payton's other hand threaded through Madison's hair, something she'd dreamed of doing so many times, their lips meeting again and again, their breathing heavier now.

Madison broke the kiss, her voice low as she met Payton's gaze, tilting her head back against the headboard. "I love having you on top of me," she said as her hands glided over Payton's thighs and up over her hips and ribs, her eyes dropping to her chest before she leaned forward, taking Payton's nipple into her mouth, her tongue swiping over it before she gently bit down.

Payton rocked forward, stars behind her eyes. She felt that everywhere, and now it felt like her clit was pulsating.

"You're killing me," Payton panted. "Fuck." Her hips rolled as Madison's fingers skated up the inside of her thigh, and then she was cupping her sex, the heel of her palm pressing against Payton's throbbing clit. "Oh god," Payton moaned. "Please."

Madison's mouth was on her other nipple, while her fingers circled Payton's clit. She teased Payton with the tip of her tongue, before sitting back, replacing her mouth with her other hand, groping Payton's breast. "What do you need?" Madison asked, her voice rough. "Tell me."

"Fingers. I'm so close, Madison. Please." Payton's hand was on Madison's neck, her other pressed against the suede fabric of the headboard.

Madison didn't keep her waiting, sliding two fingers inside. Both of them moaned as she found her rhythm before she added a third, and Payton cursed as she clung to her, her hips matching each stroke.

Payton grinded back against Madison's hand, feeling herself start to lose control, her hips moving erratically now as her orgasm neared.

Payton lowered her head to find Madison's lips and once their tongues met and Madison entered her one more time, that was what sent Payton over the edge, her body trembling as Madison held her fingers inside, her other hand in the middle of her back, her fingers splayed against Payton's skin.

Payton buried her head in Madison's neck as she came, her body slick with sweat, warmth radiating from her as tiny aftershocks of pleasure swept over her, leaving her skin tingling.

"Fuck," Payton said, gasping for breath as she pushed herself up, and Madison withdrew her fingers, bringing them to her lips, and Payton struggled to breathe as she watched Madison lick them clean.

Payton climbed off Madison and grabbed a hold of her legs. She gave them a tug, sliding her down until she was flat against the bed, and Payton sank down on top of her, ready to make Madison feel as good as she did right now.

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Madison smiled as Payton promptly put her on her back and climbed on top of her. "You don't need to recover?" she asked, looking up at her.

"Later," Payton said with a smirk as she kissed her, cupping one of Madison's breasts, her thumb grazing her hard nipple.

Madison arched up into her, her hands gliding up the back of Payton's legs until she was clutching her ass, and then Payton's lips were gone. They were hot against her chest, moving down her stomach, and then Payton was lying on her stomach between Madison's legs, guiding them further apart with her hands.

Madison threw her head back against the sheets when Payton's tongue skimmed up

along her sex, parting her folds and flickering over her clit.

Her breath was coming out in pants already, her body on fire after watching Payton come. It wouldn't take much to get her over the edge.

Madison's hips lifted off the bed, while Payton's tongue expertly brought her to the brink and back again. Madison's hand gripped Payton's hair, and she felt herself lose control as Payton shifted and made room to slide one finger in, her tongue back, teasing her clit, driving Madison absolutely crazy.

Madison moaned when Payton added another.

Between Payton's tongue and her fingers, Madison was on the edge.

"Payton," Madison gasped, her fingers raking over Payton's scalp as she let her orgasm take over, her muscles quivering, her toes curling. "Don't stop," Madison groaned, another wave washing over her. "Right there. Fuck."

A second orgasm chased the first, leaving Madison breathless, her calves aching, her heart pounding.

"Twice?" Payton asked, kissing her way back up Madison's body.

"Yeah." Madison's arm was thrown over her head, her other combing through Payton's hair, her grip light now, almost a caress. And then Payton's lips were on hers, and Madison could taste herself in the kiss.

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Madison's fingers slid through Payton's hair, pulling her back down, their bare breasts pressed together as their legs tangled, and Madison savored this feeling, of being this close to someone, or having this connection again, because it had been so long.

And Madison couldn't dwell on how much more she wanted than this one night.

"Is this okay?" Payton asked as she broke the kiss to sit up a little, adjusting the angle of her hips until her sex was directly against her own, and Madison gasped when their clits touched.

"Yes," she hissed, and then the weight of Payton's body was back on top of her, their bodies rocking together, their breathing already ragged.

A strangled moan left Payton's lips, her hips moving faster now, and Madison's hands groped Payton's ass, adding to the pressure, the heat within her rising with every roll of their hips, until she held her breath, her entire body shaking as she clung to Payton.

"I'm coming," Madison groaned, and Payton was seconds behind her, a string of curses on her lips as she held onto Madison, riding out their orgasms, their hips moving in short, fast strokes.

They hardly moved as they caught their breath, their bodies covered in a light layer of sweat now, and Madison lazily ran her fingertips up and down Payton's spine as she recovered.



Payton rolled onto her side, her cheeks flushed as she tucked her arm underneath her head, and Madison's lips curved into an easy smile.

Madison hadn't felt this light in a very long time. She knew she was probably on some kind of sex-induced high, her judgment clouded by several amazing orgasms, but she couldn't regret this. No matter how complicated this made things when they got back to New York.

She climbed on top of Payton, pushing her back against the sheets before straddling her hips, letting her hands roam over her smooth skin.

"You're so beautiful," Madison murmured as her gaze traveled over Payton's body. "So beautiful."

Madison would have to deal with the consequences of this at some point, but for right now, she just wanted to enjoy this.

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Payton's eyes slowly opened, adjusting to the darkness, squinting to read the digital clock beside the bed. 9:48AM.

It took Payton a minute to register that it was the following morning, that the blackout curtains had done an amazing job at fooling her into thinking that it was more like four in the morning. But if Payton thought about it, she probably hadn't even gone to sleep at that time. She was...

Payton closed her eyes again as her mind flooded with images of Madison. Straddling her waist with Payton's back against the headboard. Her silky-smooth hair. The way her tongue had...

Payton's eyes snapped open as she reached for the bedside lamp, and her gut feeling was right. The space beside her was empty.

She exhaled slowly as she took another second to make sure that the suite was completely silent, that Madison wasn't out in the living area or in the bathroom, but there was no noise.

Payton pushed herself up, throwing the covers back as she padded over to the closet to take down her robe, sliding it on as she peeked into the living area to find it empty.

She tried to stop her heart from racing, from her mind jumping to conclusions. Madison was probably out getting coffee or breakfast. She'd hardly run away from her. But that sinking feeling lingered, that Madison couldn't stomach waking up with her.

Payton shook those thoughts away. Not after last night. There was no way. Yes, there was probably going to be some awkwardness today, but they'd both enjoyed themselves last night, neither one of them wanting to give in to sleep.

On her way back to her side of the bed to check her phone, her eyes caught a piece of paper on the round table in front of the windows. Relief washed over her as she read Madison's note explaining that she was fine going to their ten o'clock meeting on her own and that she'd see Payton in the afternoon.

Payton knew she wasn't exactly a light sleeper, but she was still surprised that Madison had gotten ready without waking her. Then again, Payton had been exhausted. She couldn't remember falling asleep. The last thing she could remember was the feeling of Madison's smooth leg on top of hers, her arm draped across Payton's stomach while Payton had been lightly combing her fingers through Madison's hair.

“Fuck.”

Payton had been so caught up in everything last night, but the bits that were coming back to her now were extremely intimate. Not the kinds of moments she'd have with someone she was having a one-night stand with.

And it wasn't just Payton.

Madison had been right there with her, whispering in her ear as Payton recovered from another orgasm, her touches so gentle, her caresses full of passion.

Payton stood in the middle of the room, almost in disbelief that last night had happened at all. The dim lighting from the lamp barely made her reflection in the mirror above the desk visible. Her hair was messy, and as she padded into the bathroom, shrugging off her robe, hoping the hot spray of the shower would relieve the ache in her arms and legs, she caught a glimpse of the red marks on her shoulders.

Payton turned to see more marks on her back. Light red streaks. And a ripple of desire ran through her when she remembered how they got there. It was either Madison's fourth or fifth orgasm, and her climax had snuck up on her. Madison's nails had dug into her back as she clung to Payton, her head buried in Payton's neck as she came.

She turned on the shower, the steam rising as Payton ran her brush through her hair. She stepped under the spray, hoping that Madison wasn't regretting anything that had happened last night, because Payton certainly wasn't.

Madison opened the door to their suite, knowing that she couldn't really put this off any longer, and it wasn't like her to put off things. First this wedding invitation and asking Payton, and now avoiding her today, after everything that had happened last night. It just wasn't like her.

Madison nearly ran into Payton as the bathroom door opened, warmth and steam drifting out as Payton's hands found Madison's waist to prevent her from crashing into her.

Madison could feel the heat of Payton's touch through her black blouse. "Sorry," Madison said, her heart rate shooting up as she steadied herself, almost afraid to put her hands on Payton's robe.

"No. It's my fault," Payton said. "Sorry, I didn't hear you coming in. How did your meeting go?"

Madison took a step back as Payton spoke, putting some space between them, but she couldn't stop her gaze from lowering to the plunging neckline of her robe and the hint of cleavage it revealed.

"Good. Yeah. It was good to catch up," Madison said leaving her bag on the table. She almost sat on the edge of the bed, but she stayed standing, the same feelings that had overwhelmed her last night coming back, putting her head and her heart at odds.

