



Boss Daddy's Girl (Daddy's Girl #5)

Author: *Lena Little*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Drake

I've spent years scaling impossible heights, but nothing has prepared me for the challenge that is Ellie White. She's mouthy, sharp, and absolutely beautiful—a distraction I can't afford. But no matter how hard I try to ignore it, there's this pull between us, like gravity. Every time she walks into my office, I'm sure she hates me, and maybe I deserve it. I'm her boss, after all. But deep down, I know she's mine. The problem is, how do I convince her of that without pushing her away?

Ellie

Working for Drake Evans is like climbing a mountain without ropes—exhilarating but terrifying. He's gorgeous, famous, and more frustrating than anyone I've ever met. He's also my boss, so I have to keep my cool, even when all I want to do is throw caution to the wind and let him sweep me off my feet. But I'm not some lovestruck fool. I work hard to keep my distance and focus on my job. Then we arrive at the hotel for the climbing conference, and there's only one bed in the room. Just one bed. How am I supposed to resist him now?

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ELLIE

I really, really hate rock climbing. So, as I lie in bed, sliding my hand down the front of my panties with a picture of a rock climber on my phone screen is admittedly a little odd. Maybe even hypocritical.

Then add in the fact that this certain rock climber, Drake Evans, is my boss, and well, let's just say there's a whole lot to unpack here.

But what else am I supposed to do? It's only 9 PM, a relatively early bedtime for a 28-year-old, and I just can't seem to fall asleep. I've got to catch a flight tomorrow afternoon, and I need all the energy I can get to deal with Drake all weekend ... and to deal with how much he turns me on and pisses me off in equal shares.

Right now, though, he's not here to annoy the hell out of me, and the image of him coming off the cliffside this afternoon—shirtless and sweating, strolling towards me like I was his salvation—is fresh in my mind. Drake Evans is so gorgeous, so absurdly sexy, that it short-circuits my brain, making me forget myself.

I've seen his shirtless torso before. Of course, I have. I've worked for the man for over a year. And he's not the only rock climber I've seen without a shirt on. I've spent the last two years of my life as the personal assistant to the world's most famous (former) rock climber, and that means spending time around a lot of shirtless guys. None of them compare to Drake, though. Born in New Zealand, Drake moved to Denver, Colorado in his early 20s, already a rising star in the climbing world. He brought with

him a sexy accent and an attitude as large as the mountains he climbs.

It's just ... usually, I can handle it. But Drake is under my skin tonight, and I can't seem to shake him.

And I've been in the office too much. That's why this is happening. My brain is starved of endorphins, and that's the only reason why my boss' face is so firmly fixed in my mind. Not just his face, either. The way his fingers felt sliding over mine as he took the chilled smoothie from my hand, the pat on the cheek he gave me in thanks that should have been condescending, but coming from Drake gave me full body shivers.

It makes me forget that he had me drive all over town to find his favorite smoothie. It makes me forget the infuriating way he calls me "my girl". It makes me want him with a ferocity that I, still a virgin at 28, have never felt before.

But he's my boss, a world-famous athlete, and utterly demanding in all the worst ways. He is certainly NOT interested in me, his personal assistant.

This is just to take the edge off. If I can come looking at his picture, imagining his fingers instead of my own, maybe I won't be on the verge of hyperventilating every time I'm near him for the next few days.

I pull his social media page up again and scroll down to the bottom, where the oldest photos are. The casual ones are taken by friends, and his smile is genuine. I start with his body, taking in the strong lines of his legs, his powerful thighs. I scroll up, my gaze catching on his biceps, flexing as he holds himself on the cliff face.

Finally, my eyes find his face. He's mid-laugh, head thrown back, emerald eyes sparkling. His teeth are white, his smile wide. God, his smile. My breath catches in my throat, and I swallow hard.

Dropping the phone on the bed beside me, I let my eyes flutter closed, falling into the fantasy of "what if" from earlier today. In my fantasy, he doesn't take his long-anticipated drink and brush past me. Instead, he throws it aside, pins me against my car, and whispers in my ear, "I'm thirsty for something else."