All day she'd been wrestling with this dilemma of giving in and trying to think ahead

and prevent this from becoming a complete disaster.

If Madison did what she really wanted to do right now and walked over to where Payton was brushing her hair in front of the mirror and slid that robe off her shoulders, falling right back into that bed, there was no going back. Maybe they already couldn't.

But Madison had to believe that she still had some control here.

"You could have woken me," Payton said, taking her away from her thoughts.

Madison waved her off. "I was thinking that you should have the week off. You know, except for the wedding and all that."

Payton met her eyes in the mirror, her eyebrow lifting.

Madison's stomach flip-flopped. Was reminding Payton that they had a job to do Friday offensive now? Was it still a job? Yes, they'd slept together, and it had been amazing, but the reason they were here, together, was to put on a show and play happy couple.

"Do you want to go out tonight?" Madison offered, suddenly unable to imagine staying in and either having a very serious conversation about what it was they were doing or sleeping together again. As much as Madison wanted the latter, she was too afraid of what that would actually look like.

Because last night had already been so much more than it should have been.

Madison had never had that kind of intense connection with someone that fast. Sleeping with someone for the first time had been awkward more often than not in her experience, never sure if she was giving the other person what she needed or if

she was saying or doing too much or too little.

But that was not what had happened last night.

“Yeah,” Payton said after a second. “Sure. Just us?”

Madison nodded. “Yeah. I usually like to check out the gay scene when I’m in a new city.”

“Okay. I’m always up for that,” Payton said, giving her a bit of a smile, and Madison hated herself for putting off yet another thing.

They should talk about this. About last night. But she needed Payton for Friday, and if they had that conversation, there was every chance that Madison would screw it up. She couldn’t honestly tell Payton that this could be the start of something, because it couldn’t.

Next week, they would go back to being boss and personal assistant. That had to come first.

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Payton weaved her way through the crowded pub, towards the bar, as the drag queen on the tiny stage at the back of the room was belting out a throwback anthem that even she knew all the words to. Pulsating neon lights illuminated the drag queen’s silver dress while she got the crowd going.

Payton finally reached the bar, catching the man’s eye behind the bar and ordering two beers. She was surrounded by a mixture of sweet perfume and musky cologne along with the scent of wood reminding her of the pub’s age and the smells of being in an old library.

She caught Madison's eye across the room as she was coming out of the restroom, and Payton couldn't ignore the warmth that spread through her. She knew she shouldn't feel like that. They hadn't spoken about last night, and Payton had to believe that it was because there really wasn't much to talk about.

Payton just had to believe that Madison felt this too, and that once they'd gone to the wedding and were back in New York, they'd talk about this. Because there was no way that Payton could go back to the way things were last week. Not after last night.

Payton paid for their drinks. This was their fourth round, and she was starting to feel a little tipsy. She hoped that this was their last, that they'd be going back to their suite, because Payton was desperate to get her hands on Madison again.

"Hey," a woman beside her said as Payton was putting her card away. She was her type. Early forties and jet-black hair that fell a few inches below her shoulders.

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“Hi.” Payton could tell by the way this woman’s eyes were lingering that she was interested, and it probably should have scared Payton how little she cared.

“I don’t recognize you,” she said with an accent that Payton couldn’t place. Scottish maybe? “Is this your first time here?”

Payton nodded. “Yeah. Just visiting.”

“Where are you from?”

“New York.”

The woman stepped into her space as the man beside her tried to squeeze in to order a drink. “What’s your name?”

“Payton.”

“I’m Lisa. Look, Payton,” she said, her hand on Payton’s hip now. “I like to get straight to the point. I see you have two drinks in your hand. I don’t want to get in the middle of anything. Are you single?”

Payton blinked, a smile on her lips as she tried to remember the last time someone had ever been this confident with her. “I’m here with someone,” she said, taking a sip of her own drink and doing her best to subtly put a little more space between them.

“Are you the girlfriend?” Lisa asked as Madison appeared at Payton’s side.



There was already a smile coming to Payton's lips as she was about to say that yes that was her girlfriend. It wouldn't be real, but that didn't mean that Payton wouldn't enjoy saying it.

"No," Madison said matter-of-factly. "Thanks," she said to Payton, taking the beer from her.

Payton stared at Madison but couldn't get herself to form any words, and she could feel Lisa looking between them.

"Well, in that case," Lisa said a smirk coming to her lips.

"What?" Madison asked Payton, eyebrow arched. "You are single. Go for it." She was gone before Payton could say anything, her pulse pounding in her ears.

Payton gulped her drink, trying to swallow the massive lump that had formed in her throat, her eyes stinging with tears that threatened to fall.

But she wasn't sad.

She was in shock, and as she tried to process what had just happened, there was anger coursing through her veins.

Apparently, there really was nothing to talk about, because if Madison had any feelings for her at all, that wouldn't have just happened.

32

Madison returned to the hotel after midnight, exhaustion taking over. She had no idea how many miles she'd walked. She knew she couldn't come straight back here. She was too restless, too anxious.

She still didn't know exactly what had come over her in the bar. She'd been making her way towards Payton, and she was a pretty good lip reader. Not that she needed to be. The way that woman had been looking at Payton made it incredibly obvious what she was after.

And a part of her really wanted to get to Payton, to slide an arm around her waist.

But she hadn't done that.

She'd done the opposite. She'd basically pushed the two of them together.

And now she felt sick.

She got undressed and took a long shower, trying to wash away whatever this was. This time next week, she'd be glad that she did this, when they were back in New York, trying to work together again.

But right now? She had a sinking feeling in her stomach. Payton wasn't here. So that meant that she was either still at the bar, hours later, or she was with that woman.

Madison turned off the shower and dried herself before slipping into her robe. When she opened the bathroom door, the suite was still quiet.

She inhaled a shaky breath, regret washing over her as she padded into the living area, making sure that it really was empty. There was no sign of Payton.

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Madison shook her head as she got ready for bed, changing into her pajama shorts and a tank top, hoping that exhaustion would take over, but two hours later, she saw the neon green lights of the clock beside her bed show 2:42am.

And it wasn't long after that when Madison heard the soft click of the keycard in the door and it gently falling shut. She pretended to be asleep, half hoping that Payton would climb into bed and tell her that nothing had happened with that woman, but she didn't.

Payton went into the living area and never came back out.

Madison must have fallen asleep eventually, tears streaking down her cheeks, thoughts of what was wrong with her the last thing she remembered.

33

Payton woke up when she nearly fell off the couch, barely catching herself. Light streamed in through the sliding glass doors that led out onto the balcony, and Payton slammed her eyes shut again, her head thumping.

She rolled over, facing the cushions, a wave of nausea hitting her.

And then she remembered why. Shots. So. Many. Shots.

Why?

Oh yeah. Because she wanted to forget about what Madison had done for a few

hours.

And now she was paying the consequences of that decision.

Payton took a deep breath, willing that sick feeling to go away as she listened for any movement on the other side of the suite, but there was none.

She tried to go back to sleep, but she couldn't, the urge to go to the bathroom greater than the tiredness that left every muscle in her body aching.

When she finally got up to go to the bathroom, she could see that Madison had left at some point. She was probably out getting breakfast or lunch.

Payton squinted at the numbers as she picked up her phone that was on the coffee table. How was it almost three o'clock in the afternoon?

Her phone vibrated in her hand, a picture of Ashley's smiling face filling the screen.

"Hey," Payton croaked, holding her phone out so that Ashley could see her.

"Hi. You look like shit."

Payton made a face. It was true. She raked a hand through her unruly hair. "I was out late last night."

"Ohh, tell me everything!"

Payton scoffed. "It's not whatever you're thinking."

"The last message you sent me was full of happy emojis."

“Well, things change,” Payton said with a sigh.

“What? What happened?”

Payton flopped onto the couch, telling Ashley what had happened since they’d last spoken, and how Madison had come back yesterday and suggested going out. How they’d never spoken about what had happened between them. And how Madison had basically told her to go fuck someone else.

“Oh my god,” Ashley said, her mouth falling open.

“Yeah. So...” Payton blew out another breath. “That’s that, I guess. I don’t know how I’m going to get through this wedding.”

“Payton, you do see what she’s doing? Don’t you?”

“Trying to tell me not to get attached?”

“No! She’s trying to push you away. Don’t play her games, Payton. I’m telling you.”

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Payton shook her head. She was too sick to be thinking this much.

“Ash,” Payton said with her hand on her forehead. “She’s a grown-ass woman. She’s not playing games.”

“Then what are you doing in London?”

“What?” Payton asked as she closed her eyes.

“You’re in London because this woman does in fact play games. What do you call bringing your personal assistant to pretend to be your girlfriend? That’s an incredibly high-stakes game. Most ‘grown-ass women’ would just go alone,” she said using air quotes.

She did have a point. “Oh,” Payton said when she realized she’d left a bit of the story out. “I forgot to tell you. Before we slept together, when we were talking. She admitted that the real reason she felt like she could ask me to come here with her and play the part of her girlfriend was because she knew that I was attracted to her.”

“Payton,” Ashley breathed. “I’m not even sure this woman is worth fighting for.”

“It sounds worse than it is.”

“It sounds like this woman has no problem using you and tossing you aside when she doesn’t need you anymore.” Ashley exhaled. “Sorry. Look, I don’t know her. I hope to fuck she’s got a lot going on with her and this isn’t just her default mode. Maybe, she is just struggling with what to do with you, you know, genuinely. But that doesn’t

make any of this acceptable. Be careful, Payton. Please.”

“I will.” Payton fell back against the cushions. “Thanks for that pep talk.”

“I’m serious about not playing her games. The best thing you can do is go to this wedding on Friday and make her wish that you really were her girlfriend.”

“Yeah.” Payton couldn’t even think that far ahead, to how that was even going to go now. She might really be acting by then. She didn’t know what to think or how to feel after last night.

“Hey,” Ash said. “What happened with the woman from the bar?”

“Nothing.”

Ash nodded. “You’ve got it bad, huh?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“Try and have fun Friday.”

“Yeah. I will. Okay. Thanks for listening to me.”

“Keep me updated! Bye,” Ashley said, giving her a wave before she hung up.

Payton made herself get off the couch and take a shower. She wanted to get ready and be out of the hotel before Madison got back. Plus, she needed to find something to eat in her fragile state. When she felt better, she’d have to talk to Madison, and see if she could figure out what was really going on with her.

Madison didn't think she'd ever felt more restless than she had today. She'd had two meetings earlier. One with a talent agent and then she met with a potential client after, someone who split their time between London and New York, and wanted to make sure that things were under control on both sides of the Atlantic.

She was done for the day at two o'clock, but she couldn't bring herself to go back to the hotel even though she was running on empty after a sleepless night. She had a late lunch and a few glasses of wine before finally taking a taxi back.

Her hand had the slightest tremor as she used her keycard to unlock the door to their suite, and she had no idea why she was this nervous, this apprehensive. If Payton was mad at her, it was her own fault. Madison had been the one to screw things up, and she still didn't even know why she'd done what she had. She couldn't even blame the alcohol. She'd only had a few beers.

As Madison pushed the door open, she was met with silence. She left her bag on the table and glanced into the living area. There was no sign of Payton.

Madison exhaled as she shrugged off her blazer and got changed into shorts and a tank top, that restless feeling back again. She decided on a bath after pacing the room while she checked her emails on her phone.

She tried to relax beneath the bubbles, letting her eyes close as she leaned back.

What was wrong with her? That was the question that kept running through her mind. Why had that been her reaction last night?

And what did Payton think of her right now? Would she even come to the wedding with her on Friday? And if she didn't, how would Madison explain her absence?

Once she stopped thinking about herself, she let her mind go to the place she'd been



avoiding all day.

Was Payton with that woman today?

Madison had to assume that Payton had gone back to her place last night or at the very least stayed out with her for the rest of the night.

Madison's stomach turned at the thought of that woman's hands on Payton, and yet she'd been the one to suggest it.

The door to the bathroom flew open, and Payton's eyes locked onto hers before she cursed and then apologized. "Sorry!"

"Payton," Madison said, not even knowing what she was going to say, but then the door swiftly closed, leaving her alone again, her heart hammering in her chest.

Madison exhaled slowly as she lifted a hand out from beneath the warm water, the droplets falling as she ran her hand over her face.

She shook her head, trying to get her shit together, knowing she'd have to have that conversation with Payton now and clear the air, even if that meant hearing all about Payton's night with that woman.

Madison got out, drying herself off before putting on her robe and pulling the door open, her wet hair falling across her shoulders after she'd run a brush through it, not wanting to take too long in case Payton left again.

"I'm so sorry," Payton said from the living area when Madison emerged. "I didn't think to knock."

“No, it’s my fault,” Madison said with a sigh. “I forgot to lock the door.”

Madison forced herself to look at Payton who was sitting on the couch, wearing white shorts and a navy tank top, her blond hair cascading over her shoulders. She looked refreshed, unlike herself, and the obvious signs of tiredness that had met her when she’d briefly checked her reflection before leaving the bathroom.

Madison stood between the two rooms, leaning against the wall separating them as she tried to figure out what to say. “Payton,” she said softly, waiting for her to look up.

Payton lifted her gaze, her hands clasped, her elbows on her knees as she stared at Madison, her expression unreadable.

“I don’t know what happened,” Madison said, crossing her arms over her chest as she spoke. “Last night. I don’t know why I said that.” She stopped talking because suddenly her throat felt like it was going to close up, choking the words off.

Payton stood up, coming towards her. “I couldn’t believe you’d say that.” Payton visibly swallowed. “After the other night?” She shook her head, her lips tight. “I don’t know. It just threw me completely.”

“I’m sorry,” Madison managed, biting the inside of her cheek, waiting for Payton to tell her that she’d had a great time without her.

“Did you regret saying it? When you left?”

“I regretted it the instant those words left my mouth,” Madison said with a sigh as she looked away, unable to take the intensity of Payton’s gaze.

“Then why did you suggest I go off with her? If you regretted it right away?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you were scared,” Payton offered, her voice gentle. “I think you were afraid to feel whatever this is,” she said, motioning between them.

Madison shook her head. “I don’t know what I was. I just panicked, I guess.”

“Nothing happened,” Payton said after a moment.

“What?” Madison asked, her attention snapping back to Payton.

“Nothing happened with that woman at the bar. We got stupidly drunk. I don’t even know how I got back here. I think she put me in a cab and somehow got me to tell her what the name of the hotel was.”

Madison searched Payton’s eyes. She wasn’t lying. Not that Madison even thought that Payton was capable of lying to her face, but there was something in the sincerity of her expression that told Madison that she was telling the truth. “But I thought she was interested?”

Payton shrugged. “She was.”

“And you...”

Payton’s lips spread into a smile. “I’m too busy trying to convince my boss to let me be more than her pretend girlfriend.”

Madison’s eyebrows rose. “What?” she asked, feeling her own lips curve into a smile full of relief.

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“Can we just admit that we’re not pretending anymore?” Payton asked, her hand resting on Madison’s forearm, easing it away from her chest. She found Madison’s hand, her fingers interlacing with Madison’s at her side. “I feel like things would be so much easier if we did that.”

Madison choked out a laugh. “It’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it though?”

“Putting the logistics aside,” Madison said, her voice serious again, “I’m not sure what I can offer you, Payton. You’ve met my ex-wife. You know how quickly that crashed and burned. And there’s a reason I haven’t gotten involved with anyone since.”

“What’s that?” Payton asked, her fingers brushing against Madison’s.

“I just don’t think I’m the kind of person who should settle down. I spend far too much time at work, putting most of my energy into my business, which you know all about. It’s not an exaggeration to say that I’m married to my work.”

“I know how hard you work, but I think with the right motivation, you might be willing to leave at six some days.”

“The right motivation?” Madison asked with a smile.

“Yes. The right motivation.” Payton didn’t return her smile, her gaze focused intently on Madison, studying her almost. “Give me this week. Let’s enjoy Friday. You know,

as much as one can possibly enjoy watching their ex-wife get remarried.”

“I am happy for her,” Madison said, a lightness coming over her, the tension of the last nearly twenty-four hours slipping away.

“I’m sure you are, but you skipped over the important part of what I just said.”

“What’s that?” Madison asked, knowing exactly what she was talking about, but she’d prefer to hear it again.

“Give me the rest of this week. Don’t worry about what’s going to happen when we get back to New York. Just relax. Treat this like a vacation. And let this,” Payton said, gently tugging Madison into her space, “Be whatever it’s going to be.”

Madison’s breath caught in her throat. She was close enough to Payton that all she had to do was close the last few inches between them, and she found herself leaning in before she even realized what she was doing, Payton right there, waiting for her.

Payton’s other hand cupped her cheek as their lips met in a kiss that Madison swore she could feel in every part of her body. It should have been cautious, both of them trying to figure out where to go from here, but it was anything but.

Madison fisted Payton’s tank top, desperation in her fingertips as she parted her lips, letting Payton in, their tongues searching, and Madison sighed into the kiss, hungrily kissing her back.

Payton’s hand dropped to her neck, her palm hot against Madison’s skin as it traveled further, over her chest and underneath the robe. Payton moaned into the kiss as her hand curved around Madison’s breast, her thumb swiping over her nipple, and Madison’s back arched, leaning into Payton’s touch.

“Oh fuck,” Madison panted as Payton’s lips brushed over that sensitive part of her neck, just below her ear, her other hand following a similar path, dipping beneath the robe, both hands covering Madison’s breasts now.

“You drive me crazy,” Payton murmured against her neck, her hands pushing the robe off her shoulders, and the chill of the air-conditioned room made her nipples even harder.

Madison threaded her hand through Payton’s hair as she kissed her way over Madison’s chest, her hot lips skimming over her breast before wrapping around her nipple, her tongue flicking and teasing her.

Madison struggled to stay standing, her knees buckling as Payton moved her attention to Madison’s other breast, her hand replacing her mouth, rolling her nipple between her fingertips.

Payton’s other hand trailed up her thigh, a ragged moan leaving her lips when she reached Madison’s sex. “I didn’t notice you were completely naked,” Payton said as she stood up fully, her lips on Madison’s again, kissing her with a renewed desire as her fingers slid through Madison’s slick heat.

Madison fell back against the wall of the archway, no longer able to hold herself up on her own. Payton came with her, her lips crashing against Madison’s, her fingertips on her clit, drawing agonizingly slow circles.

“Payton,” Madison breathed, breaking the kiss. “I can’t stay standing.”

Payton kissed her again, taking her time, kissing her deeply as she withdrew her hand, the other finding Madison’s, gently tugging her with her into the bedroom.

Payton pushed Madison back onto the bed, removing her own clothes before climbing on top of her, her hand back between Madison's legs.