One hand between my legs and the other sliding up to tweak my own nipple, I let the imaginary scene play out. In my head, Drake's fingers are under my skirt, rubbing the perfect spot, making my knees weak. He presses me harder against the car and takes a nipple into his mouth, sucking on it through the thin cotton of my shirt.

His hand slides into my underwear, and he lets out a low growl when he feels how wet I am.

"God, Ellie, I want you so bad. You're all I can think about," imaginary Drake murmurs. "Tell me you want this. I can't go another day without having you."

My fingers move faster, and my breath hitches as my imagination gives me a glimpse of what Drake would look like above me, his cock thrusting in and out, the muscles of his shoulders bunching and releasing as he pushes himself closer and closer to his orgasm.

I'm hot all over, slowly climbing the hill towards orgasm, my thoughts nothing but Drake, Drake, Drake. Pulling my hand out of my shirt, I grab my phone again, desperate for another look at him before I come. I'm almost there, teetering on the edge?—

And then a call comes in, blocking out the screen, the phone shrieking in my hand.

Drake. As if somehow, he knows exactly what I'm doing.

I gasp, my fingers slowing, my arousal draining out of me like a bucket with a hole

punched in the bottom. Fuck. I let the phone ring, and then silence falls again. It's quiet. And then it's not.

The phone rings again, and predictably, it's Drake. Feeling like I'm on the edge of tears, bizarrely nervous that he somehow knows I'm masturbating to his pictures, I answer. "Hello?"

"Ellie, my girl, how are you doing this fine evening?"

I close my eyes, suppressing a groan of frustration. "I'm trying to sleep, Mr. Evans."

"It's 9:15." He laughs, a deep, warm sound. "I'd like to think you can manage to stay awake for a few more minutes."

"Why are you calling me?" I ask. I've been working for Drake for the past year, and although he has no concept of leaving me alone after work hours, he rarely calls me at night.

"I need a favor. I know we're supposed to fly out at 3 PM tomorrow, but could you possibly get us an earlier flight? My old mate Chris is going to be at the conference, too, but he and a few other guys are going to climb Breaking the Wheel in Ogden before check-in. It should take three hours, tops, but we definitely need to fly out earlier."

I want to scream. This is classic Drake—almost impossible requests made at the last minute, with the full expectation that I can pull it off. Luckily for him, I'm excellent at what I do, and nine times out of ten, I do manage to make magic happen. This is just a flight change; it should be no different. Even if it is a pain in my ass.

"You want me to switch flights for tomorrow. Mr. Evans, you do realize you're sort of asking a lot?" I ask him, already knowing what his answer is going to be.

"Of course. But you can handle it, can't you? I know you can," he says smoothly. And then, as if the idea just occurred to him, he adds, "You could come out too, you know. The offer still stands."

Without even having to ask, I know the offer he's referencing—the standing offer to teach me to climb. I'm the opposite of an athlete, but I can't deny I've considered taking him up on the favor. I can picture it now, hanging from the cliffside with Drake's strong body behind me, his hands helping me position the gear. His arms encircling me as he guides me up the sheer surface. It's an intoxicating idea, but I'm not about to tell him that.

"Thanks, but no thanks. You're the climber, not me."

"I could teach you," he murmurs. "There's nothing quite like the view from on top."

Ignoring the double meaning of his words, I sigh. "Again, no. But I'll make the flight thing happen. Keep an eye out for your new ticket. And don't be late!"

I hear him laugh and roll my eyes. "That's my girl," he all but purrs, and I'm covered in goosebumps all over again. "Don't worry, I'll be there right when you need me to, Ellie. See you tomorrow."

"See you then." I hang up the phone and sit in front of my computer, trying to shake the thought of Drake Evans off before I start. I'm a professional, damn it. He's my boss, not my boyfriend. My brain, however, isn't hearing it, and the thoughts come unbidden even as I pull up the booking page.

"Damn you, Drake Evans."

Unsurprisingly, at 8:20 AM, I find myself repeating the same words from the previous night. This time, under my breath as I try to cram my carry-on in the

overhead bin.

"Damn you, Drake Evans..."