Madison moaned as Payton lightly ran her fingers along her sex, but she was so ready for her that Payton easily thrust two fingers inside, eliciting a throaty moan from Madison.

"Oh my god," Madison groaned, grabbing Payton's ass, already rocking back against her hand.

Payton worked up a rhythm, unable to resist leaning down to find Madison's lips, kissing her passionately, their tongues dueling as Madison's grip tightened.



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Payton's free hand found Madison's, pressing it back against the sheets, their fingers interlaced, and Payton increased the speed of her strokes, adding a third finger until Madison was writhing beneath her, her hips lifting off the bed, coming as she freed her hand from Payton's, switching their positions and pressing Payton back against the bed.

Payton looked up at Madison. Her hair was still wet, and her cheeks were flushed, but she was stunning.

Payton reached up, covering Madison's breasts with her hands, teasing her nipples, but Payton forgot what she was doing when Madison slipped her hand between them, cupping her sex before entering her with at least two fingers.

"Oh," Payton gasped, her eyes falling shut, warmth spreading to every cell in her body as Madison slowly fucked her. It was somehow gentle yet intense, the strokes steady, as if Madison knew how to draw every bit of pleasure out of her.

Payton sighed as Madison lowered herself down, her hard nipples grazing Payton's skin, and then Madison's lips parted against her own, her tongue searching out Payton's while she added another finger, and Payton didn't think she'd last much longer.

Payton's hands moved to Madison's thighs, trailing her fingertips along the inside until she met Madison's arousal, and Madison moaned into the kiss as Payton's fingers slid up to her clit, circling her before dipping lower and entering her with a long, swift stroke.

“Oh, Payton.” Madison’s own fingers slowed for a moment. “Fuck, I can’t think.”

“Come with me,” Payton challenged her, a whimper leaving her own lips as Madison found her rhythm again. “Oh fuck. Yes.” She picked up the pace, knowing she was close, and Madison’s breathing was starting to quicken.

“You feel so good,” Madison moaned, her hips starting to rock now, her clit bumping up against Payton’s hand with every motion.

“I’m so close.”

“Fuck.” Madison’s head fell to Payton’s shoulder, and Payton wrapped her free arm around Madison as her body shook, and Payton’s orgasm followed seconds later.

Madison cried out, her voice muffled against Payton’s neck.

Payton’s eyes slammed shut as she held onto Madison, her own body shaking as she came down off that high, her breathing heavy, her body flushed.

Payton knew they still had a lot to figure out, and she probably shouldn’t be as happy as she was, but she couldn’t worry about the future right now, not with Madison on top of her, their skin glistening with sweat, and her body satisfied.

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Madison awoke to a soft voice and a gentle shake of her shoulder. It took a second to register that Payton was trying to wake her up, and Madison’s eyes fluttered open as she rolled onto her back, looking up at her.

Payton was dressed, wearing black shorts and a gray tank top, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. “Hey,” she said with a hint of a smile. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted, but

I ordered a few things for breakfast just to save time.”

Madison must have been frowning back at her or making some kind of face because Payton chuckled.

“You have a meeting scheduled for ten,” Payton said. “It’s almost nine, and I know you can’t function without coffee at the very least.”

“Fuck.” Madison ran her hand over her face. “Why did I do that?”

“Well, when you made your schedule for the week, you probably hadn’t factored in that you’d still be up at 2:00am with your leg thrown over my shoulder, clutching the sheets.”

Madison met Payton’s amused gaze, and before she could even think about wiping that grin off her face with a kiss, there was a knock at the door.

“That would be room service,” Payton said, leaving Madison in bed while she went to answer the door.

Madison found her pajamas in the top drawer of the bedside table and slipped them on as Payton set up their breakfast on the table in the corner of the room.

“Thank you,” Madison said, running a hand through her messy hair as she sat down.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, and Madison dug into an omelet. Apparently, she’d worked up a serious appetite, and just thinking about the two of them in bed together made Madison want to cancel her meeting and stay here for the day.

“I think we should talk this evening,” Payton said as she finished her poached eggs.

Madison looked up, those words inevitably sending a pang of fear through her. When did they ever mean anything good?

“About?” Madison asked as she reached for her glass of orange juice.

“This,” Payton said, motioning between them. “I don’t want to feel the way I did the other night anytime soon. Look, I know you’re in a hurry. We don’t need to get into it now.”

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“No.” Madison shook her head. “It’s fine. I can be a few minutes late. What do you mean?”

Payton sighed. “After we slept together the first time, I thought things were fine between us. We still had a lot to talk about, but I would never have guessed that you would feel like pushing me in the direction of another woman. I felt like shit, Madison. It was like you threw that night back in my face, like it had meant nothing to you.”

Madison swallowed down the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. “I’m sorry.”

“I woke up today with a stupid smile on my face until I caught myself. I had to remind myself that there was every chance I could end up feeling that way again. I know we still have the wedding tomorrow and everything, but I want to know that you’ll give this a chance when we get back to New York. And if you won’t? That was it. Last night was the last time we sleep together. I can’t keep doing this back-and-forth thing.”

Madison pressed her lips together. “I’m sorry for the way I treated you.” Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she didn’t know how to put into words what she was feeling.

“Go to your meeting,” Payton said as she stood up. “I’ll probably go be a tourist for the day. You can let me know what you decide when I see you in the evening.”

“Okay,” Madison said as Payton left to go into the living area. She reappeared a few

seconds later.

“Also,” Payton said, her sling bag over her shoulder. “You never answered my question last night. Both of them, actually.”

“When? What questions?”

“Before your robe came off. I asked you if we could admit that we weren’t pretending anymore, and I asked you to give me this week.” Payton took her shades out of her bag and put them on top of her head. “You can answer all those questions later.” She was halfway out the door when she called over her shoulder, “Hope your meeting goes well.”

Madison watched her go, completely baffled by that interaction. They were such serious questions, but the way Payton delivered them, it was like she was asking her what time they were having dinner.

Madison knew what she wanted to tell Payton. Obviously, they weren’t pretending, but what would happen when she said that out loud? She’d already tried to tell Payton that she wasn’t good at relationships, the memory of their brief conversation coming back to her.

And if that wasn’t a good enough reason not to do this, there was the small detail of Payton being her employee. Her much younger employee.

Madison glanced at her watch and that got her out of her chair, scrambling to get dressed and put on makeup in record time.

She’d have to let Payton down easy. If that was what she was going. That was what she should be doing. Because clearly, she hadn’t done a good job of treating Payton with respect.

Madison pushed all those thoughts aside as she entered the restaurant where she had her meeting. Thankfully, she was just ten minutes late.

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Payton left the suite in a daze, adrenaline pumping through her, her heart beating way too fast. That was gutsy. And potentially stupid. Being so direct with Madison.

But at the same time, she was kind of proud of herself for doing that. It was an attempt to protect herself, even though she was already so far gone.

But she had to know.

And there was the wedding tomorrow. She had to know going into that if she could just relax and be herself or if she maybe needed to be more guarded.

So, now she'd get to spend the day wandering around London trying not to dwell on what she'd just done and what Madison's response was going to be.

That was certainly easier said than done, but as she slid on her shades and crossed the street, she decided she'd see if she could find a ticket to an afternoon show in the West End. She doubted she'd get to see any of the popular shows, but she wasn't picky. She just wanted the experience and also the distraction.

She took out her phone and typed in the location, seeing that she had about a thirty-minute walk ahead of her. Perfect. She could do with some fresh air, and she popped her headphones in, putting on her favorite playlist, hoping it would keep her from thinking about Madison.

She really wanted to call Ashley, but it was too early, although she had a feeling that Ashley would cheer her on. She'd probably be shocked that Payton had the guts to do

it, but Ashley would be happy that she had.

Payton had to wonder if she would be happy with herself this evening when she got back to the hotel, and Madison had some answers for her.

The problem was, Payton could see it going either way. She could just as easily picture Madison gently telling her that their working relationship made this impossible as she could Madison saying that she couldn't ignore the chemistry they had, that this was worth exploring.

Payton stuffed her hands in her pockets as she slowed her steps to wait for the stream of people coming out from the tube station to file onto the busy sidewalk.

This was going to be a long day.



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Madison paced the carpeted suite. Her meeting had gone well, and then they'd had lunch, but she'd come right back here, not wanting to delay this conversation any longer.

Except Payton wasn't here.

It was almost five o'clock, and Madison couldn't sit still. She had emails she needed to send, and she had her laptop open on the desk, but she couldn't focus. She'd spent the last two hours trying to, but she finally gave up.

Her mind kept wandering to what she was going to say whenever Payton did come back. She knew what she wanted to tell Payton. She'd seen it enough in her business to know that these kinds of relationships never worked. Why would they be any different?

And that's what she should be telling Payton. That the only reason anything happened between them was because Madison had been foolish enough to put them in this situation, sharing a hotel room and pretending to be together. If this trip hadn't happened, they wouldn't have anything to discuss.

But it had.

And the most challenging part of this trip was still ahead of them.

Madison had no idea how tomorrow would go, but it would definitely depend on how this conversation went, and she couldn't ignore that fact. She had to find a way to let Payton down easy and still be on good enough terms that tomorrow wouldn't be a

disaster.

She raked a hand through her hair. The thoughts that were running through her head right now... If she saw them on one of those AITA posts, Madison would have no problem telling that person that they were indeed the asshole.

This was why she didn't do relationships. She was shit at them. She was too tactical, too calculated, with a serious lack of empathy. But that was what had made her successful in business. It just didn't translate to relationships.

Madison turned towards the door when she heard the keycard activate, her heart jumping to life, her palms suddenly clammy.

"Hey," Madison said, clearing her throat. "How was your day?"

"Good. Yeah." Payton took her shades off her head and left them on the table along with her bag. "How was your meeting?"

"Good." Madison met Payton's eyes. "Look, I have to apologize for the way I've been with you this week. I've been shitty. And I'm really sorry."

Payton nodded slowly, biting her lip for a second, as if she could sense the bad news coming.

"To answer your questions." Madison slid her hands into the pockets of her slacks. "I can admit that we're not pretending. Everything that's happened since we've been here has been real for me."

Payton visibly swallowed. "And the others?"

"Can I give you this week? Yeah," Madison said with a sigh. "I can, but I'm not sure

if that will do us any good. Because to answer your last question, I don't know that I can give this a chance when we get back to New York. If it's not bad enough that I'm your boss, I run a very successful agency that more often than not is trying to repair the damage done from a relationship just like this, where lines are crossed."

Madison slowly exhaled as she tried to decipher Payton's expression. She wasn't giving much away, but her hands were on her hips, and she held Madison's gaze.

"Two out of three," Payton said after a moment. "Well, maybe not. The second question had a reluctant yes for an answer."

"Payton, I'm not trying to be difficult here. Please know that."

"I know." Payton inhaled a sharp breath. "I know."

"I'm just trying to be realistic."

"If it was just us? And we hadn't met at work?"

Madison couldn't miss the way Payton's voice wavered ever so slightly, finally showing her emotions. "Then it would be a yes to all three. Without a doubt."

Payton nodded, looking away, probably trying to figure out where that left them. Well, that was what Madison was thinking.

"And tomorrow?" Payton asked.

"Let's just enjoy it. No pressure. No rules. Just try and have a nice time."

"Okay." Payton's hands fell away from her hips, and she took the three steps to the bed, sitting on the edge of it, a lock of hair falling across her eye.

Madison could feel her resolve starting to fade, and she was crossing the few feet that separated them, standing in front of Payton, finding her hands and holding them loosely. “Hey,” she said softly, and Payton lifted her head up, a steely look in her blue eyes. “I wish it wasn’t like this,” Madison said, thinking out loud, not even knowing what the point of what she was saying was. She’d made her position clear.

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Madison brushed Payton's hair behind her ear, second-guessing herself, but she knew she'd done the right thing. She couldn't have Payton thinking that when they got back to New York they were just going to start dating.

"I'll take this week," Payton said, looking up at her. "Whether I'll regret that or not... I don't know. But I can't have you standing in front of me, looking like that," she said with a note of reverence in her voice as she openly let her gaze travel over her and her voice drifted off, like she forgot what she'd even been saying.

Madison swallowed. She was only wearing black slacks and a white silk blouse. It wasn't a dress that showed off her legs or a low-cut top that revealed some cleavage. It was the most basic business casual she owned. And that turned Payton on?

Madison knew she shouldn't, but she couldn't stop herself from lifting her hand to Payton's cheek and bending to find her lips.

Payton's arms were on her hips as she kissed her back, parting her lips and deepening the kiss, leaving Madison wanting so much more.

"Do you have any plans for this evening?" Payton murmured between kisses, her hands already moving to the buttons on Madison's blouse.

"None." Madison ached for Payton, and it should have scared her how much she wanted this woman.

Payton's lips quirked into a smile as she pushed the fabric over Madison's shoulders, her eyes roaming over her white lace bra, her hands warm against Madison's skin.

“Good,” Payton said as she stood up, reversing their positions, and easing Madison back against the sheets.

39

More than once today Payton had to stop herself from thinking that any of this was real. Well, it might be real, but it wasn’t going to last. Sitting beside Madison at the ceremony earlier, having dinner with people that Madison had known years ago, and being introduced as her girlfriend?

It was surreal.

And that’s because it was. It was nothing more than a dream, and on Monday morning, or maybe even when they boarded the flight, it would all be gone. A memory that Payton would no doubt visit frequently.

Chandeliers bathed the guests in a warm, golden light as the band took the stage in the spacious ballroom. Laughter and chatter mixed with the clinking of glasses while the dance floor filled up, now that the first dance had finished, and Madison caught her eye from where she was standing beside the bar.

Payton made her way over. She’d just gone for a walk around the lobby and out to get some fresh air before stopping in the restroom on the way back to touch up her makeup. In the time she’d been gone, their table had emptied, with most of the guests milling around or dancing.

“Payton,” Madison said with a warm smile that Payton wished was for her. The conversation they’d had was supposed to clear things up, but it’d only left Payton more torn, not quite believing that she was going to torture herself like this for their remaining time in London. “This is Hazel’s best friend, Rory. She plays soccer in New York. Rory, this is Payton. My girlfriend.”

Payton smiled at Rory as she got involved in the conversation, ignoring the way Madison had stumbled over that introduction, throwing in the girlfriend part at the end, almost as if she'd forgotten. It shouldn't bother her, but it did. Maybe, if they hadn't admitted that they weren't pretending anymore then today might have been that bit easier. Maybe Madison wouldn't be second guessing every word, because that's what it felt like she was doing.

"You guys should come to a game," Rory said. "I'm trying to convince Hazel to play for us. I know the management wants her, but so do a lot of other teams. She's really made a name for herself in the last two or three years."

They all looked towards the dancefloor where some guests were leaving as an upbeat, classic that everyone seemed to know but Payton had never heard before finished, a much slower song starting now, the brass tones filling the air.

"Oh," Rory said with a hint of a smile. "Think my girlfriend's waving me over. It was nice to meet you both. I'm sure I'll see you later or tomorrow night."

They said goodbye, and then it was just the two of them. Payton leaned against the bar, aware of how close they were, but not willing to move, because it would look strange if anyone was watching, and well, Payton didn't want to move. She was in this mess now, and she might as well enjoy it.

"Want to dance?" Madison asked after a moment, finishing what was left in her wine glass.

Payton had not been expecting that. Although Madison had two glasses of wine during dinner and another one now. Maybe, this was just drunk Madison. The version of her boss who actually enjoyed being in Payton's company and didn't question it.

"Sure." As Payton followed Madison out onto the dancefloor, hand in hand as they

moved through the tables and people chatting, she realized that this was what she was here for.

This was that moment.

Yes, Madison had introduced her to everyone at their table as her girlfriend, but other than the Rory, no one else here really knew that they were together. Maybe, Jen had mentioned it to her family, that her ex-wife was coming, but that she was bringing her new girlfriend. Payton didn't know. But this slow dance, this was the thing that would make it obvious to just about everyone in the room that they were together.

Payton sucked in a breath as they found a spot towards the edge of the floor, and it could have been really awkward had Payton not instinctively slid her right hand behind Madison's back and held out her left, waiting for Madison's hand. They easily could have fumbled around, not knowing who would lead, which wasn't something that should happen if they were really together.

But thankfully, Payton didn't overthink it. She just went for it. And Madison's left arm was draped over her shoulder, her fingertips brushing the hair at Payton's neck.

"That updo suits you," Madison said after a moment, leaning in so that Payton could hear her over the music, her breath warm against Payton's ear.

"Thanks." Payton ignored the tingling sensation that erupted over her skin, hoping Madison wouldn't notice the goosebumps that now appeared on her bare arms. She met Madison's eyes as she pulled back. "Apparently, we make quite the dashing couple. And that's a quote. From... Hazel's uncle? I think."



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Madison's lips slid into an easy smile. "I've heard something similar said to me twice already."

Payton tried not to get caught up in this, but it was so hard not to. Madison looked absolutely stunning in a classy teal dress, her dark hair falling across her shoulders with more waves in it than she normally had. Her eyes dazzled. And the feeling of having Madison in her arms like this? Payton didn't know how she'd recover.

Madison shifted her arm on her shoulder as they turned, avoiding another couple that was waltzing to the song, moving much faster than just about everyone else, and Madison's fingers trailed over the back of her neck, sending a chill right through her.

"Are you having an okay time?" Madison asked as they swayed to the music. "I know this isn't easy. Being paraded around almost. I wasn't thinking when I asked you to do this. It's only now that I'm seeing that."

"I am, actually. And if you hadn't asked me to do this..." Payton let her voice trail off, because she couldn't believe she'd almost said that out loud. If you hadn't asked me to do this, then nothing would ever have happened between us.

"I know," Madison whispered, so low that Payton wondered if she'd actually said it.

It was impossible to understand what those words meant to Madison. Was there regret in them?

"We probably should have practiced this," Madison said, her eyes finding Payton's, a smile tugging at her lips.

“Are you suggesting that I’m not very good?”

Madison grinned. “No. I’m impressed, and it just reminded me that we probably should have practiced this. Except it turns out that we didn’t need to.”

“I wouldn’t have minded.” Payton returned her smile. “And I’m kind of mad at myself that I didn’t think of it.”

Madison shook her head slightly, still smiling. “What am I going to do with you when we get back?”

Those words caught Payton off guard, her feet stalling for a second, and thankfully they were moving too slow for it to make a difference.

What was that supposed to mean?

Was Madison changing her mind?

40

Madison woke up the next morning to the sound of the shower running, the space beside her empty. She stretched her arms over her head, her muscles aching after last night, but she didn’t regret a second of it.

And that should have scared her.

Instead, it propelled Madison out of the bed, and into the bathroom, not even bothering to grab her robe or her pajamas. She knocked on the door, asking Payton if it was okay if she could brush her teeth, but Madison knew once she was done, she wouldn’t be able to resist joining her.