"What was that?" the man himself, seated already, asks.

"Nothing."

"Here, let me help you."

I try to finish the job myself before he can assist, but Drake is on his feet in seconds and using his excess height to easily put my luggage away. Drake takes the window seat, his long legs barely fitting in the small space. I take the center seat and pray that the aisle seat remains empty.

"I don't mean to tell you how to do your job, Ellie, but economy class? Really?" Drake has been annoyed all morning, and I get the feeling that he's sorely regretting his choice to fly out in the morning, not just because of the early hour but because he now has to face the consequences of his actions. Even if he's trying to push the blame on me.

I bristle at his tone. "We were comfortably in first class on the 3 o'clock flight, but it was you who wanted to switch. It's honestly a miracle that I was able to get us seats last minute at all, so yes, Mr. Evans. We're flying economy."

He looks at me with a sly grin. "Mr. Evans still? I thought we agreed that you'd call me Drake. We're friends, Ellie."

I bite back a sigh. "You're my boss, Mr. Evans."

He grins, and I know he's just messing with me. "I'd say I'm a lot more than that."

"I think you're mistaking me for the groupies you're used to. You can't just say things like that and expect me to melt for you. I'm a professional."

His hand rests on the armrest, just a breath away from mine. "I'm not talking to a professional. I'm talking to Ellie, my friend who is woefully bad at booking plane seats."

I roll my eyes. "If you're that offended, why don't you just take a private jet next time?"

Instead of scoffing, Drake looks thoughtful and pulls out his phone to make a note. "Now that's the best idea you've had all day. Certainly better than these abysmal seats."

"You're unbelievable." I'm about to turn away when Drake's hand brushes my hair, moving it from my face. I'm startled by the simple gesture and can feel heat creeping up my neck. I glance up and realize Drake has moved closer to me. "W-what are you doing?"

"Just a stray hair," Drake murmurs, his fingers still brushing the side of my neck. My cheeks flame, and I shift in my seat, leaning away.

"I can manage."

"Sure." Drake moves his hand back and settles into his seat, his leg brushing against mine.

"Can you..." I start, my voice trailing off. Drake turns his head, looking at me expectantly.

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

The cabin starts to fill up, and I'm getting a little queasy. It's so cramped and warm, and I don't enjoy flying even at the best of times. At least it's only an hour and a half to Salt Lake City, where the World Outdoor Climbing Conference is being held. My boss is apparently done talking, leaning back in his seat with his eyes closed. He doesn't even open them when someone loudly plops into the aisle seat next to me, bumping me with their elbow. Ugh. I should have just told him there were no flights this early.

Instead of giving in to my nerves, I sneak another look at my employer and feel my heart flip flop in my chest. God, he's so sexy. The former rockstar climber is currently wearing an expression of mild annoyance, which is pretty much his default expression when he's not smiling that devastating smile of his.

I've seen him use it to disarm many women, and it works every time. No one can resist Drake Evans, and he knows it. He's used that smile on me a few times. It always leaves me feeling breathless and a little dumb. The difference is that I've trained myself not to react when he aims it my way, and I know not to let it get to me. Not that he uses it on me all that often. Drake controls me via my admittedly amazing paycheck, not through his good looks.

I'm a bit of an anomaly, I suppose. I'm the only female assistant Drake has ever had and the only assistant to last more than two weeks. For all his charm, Drake isn't easy to work for. He's supremely confident, impulsive, stubborn, and has a tendency to disregard the needs of anyone but himself. When he was a world-class climber, those traits were necessary not just to succeed but to survive. But when Drake retired from climbing the biggest peaks after summiting Everest and started his own climbing gear company, he needed a right-hand man or woman to keep his wild ambition in check and ensure his company's success.

I wasn't Drake's first or even his third choice, but I'm the right person for the job. I'm organized, detail-oriented, and able to multitask. More importantly, I can keep up with him, whether he's climbing a wall or planning a press junket.

No one expected his company, Dragon Ascent, to take off the way that it did. But Drake was already a bit of a celebrity for having the face and body of a god and the talent to back it up. It gave the fledgling company the boost it needed to become the leading climbing gear company on the market. He has the experience to know what he wants out of the gear he sells, and he has the trust of other climbers.