Madison freshened up, brushed her teeth, and padded across the tiled floor to the fogged-up glass where Payton's sexy figure stood under the spray, tilting her head back as she washed her hair.

Madison stood there for a moment, suddenly doubting herself. This wasn't something she normally did. It was too spontaneous. And she hadn't had sex in a shower in more than ten years.

"Are you going to join me?" Payton asked, her voice as smooth as silk.

Madison didn't hesitate, stepping into the shower, her hands on Payton's hips as Payton slipped hers behind her neck, bringing Madison in for an intoxicating kiss.

Madison had visions of backing Payton up against the tiles and having her way with her, but it was Payton who turned Madison, easing her under the spray and then against the cold wall.

Madison sighed as Payton's hand trailed up her thigh and cupped her sex as she leaned in, capturing Madison's lips in a hungry kiss.

Madison broke the kiss, tilting her head back against the wall as Payton entered her with a smooth stroke, the heel of her palm hitting her clit with each movement.

Madison's hands roamed over Payton's wet body, unable to resist teasing her, exploring her sex with the pads of her fingertips, circling her clit until she eased them lower, pushing two fingers inside, matching Payton's rhythm after just a few thrusts.

Payton's teeth grazed Madison's collarbone, her hot lips placing open kisses up her neck until she found Madison's lips again, their tongues swirling.

"I can't come standing up," Madison reminded Payton after breaking the kiss,

although she was closer than she'd ever been.

Payton's free hand was on Madison's hip, guiding her back onto the bench, and Payton climbed into her lap, both of them moaning as they entered one another again, this time with more force, more fingers.

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Madison gasped, her fingers digging into Payton's lower back and hip as she tried to hold on, her hips rocking, and then Payton was moaning, her breath hot against her ear, her breasts in Madison's face as her fingers stalled, her orgasm taking over.

Madison held her fingers inside, curling them, holding onto Payton while she came down, both of them breathing heavily, but Payton's fingers started moving again, thrusting in and out, and Madison clung to Payton, gripping her thigh and back as her own orgasm took over, her head resting against Payton's chest, steam rising all around them as they caught their breath.

"That was a nice surprise," Payton said, her voice echoing off the walls.

"For me too." Madison smiled as she looked up at her.

Payton opened her mouth but closed it again, and Madison desperately wanted to know what she'd been about to say. Instead, she dipped her head, slowly kissing Madison, her hand slipping behind Madison's head as their tongues met.

41

Payton's own words were haunting her as she slid onto a bar stool, waiting to catch the bartender's attention.

Give me this week.

Well, the week was nearly over. They were at Jen and Hazel's favorite bar, enjoying a second night of celebrations and toasting the happy couple, but Payton couldn't stop

thinking about their flight back tomorrow and what that would mean for her and Madison.

They never broached the subject again, but Payton found herself hoping that she'd somehow changed Madison's mind. It was the way Madison had been at the wedding. Maybe not at the start, but they'd danced so close. Madison had held her hand anytime they were walking alongside one another last night or tonight.

But mostly, it was the way they were in bed together. It had been so intense right from the start.

Payton had never been like that with someone that quickly, and if she thought about it, she'd never experienced anything like that period.

But had Madison felt it too?

She ordered another round when the bartender came over, and while she waited, she turned, her eyes landing on Madison straight away, somehow able to find her in an instant in a crowded bar. Her dark hair was pinned back in a half-up, half-down style that Madison rarely wore to work, and Payton couldn't look away before she got caught.

Madison was standing beside a woman who looked an awful lot like Jen. It must have been one of her sisters. And Madison's lips quirked into a smile as she held Payton's gaze for a few seconds before returning to her conversation.

Payton's phone vibrated in her pocket almost non-stop for a minute. That would be Ashley finally seeing her texts. Payton had filled her in on the taxi ride here, typing out a short message to update Ashley, knowing she'd have a million questions but not wanting to spend the whole journey here typing on her phone and ignoring Madison.

Payton resisted the urge to check her phone. Ashley's messages would probably be encouraging her to just talk to Madison, to tell her how she felt. Ashley had said something about that when Payton had given her a quick call between the wedding and the reception.

If only it were that easy.

But Payton couldn't do it. She was too afraid of pushing Madison, of being rejected. So, she just had to wait and see what would happen when they arrived back home in New York.

42

Madison took a sip of beer as she listened to Jen's sister Laura tell her how happy she was for Jen and Hazel. She was nearly finished with her drink, but as her eyes swept the busy pub, she spotted Payton at the bar, looking at her already.

Madison held her gaze without even realizing what she was doing, before Laura saying her name brought her back into the conversation.

"Madison, don't get me wrong. I don't mean to go on and on about those two, and I do have to say that I'm just as happy for you. The way Payton looks at you?" Laura nodded in Payton's direction. "And I didn't get a chance to say it to you last night, but seeing you together... I feel like this is the real deal. Do you? Or am I just in too much of a romantic mood to see things clearly?"

Madison took a deep breath. "Yeah. No." She pressed her lips together to try and gather herself. Why couldn't she string a few coherent words together? "She's great," Madison finally managed.

"I'm glad you've figured out your priorities," Laura said before taking a drink. "I'm

not blaming you for what happened with Jen. Clearly, you both were meant for other people.”

“Yeah.” Madison swallowed down the lump in her throat. Why did she feel so guilty? She’d probably never see Laura again after today. Why did it bother her so much that Laura thought they were perfect for each other?

“Just don’t fuck this one up.”

Madison’s mouth fell open.

“I don’t think you’re a heartbreaker,” Laura said. “I don’t think you’ll do it again, but I had to say it. Seriously, Madison. Don’t throw this one away.”

Madison nodded, Laura’s words sinking in. This week was turning out to be a bit of a therapy session. More than once, she was reminded of how shitty of a girlfriend and wife she’d been. Even if it wasn’t with Payton, she needed to do better.



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She found her eyes drifting towards the bar again, and Payton was coming towards her with two pints of beer, her blond hair catching in the warm lights in the cozy pub as she weaved her way through the crowd.

Madison couldn't shake that feeling of guilt. Payton wanted this to work, but Madison just couldn't see how it possibly could, no matter how much she wanted it to.

43

Payton lifted her suitcase off the carousel, and Madison was just a few feet away, leaning forward to catch her own black suitcase before it went by.

They wheeled their cases out to find Madison's driver already pulled up and waiting for them, holding the backseat door open.

Payton's throat tightened. They'd both slept for most of the flight after being out late last night, and they hadn't spoken anymore about what was going to happen now.

"Thank you," Madison said, the muggy New York air greeting them as soon as they stepped outside. "For everything."

Payton nodded, her stomach doing somersaults as she clutched the handle of her suitcase. "No problem."

Madison's eyes searched hers, and Payton swore that she wanted to say more, but they were outside a busy airport with horns blaring and people on the phone all

around them. It wasn't really the place to have a serious conversation.

Madison stepped into her space though, her arm slipping around Payton's shoulder to pull her into a hug. It was longer than it needed to be, and Payton couldn't stop herself from reveling in it, knowing that there was every possibility that this was the end of any chance with Madison.

Payton met her eyes when Madison took a step back. "We're okay?"

Madison nodded. "Can I drop you home?"

Payton sucked in a breath. She didn't think she could draw this moment out any longer. Sitting in the backseat beside Madison, not knowing what to say while also having too many things to say... She couldn't do it to herself.

"No. I'll get a taxi back. I'm out of your way."

"You're sure?"

Payton nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay. I'll see you in the morning?"

"Yes." Payton still had no idea how they were meant to work together tomorrow and every day after that. "See you then."

"Bye."

Payton watched Madison slide into the backseat of her car, and as she stood in the line to wait for a taxi, a thought popped into her head.

It was obvious.

It was a little crazy.

But it would provide a solution.

Payton's heart beat faster as she turned the idea over in her head, and it didn't take her long to realize that this would be the only way.

This would prove to Madison how serious she was and simultaneously solve her biggest problem.

44

Madison took off her glasses and pushed herself out of her chair, needing a break from staring at her screen for the last two hours. She'd arrived before six o'clock, an hour earlier than usual, because she couldn't sleep. Her body clock hadn't adjusted to New York time yet, and in her head, it was already time to have lunch.

The office was just starting to fill up now, with most people arriving between 8:30am and 9:00am. She'd gotten a serious amount of work done in those few hours, but she was still waiting to see Payton.

Madison's thoughts had wandered several times already this morning, thinking ahead to what their interactions were going to be like now that they were back to being boss and personal assistant. Nothing more.

Madison went over to the windows, sliding her hands into the pockets of her slacks, taking in the view of the city. She'd tried to imagine last night, when she couldn't sleep, what it would be like to date Payton. She would have to be assigned to someone else. She couldn't be Madison's P.A. anymore. But she knew Payton was

capable of so much more, so maybe there was a better role for her within the company.

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And then Madison started to think about what that would look like. Would it be any better? Dating a colleague instead of her personal assistant? And Jack was the only one technically on her level. Everyone else was an employee. So, not much would change. It might just look slightly better.

She'd tossed and turned for most of the night, thinking about how this could work, while also wondering if now that they were back home and not on vacation, would they still want this? What if it was just a sex thing?

And that brought back flashes of those incredible nights with Payton to the front of her mind.

It wasn't a sex thing. That much was obvious. It had been too intense. Too emotional. Too... Everything.

Madison couldn't even think about it.

A knock at her door took her away from her thoughts. "Come in," Madison said, turning to see who it was.

The door opened, and there was Payton, her hair straight, flowing across her shoulders. She wore a navy button-up blouse with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows and gray slacks, an envelope in her hand.

They stared at one another for a long moment, before Madison motioned for her to sit down, and she returned to her desk, taking a seat.

Payton still hadn't said anything, but she slid the envelope across the desk once she was seated.

"What's this?" Madison asked, noticing that her name was on the front of the envelope, but that was it. She was already peeling it open and sliding out the folded letter.

"My resignation."

Madison's eyes shot up before she even had a chance to read the content of the letter. "What?"

"I'm resigning. Today." Payton's jaw was set, her eyes serious.

"I can't let you do that," Madison said as her eyes scanned the paper in her hands.

"This will never work if I'm your P.A." Payton visibly swallowed.

Madison folded up the paper again and left it on her desk, her thoughts jumbled. It did make sense, but Madison didn't want Payton to have to quit her job. She was in the middle of trying to figure out how to make this work. This was the last thing that Madison had expected, for Payton to be the one to take the initiative.

"Unless you don't want it to work..." Payton's voice trailed off, and she was already standing up, her eyes glistening.

Madison had no idea how long she'd left Payton hanging. She'd been lost in her own thoughts. Had it been too long? Had Payton mistaken her silence for a flat no?

"Right," Payton said, her voice thick with emotion. "Well, either way, I'm resigning." She was heading for the door before Madison could gather her thoughts, and then the

door swung open and clicked shut, leaving Madison alone again.

“What just happened?” Madison whispered to herself, her hands trembling as she picked up the letter again, reading it properly this time.

45

Payton finally got home at around five o'clock. She knew Ashley was gone for the day, doing a wedding in New Jersey, and Payton just couldn't face sitting at home alone all day. She was too wired. Too anxious.

She went for coffee, and then a very long walk, even though she didn't have the shoes on for it, but she couldn't sit still. She kept replaying what had happened. Payton knew it might not have gone her way, but the silence from Madison had been deafening.

Payton had wiped her sweaty hands along her slacks, her knee bouncing as she'd waited for Madison to say something.

Payton hadn't really thought when she'd said, 'Unless you don't want it to work...'

But Payton had to fill the silence, and then once it was out there, she'd thought Madison's gaze would lock onto hers and tell her that of course she wanted this to work.

All Payton had gotten was more silence.

And then she had to get out of there.

Payton had lost track of the number of times she'd checked her phone today, half expecting a text from Madison. Some kind of apology or something. Anything.

But no. Payton hadn't heard from her.



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She got changed into shorts and a tank top, knowing that Ashley wasn't going to be home until tonight. Going for a run was the last thing she wanted to do right now, but it was the only way she might sleep tonight. She needed to exhaust herself.

And thankfully, Ashley had not been joking about the tub of ice cream. It was waiting for her in the freezer.

She tied her hair back in a ponytail and checked her phone one last time before shaking her head. Of course, there was nothing.

She had to believe that she'd done the right thing. She couldn't go back to the way things were, and Madison was never going to date her personal assistant.

So, she had to do it.

Even if it hadn't gone the way she'd wanted it to.

A knock at the door had Payton freezing in the middle of her living room.

No one knocked on their door.

Payton squinted through the peephole, her breath catching when she saw Madison standing in her hallway.

She gripped the door handle, taking a deep breath before opening the door. "Hi."

She had no idea why Madison was here. She could just be telling her that she was

accepting her resignation. There was no reason to believe that anything had changed.

“Hi,” Madison said, her expression neutral. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah.” Payton stepped back, glad that they kept their apartment tidy ninety-nine percent of the time.

Madison’s heels clicked against the hardwood flooring. She hovered inside the door, her weight shifting from one foot to the other. “Are you here alone?”

Payton nodded. “Ashley’s gone all day. She’s doing a wedding.”

“On a Monday?”

Payton shrugged. “I guess.”

“Anyway,” Madison said with a sigh. “I came here to apologize. For what happened in my office. For my reaction.”

“I thought you’d be happy.” Payton stood inside the door, not offering to move into the living room, to sit down, because she had a sinking feeling that this conversation wasn’t going to last very long.

“It was our first day back,” Madison said. “I was shocked.”

“I just thought it was the only way. I’m sorry if it puts you in an awkward position now. Without a P.A.”

“I don’t care about that.” Madison waved her off. “And I get why you did it.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but.’”

Madison exhaled. "I've been trying to tell you all along. I'm not worth it, Payton. I have a terrible track record. And now you're quitting your job because of me."

"It was never going to be a long-term job." Payton shook her head. "And I can't believe you would say that about yourself. Still. What was last week for you? The end of it? When we weren't pretending. Did you not feel this? This magnetic pull between us?"

Madison inhaled a sharp breath. "Last week was amazing. Honestly. But we were on vacation. We were in an unusual situation. One that I put us in."

"If I'm not your personal assistant anymore," Payton said, her pulse thumping in her ears, "Then give me a chance. Let's just... Go on a date? I know we'd be doing things backwards, but... Whatever it takes, Madison."

"I had Jen's sister, Laura, telling me not to screw this up yesterday. I got a text from Jen on the way here telling me not to fuck this up. Both of them telling me how lucky I was." Madison took a step towards her. "And I felt so guilty. For letting them think that this was real, but I don't think that was it at all. I think I wanted it to be real, but I knew it couldn't."

"But why can't it?"

"That's what I'm starting to ask myself now." Madison stood in front of her, running a hand through her hair. "I've been so busy fighting this, that I haven't stopped to wonder what it could be like."

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“You gave me last week? Give me another.” Payton could hear the desperation in her voice, but she didn’t care. This was her last chance, and she was going to grab it. “Let’s go out some night this week. Get dinner. Start over. Away from work.”

“I’d like that,” Madison said, her voice just above a whisper. “You have no idea how much I would.”

Payton searched her gorgeous eyes, her hand lifting to Madison’s face, brushing a lock of hair behind her ears. “Then let’s do that,” she murmured, her head already tilting, her hand on Madison’s cheek as she kissed her softly, cautiously.

Madison sighed into the kiss, parting her lips, deepening it within seconds, her hands on Payton’s hips.

“How about tonight?” Madison asked as she pulled away.

Payton inhaled a shaky breath. “I would love that.”

46

Madison shut down her computer. It had been an extremely long week, between getting adjusted to this time zone again to everything that had happened with Payton.

But it was Friday evening, and although she hadn’t seen Payton since they’d gone for dinner Monday night, they’d texted each day and had plans to see each other tonight.

There was a knock on her door as Madison stood up, sliding her laptop into her bag

and gathering her things. “Come in.”

“Hey,” Jack said, his suit jacket gone, and his sleeves rolled up. “Any luck finding a P.A. yet?”

“I have narrowed it down to two. I’ll decide by Monday.”

“It’s always right around the year mark,” Jack said with a grin.

“Hm. There’s something I need to tell you.” Madison’s hands went to her hips. She’d wanted to talk to him about this Monday or Tuesday, but they’d both been so busy this week. “The reason Payton quit... We’re... We want to start seeing each other. And nothing happened here. Just to make that clear.” She couldn’t gauge Jack’s reaction. “There’s no impending lawsuit for you to worry about. And I had no idea that she was going to resign. She wasn’t pressured into it or anything like that.”

Jack smiled as he held up his hand. “Relax, Madison. I’m happy for you.”

“You are?”

“Yes. Of course, I am. And to be honest, I already thought there was something going on between you two. You were acting strange that night I bought my apartment. You couldn’t take your eyes off her, but yet you didn’t really seem like you wanted to go talk to her.”

Madison sighed. “Yes, well. Nothing was going on then.”

“So, you didn’t plan a trip to London to get some time away together?”

Madison shook her head. “No. But it kind of ended up like that.”

“Go for it, Madison. You deserve to be happy.”

“You don’t think she’s too young for me?”

“I don’t know how old she is, and I don’t think it matters much if you’re happy.”

Madison pressed her lips together.

“The wedding went okay?” Jack asked after a moment.

“Yeah.” Madison had never told Jack about bringing Payton as her date. “It was a bit strange, but Jen and Hazel make a great couple. I’m happy for them. Honestly.”

“Good.” Jack smiled at her. “Oh, the reason I knocked on your door. Are you free for drinks tonight?”

“I can’t tonight. Sorry. Payton’s coming over.”

“Say no more,” Jack said with a wink. “Another night then.”

“Yeah. We need to catch up outside of work.”

“Agreed. Enjoy your night, Madison.”

“You too.”

Madison left the office a few minutes later, surprised at how well that had gone, but Jack was easygoing like that. It was one of the reasons they’d worked so well together over the years.

Madison found her driver waiting for her downstairs, butterflies coming to life in her stomach, knowing that she’d see Payton in just a few hours.

47

Payton tapped her pen against the page, already filled with a mind map. The question at the center of her journal page was ‘What should I do with my life?’

She looked up, sitting back against the couch in the middle of the coffee shop, the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans blending with the sweet scent of baked pastries and flavored syrups.

The front door occasionally chimed as a new customer entered, and nearly every rustic wooden table was full of either people working on their laptops or engaged in conversation.

Payton brought her mug to her lips, the warmth radiating through the ceramic as she took a sip.

She'd applied for a few odd jobs this past week, but she didn't want to get into another situation that felt as temporary as all of her other jobs had. She'd never really stopped to think what she wanted to do with her life, and being six months ahead in her rent gave her the time to think about what her next move was going to be.