Now, three years later, the company is worth millions.

That's why we're here. We're going to Salt Lake City for the World Outdoors Climbing Conference, an international conference where outdoor athletes and equipment companies come together. He'll give a talk, demonstrate his newest gear, and sign autographs. Meanwhile, I'll be running around, ensuring everything runs smoothly, keeping the schedule, and, most importantly, him on track.

He's intense, stubborn, and used to getting what he wants. He can be downright impossible.

He's also the hottest man on the planet, which adds an extra layer to the difficulty of working with him. Despite all of that, and the wild attraction I feel towards him, I've lasted a year as his assistant. Apparently, Drake likes me well enough, too, considering how many times he's told me I'm not allowed ever to quit.

I can't imagine life without him anymore, honestly. But I'll never tell him that.

There have been sparks between us, at least on my end, since the very beginning, but they were furious sparks at first. I found out about the job opening through a friend of mine and quickly applied for the position of Drake's assistant. I'd been bouncing

around from job to job after graduating from business school, and being the right-hand girl of the CEO of a new and wildly successful company seemed like a dream come true.

I got to the interview fifteen minutes early. Drake Evans, on the other hand, was sixty minutes late. I counted.

To add insult to injury, he was also carrying a bag of takeout sushi, which he seemed more than happy to eat in front of me as he conducted the sham of an interview—all the while staring at my bare legs encased in my favorite pinstripe pencil skirt.

When he finally did ask a question, it was inane, and I was so flustered by his behavior that I ended up telling him what an asshole he was. I was kicking myself for giving up the chance at a seemingly perfect job until the next day when an email appeared in my inbox, asking me to show up for work Monday morning.

In the year that followed, I got to know him better. I quickly discovered that Drake wasn't a total asshole but undeniably hard to please. He didn't want a yes man; he wanted someone who could hold her own and think on her feet. And I do, usually. We're a good fit for each other. I keep the chaotic, easily distracted, stubborn climber on track, and he keeps me on my toes. Sometimes, when he is being truly impossible, I don't mind the occasional "Yes, sir."

If I were a little braver, a little more self-assured, I'd even be open to a "Yes, sir. Harder."

The thought makes my face heat, and I raise my hands to cover my cheeks, accidentally knocking my elbow into the arm of the man in the aisle seat, who glares. Right. I need to remain as still as possible to get through the flight.

We planned our trip to the annual conference weeks ago. It's one of the biggest

events of the year in the industry. Dragon Ascent has a prominent booth, and the Dragon Ascent team has a schedule packed with appearances and workshops.

Drake Evans himself has a full schedule, too. I'm still not sure how much of it he's going to drag me along to, but I'm getting a hefty bonus just for coming and my own swanky hotel room. Plus, it's a chance to network and expand my skills.

I just need to make it through a one-and-a-half-hour flight and a week of Drake Evans.

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DRAKE

Climbing Breaking the Wheel should have been a breeze and a quick one at that. Instead, catching up with friends and an admittedly large amount of chit-chat made the short climb turn into a much longer one, and now I'm pretty sure Elanore White will strangle me.

If I'm lucky, she'll do the strangling with those gorgeous legs of hers, and I'll die a happy man.

Right now, though, she's sitting on the hood of the rented car, her legs crossed and a look of white-hot, unadulterated fury on her face.

She's so fucking hot when she's angry, and she doesn't even know it. I weigh the idea of telling her just to see how much angrier I can make her but decide against it. After all, I did fuck up this time. Not that I'd ever admit it.

"What happened to three hours?" she demands, hopping down from the hood of the sleek white Cadillac and stomping towards me. The group of my mates behind me hoot and holler, but I turn around and give them a look that silences them immediately.

"Time got away from us," I tell her. "It just happens sometimes. You should know this by now. You've been with me for, what, four months now?"

Ellie's eyes pop open even wider, her hands closing into fists. "I've worked with you for a year!"

I know that, of course, but I can't help but push her buttons. "Whatever. Let's get to the hotel."