Payton scanned the page on her lap, her eyes lingering on the business degree that she had. She also had her love for theater, and she did live in New York. That might be a path to go down.

She hadn't expected to figure her life out in one journaling session, but it felt good to write it all down and maybe in the next few days something from this page might jump out at her as the right path to take.

As she glanced at her watch, she knew she should get going soon. She wanted to get home and take a shower before she went over to Madison's tonight. They were supposed to be going out for dinner, but Madison suggested coming over instead in a text she'd sent just a few minutes ago, saying that she'd cooked.

Payton had smiled as she'd read that text. It still didn't seem real, that Madison had shown up at her door like that on Monday, and that nothing had changed during the week. They'd texted every single day, and Payton would be heading over to her place in just a few hours.

As Payton closed her journal and slid the elastic band into place, she caught the conversation going on behind her. She wasn't one to eavesdrop, but she couldn't help it. The two women weren't exactly speaking in hushed tones.

"The wedding is tomorrow!" The woman sounded defeated.

The other woman spoke now. "I know, but it's not your fault your singer was in a car accident yesterday."



“I know, but I don’t know what to do. She insists that she’ll be fine. That she can take less pain meds during the ceremony, and that she can stay seated. What am I supposed to say to that? I don’t have a backup plan, but I can’t ask her to do that. I don’t know how I can get married without music.”

Payton opened up her journal again and wrote down her name and phone number as well as Ashley’s name, underlining it twice before ripping out the page. She slid the journal into her bag and slung the strap over her shoulder as she got up.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt,” Payton said, coming around to stand beside the table behind her, both women looking up at her. “I represent a very talented singer song writer. She does all kinds of events, but her specialty is weddings. I’m actually all out of business cards right now,” Payton improvised. “But my name’s Payton, and I’d like to give you my number and my client’s name. Look her up. There’s plenty of videos of her performing live online. She also happens to be free tomorrow. Call me if you’d like to book her. I’m sorry about your situation,” Payton added, her heart racing in her chest. “Anyway, I’ll let your two get back to your coffees.”

And with that Payton left the piece of paper on the table between them before turning to leave, adrenaline pumping through her veins.

She was barely in the door of her apartment when her phone rang. The woman wanted to book Ashley, and when she asked for a price, Payton held her breath.

She had a vague memory of Ashley mentioning prices a year or two ago, about weddings paying better than her gigs in bars. The figure popped into Payton’s head, and before she could overthink it, she doubled it.

Payton waited for the woman to say something, and she was about to defend the price, ready to say that it was a last-minute booking, but she didn’t have to. The woman agreed. She asked Payton for Ashley’s number to see if she could meet her

tonight to discuss songs.

Payton gave it to her and as soon as she hung up, she called Ashley's name, hoping she was in her bedroom.

"Ashley!"

"Yeah?" Ashley came out from the bedroom, her hair tied up in a bun.

"Your phone's going to ring in a minute. Just go with it. I got you a wedding for tomorrow."

"What? Are you my agent now?" she asked with a grin.

Payton smiled back at her, but it made her pause.

Why couldn't she be Ashley's agent or manager?

48

Madison took a sip of wine, putting down her fork and knife as she listened to Payton. "So, this just happened?" Madison asked.

"Yeah." Payton nodded. "Three hours ago."

"Wow." Madison had thought about what Payton might do next. She still felt guilty about Payton resigning, but it really was the only way that this was ever going to happen.

"I think I'm going to spend the next month or two doing this," Payton said as she finished her lasagna. "While I'm looking for something else."

"Be Ashley's manager?"

"Yeah. She has no trouble getting gigs, but she doesn't get paid enough. I want to see if I can get her to take on less work, but still make enough. Make more than she is right now."

"And because you asked for more for this wedding, you're able to take a commission?"

"Yes." Payton reached for her wine glass and took a drink. "We'll draw up a contract if this is actually going to work, but for right now, I offered ten percent. Ashley

insisted on twenty.”

“That’s fair.”

“She wants this to work as much as I do,” Payton said. “We actually had a really good conversation. About what she wants. I don’t think she even realized how close she was to burning out. She couldn’t keep going like that. She’s singing five or six nights a week, every week.”

“Payton, you don’t waste any time,” Madison said as she carried their dishes into the kitchen. “This is amazing.” She loaded the dishwasher and turned to Payton. “And you have a business degree.”

“Yeah.” Payton brought their glasses in and added them to the dishwasher.

“You were my best P.A. by far, and I’m not just saying that. I mean it. And that job encompasses so many skills.”

“Did you miss me this week?” Payton asked with a smile.

“So much.” Madison stepped towards her, her hand on Payton’s cheek as she leaned in for a kiss. “But I’m not talking about work,” she murmured before parting her lips against Payton and kissing her fully.

## EPILOGUE

Snow flurries drifted down onto New York’s quiet streets, and Payton leaned in a little closer to Madison as they strolled along. They’d had dinner at one of Madison’s favorite Indian restaurants and gone for a drink after, but with the news dominated by the impending snowstorm, the streets were nearly deserted at 11:30PM, everyone hunkering down.

The snow crunched beneath their boots. It was starting to accumulate as they continued walking towards Rockefeller Center. They were hoping to make it in time before the lights were switched off.

“I know we could do this another night,” Payton said as a taxi blew its horn somewhere in the distance. “But I don’t know. It was just so peaceful when we came out of that bar. It didn’t feel real. Seeing the city this quiet.”

“I’m glad you suggested it,” Madison said, wrapping her arm around Payton’s waist as they walked. “If it was up to me, I’d have been in front of my electric fireplace right after dinner.”

Payton laughed softly. “You should have told me.”

“But I will get there eventually. And in the meantime, I get to feel like I’m in a snow globe.”

“It does kind of feel like that.” Payton glanced up, the snow falling a little heavier now, the skyscrapers reaching up to the clouds. “Or a horror movie.”

“It doesn’t feel eerie though. Just strange,” Madison said as she looked around. There was just the occasional person that passed them, bundled up with their hat tugged low and a scarf around their neck.

“Peaceful.”

“Hm.” Madison’s gloved hand slipped into hers as they continued on. “How’s it going with Ashley?” she asked after a while. “I’ve been worried about you working with your best friend. That it might change things.”

“No, it’s been good. I mean, it’s only been two months since we officially agreed to

do this. But I hope that me being her manager never gets in the way of our friendship.”

“Especially when you live together too.”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:55 am*

“Yeah,” Payton said, her breath visible in puffs of white. “That’s true. We do spend a lot of time together. Although, I have been staying over at yours more often.”

“About that...”

Payton’s feet slowed just as they reached their destination. The Rockefeller Christmas tree towered above the plaza, the snow dancing to the ground in the golden hue of the lights. But Payton struggled to take in the sight, her mind scrambling to put meaning behind Madison’s words.

Did Madison want to slow things down?

The last four months had been amazing. They’d started off seeing each other two or three times a week, going for dinner or for a drink, but things naturally progressed as the weeks went by. In November and December, they easily saw each other four or five times a week, and Payton stayed over three or four nights. Definitely over the weekend.

Was Madison regretting that now?

Madison turned to her now, taking a deep breath. “I was wondering how you’d feel about moving in with me?”

Payton stared at her, her heart jumping to life. “What?” she asked, shock taking over.

“At the very least,” Madison said, putting her hand in her pocket and clutching something, placing it into Payton’s gloved hand, “I want you to take this.”

Payton looked down at the tiny gift box in her hand. She lifted the lid to see a silver fob engraved with Madison's penthouse suite number.

"So you can come and go as you please," Madison said.

Payton lifted her gaze, her mind scrambling to catch up. This was a huge deal for Madison. Payton remembered Jen saying in London how long it had taken her to convince Madison to move in together. Years. And Madison was ready to take the leap with her just four months in?

Madison's eyes searched her own, and Payton realized she needed to say something. She didn't want Madison to think that Payton wasn't sure.

"Yes." Payton cleared her throat. "Yes," she said with more conviction, a smile coming to her lips. "God, I thought you were trying to put the brakes on this."

Madison's mouth fell open. "I can't blame you for thinking that. I know it's going to take more than a few weeks to get you to trust me. After the way I treated you in London."

"Hey, we're beyond that now." Payton put the lid on the box and slid it into her pocket with the fob still inside. "I just had this sinking feeling that this was too good to be true."

"I know," Madison said with a smile, her hand on Payton's cheek. "I have that thought just about every time I'm with you."

Payton leaned in, brushing her lips over Madison's, her nose cold against her own as the snow continued to fall all around them.

Payton pulled away, her arm around Madison's waist as they took in the empty ice-skating rink, the snow almost completely covering the surface now. The scraping of



skates and the upbeat Christmas music that had been here just a few hours ago was gone, a serene silence enveloping them now.

The night air was sharp and invigorating, flushing their cheeks as they stood side by side, taking in the stillness, the tree's lights reflecting back at them.

Payton's heart swelled as Madison leaned her head against her shoulder, and Payton turned to brush her lips against her hair.

She couldn't believe how much her life had changed in the last six months. So much had happened, and now things were somehow getting even better.

"Come back to mine?" Madison asked as she lifted her head.

Payton nodded, tilting her head to find her lips.

"Let's go," she said softly, and just as they turned to walk away, the lights switched off, the tree behind them dark.

Payton reached for Madison's hand, interlacing their gloved fingers, happier than she ever could have imagined being.