"Drake, I've been waiting out here for two hours. They wouldn't let me check in without you, so I spent almost three hours there working in the cafe. Which, and I know this is difficult math for you, equals five entire hours I've been waiting for you! Three was pushing it, but five?!"

Walking towards her, I snatch the keys out of her hand and climb into the driver's seat. Adjusted to Ellie, the seat is claustrophobic incarnate. "Christ, Ellie, it's going to take me so long to adjust this seat we'll be here another five."

She's in the car before I finish talking and somehow manages to reach the controls on the seat, setting it perfectly for me.

"How did you?"

"I added a seat profile for you. I've had a lot of time to kill, Drake."

I start the engine and pull out of the parking lot, not responding. It's about forty minutes back to the hotel in Salt Lake City, and as fun as it is, I know I shouldn't wind her up if I'm going to be stuck in a car with her. I'm already fighting with enough feelings with her this close.

God, she is beautiful. Everything about her, from her cute little nose to her expressive sapphire eyes and lips that were made for kissing. Right now, her honey-blond curls are in a braid. It's a rarity for her to wear it down, but I've seen it in all its glory twice, and the memories are burned into my brain.

We get on the freeway and begin the drive, and soon enough, I can't take her silent anger anymore. "You don't have to be so dramatic," I say. "You didn't have plans until tomorrow, did you?"

Her eyes are still like fire when she glances at me. "I had a very important work call with a distributor. It's been on your calendar for weeks, Drake." I open my mouth to respond, but she holds up a hand to stop me. "Don't worry, I handled it. I just..." Ellie sighs heavily. "I just wish you'd let us check into the hotel before climbing so I wasn't stuck waiting on you."

"Well, that's why you're my assistant," I tell her, chuckling. "Without you, who would I have to pick up the slack?"

"Is that why you hired me?" Ellie asks, her voice a little less irritated. "Because I'd be so eager to clean up your messes?"

"Exactly," I confirm, a smile playing at the corner of my lips.

"I'm fired, then."

"Fired? Ellie, don't be silly. You're the best assistant I've ever had."

"Then it's too bad you've made a habit of scaring them all off."

"Well," I say, turning up the radio, "you're the first one that's lasted, and I'm not letting you go. So, tough luck."

She doesn't respond, and we're silent the rest of the drive. I can feel her annoyance and something else ... something more. She's not just angry. I want to ask her about it, but I'm sure she'd snap at me. I need to offer an olive branch, but Ellie is complicated. "Look, Ellie. I'll buy you whichever bottle of stupid, expensive wine

you want if you'll let me off the hook. I'm going to need you on my side this weekend, as you know."

It works. She turns to me, a little smile tugging on those sweet, tempting lips. "It better be a big bottle," she says.

"Whatever you want," I say, returning the grin.

When we get to the hotel, the staff is expecting us. We're painfully late, but I'm a big enough name that it shouldn't be a big deal. Ellie is walking ahead, checking her phone. I'm staring at her ass, unable to help myself. She finds what she's looking for on the device and shows it to the desk worker, who happily types on her keyboard for approximately three seconds before turning a strange shade of gray.

Ellie, always attentive, notices right away. "What's wrong with the reservations?"

"I, um..." Her eyes flicker to me, but Ellie isn't having it.

"I'm speaking to you, not Mr. Evans. What's wrong with the reservations?"

"Well, um, as you know, we are very busy with the convention going on, and all of the rooms are booked..."

"But we have reservations."

"So. Ah. You and Mr. Evans have a reservation. Singular."

"I'm sorry, what do you mean singular?"

"There is one room, miss. The honeymoon suite." She presses a button on her computer, and a little ding signals a printed piece of paper. She passes it over the

counter, a sheepish look on her face.

Ellie grabs the sheet, staring at the little picture of a white-covered king-sized bed.

"It's the only room left, and we will comp the room entirely, of course," the woman explains, looking over Ellie's shoulder.

"With one bed," Ellie says. "And I can't get a room for the night?"

She shakes her head, looking remorseful.

"What about the airport hotels?"

"All booked, unfortunately."

Ellie has gone white.

"Is that a problem, Ms. White?"

"No," she says, but the word sounds strangled.

I walk over, my eyes glued to the photo on the piece of paper, but Ellie is not done letting her displeasure be known. "This is unacceptable. Mr. Evans is one of the keynote speakers, how can a mistake like this happen?"

"It's fine," I cut in, smiling at the distraught desk clerk. "I'm sure we'll manage."

"I am so, so sorry. Of course, we'll be reimbursing you the cost of the entire weekend," the clerk continues, looking as if she's about to start crying.

"It's fine," I reassure her.

She still looks terrified, but Ellie finally nods, and I grab the keycard. "You don't have to bring any bags up; the bellhop will be happy to take them. And if there's anything you need, please let us know, and we will be happy to?—"

"Yes, thank you. That will be all," Ellie interrupts. She turns on her heel, and I'm forced to follow her, staring at her ass again, of course.

The elevator ride is silent. Ellie is leaning against the wall, trying her best not to look at me. She's nervous.

"It's not a big deal. Really, Ellie."

"We work together. It's ... unethical," she says, turning her gaze towards me.

I can't help but laugh. "Are you suggesting what I think you are?"

Ellie is red-faced. "No!" she yells. "I'm not. I don't want that. I just ... it's weird! We're both adults, and we work together, and this is just ... so ..."

"Strange," I supply. Exciting, I think, but I keep that thought to myself.

"Embarrassing," she counters. "But I guess it will be fine. We're going to be so busy I'm sure there will be minimal time in the room itself."

Her words are becoming a nervous babble, and I can't help but laugh. My sweet, brave Ellie being so shaken by sharing a room is almost hilarious.

"Don't worry," I say. "I'm a gentleman."

Her blush deepens, and she doesn't respond.

"Your silence is telling."

"Well, I didn't think you'd be happy if I called you a liar."

Ah, there she is. My witty, sarcastic spitfire of a girl. It's taking everything in me not to celebrate here and now, right in her face, the fact that we're sharing a room. I've hungered for this woman, in her sinfully tight pencil skirts and silky blouses that give me tantalizing peeks at her lacy lingerie, since the moment I laid eyes on her. That want morphed into a genuine, soul-shaking need when, during that first interview, she called me an asshole and stormed out. After dozens of interviews of would-be assistants bowing and scraping and nearly begging to kiss my ass, her fire was like a breath of fresh air.

But my Ellie is all professional, at least most of the time. It's all 'sir' this and 'Mr.Evans' that. I so rarely get to hear her say my name, and only usually when I've royally pissed her off, but damn, when I hear it roll off her tongue, I go hard as steel.

This must be karma for being such a stubborn prick my entire life—wanting the one woman on earth that I really should leave well enough alone.

The elevator dings at the top floor of the hotel, and it's time for us to face the music. A funeral dirge in Ellie's mind surely, but a romantic, sensual song in mine.

The convention is being held at the Salt Palace Convention Center, and the attached Regency Salt Hotel is a beauty even by my high standards. Funny that I'm fine sleeping in a tent on the side of a mountain at any time, but I have no patience for cheap lodgings when I'm playing the part of owner and CEO of Dragon Ascent. I might as well enjoy the perks of all my hard work.

The building is tall, all mirrored glass from the outside and luxury inside. It's packed with people in town from all over the world for the conference, which will be held in

the other part of the building. It's a new building, and it shows.

The honeymoon suite we've been accidentally booked into is a different story. It's clearly been built and decorated for amorous couples, and Ellie is blushing as I watch her take in the decor and the gigantic bed that dominates the main room. There's a roomy balcony with a hot tub, a separate sitting room, an oversized bathroom, and a fully stocked kitchen.

"It's beautiful," she sighs, wandering towards the windows.

I can't help but agree. It's her.

The first order of business is to take our things to the bedroom. And I'm going to enjoy every minute of watching her try not to react. It's done tastefully, with dark wood and cream colors, and the bed is large enough for a small orgy.

"I'll take the couch," I offer, smirking at her.

"No way! I'll sleep on the couch," she insists. "You're too tall!"

I shrug. "Too bad. You want first dibs on the shower?"

"Um, sure," she says, clearly flustered.

"Great. I'll be in after you." I set my backpack on the ground and walk towards her, crowding her into the room.

"But—"

I take her suitcase from her, setting it on the bed. "Ellie, it's fine. I'm used to sleeping on all kinds of surfaces."

"But it's not right," she argues, crossing her arms. "I should be the one to sleep on the couch."

I step closer to her, towering over her small frame. She swallows hard, her cheeks pink as she stares up at me, eyes wide. She smells like peaches, and I want to press my face against her neck and breathe her in.

"I won't take no for an answer." My voice is lower than I expected it to be, and she visibly shivers.

I turn away before I do something stupid, like pull her into my arms. I grab my duffel bag and shove it on the bed beside her suitcase, unzipping it quickly. "Go ahead and shower, El. I'll just get my stuff ready."

"Um, okay." She moves quickly, grabbing her toiletry bag and towel before escaping into the bathroom.

The second the door closes, I slump onto the bed. What am I doing? Why did I volunteer for this torture? It was bad enough before, being around her and trying not to make an ass of myself. But now we're in a room together, and I know I'm going to hear the shower running and think about her naked in there.

I run a hand over my face, groaning quietly. I need to get a grip. I can't risk our working relationship by being inappropriate. She deserves better than that.

I take out my phone and try to distract myself with work, but I can't focus. With nothing else to do, I close my eyes and lie back on the comforter, trying to meditate and block out the sound of her showering and ignoring the voice in my head screaming at me to stroke my cock and at least take the edge off this need. With my luck, she'll come out as soon as I start, and I'll be even more frustrated than before.

Ellie, Ellie, Ellie. What the hell am I going to do with you?

ELLIE

After an awkward two hours of moving around Drake in the hotel room, I finally feel fully human again. A shower and a fresh set of clothes restart my brain and let me consider the situation fully without all the emotions coursing through me earlier.

Okay. So, we're sharing a suite. A honeymoon suite. Not ideal but not the end of the world either. Like I told Drake before, we'll be so busy I'm sure we'll see very little of each other. Usually, Drake would have me attached to his side at all times, but he's got multiple events on the schedule where he will be all on his own, flaunting his charisma and charm to the masses.

I, on the other hand, will be working to keep him on track and keeping all the plates spinning behind the scenes. Sort of like what I do on a day-to-day basis, just at a much larger scale.

I can hear Drake finishing up in the bathroom and take a moment to sink onto the chaise across from the floor-to-ceiling windows. The sun is nearly set, and despite the general fatigue of the day, I can't deny that the view is beautiful. Salt Lake City is surrounded by the sort of natural majesty that has Drake going on and on for hours, but I rarely have the time to soak it in myself.

From the top of the hotel tower, I can see the city lights and, beyond them, the Wasatch Mountains that seem to stretch forever. I'm lost in the view and almost jump out of my skin when Drake comes up to the window beside me. I've been avoiding

looking directly at him since we got into the suite, and now that I do, I feel my heart stop.

He's showered and changed into a dark navy suit. His hair is damp, and the smell of his soap is warm and woodsy. I'm usually able to ignore just how good-looking he is during work hours, but right now, the sight of him is impossible to ignore.

He meets my eyes with a slight smirk, and I blush, knowing he's caught me staring. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" he says, and I'm relieved that he doesn't tease me about my little moment of reverie.

"It really is," I answer, looking back at the view.

"You've never had much of a chance to enjoy nature, have you?"

I laugh at that. "No, not really, which I guess is ironic considering who you are. I've had my hands full trying to keep up."

His smile widens into a grin. "It's your job to keep up with me."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, well, it would be nice if you made it easy for me every once in a while. Like maybe you could actually read your schedule for once?"

"My dear Ellie, that is exactly why I have an assistant. Now, believe it or not" —he sits on the chaise beside me— "I do remember that you said we have a mixer tonight, which is why you had this suit sat out for me, I assume. Are you ready to go?"

With a sigh, I look down at my own outfit. Business casual looks so much sexier on Drake than on me, but maybe that's because I'm dressing to blend into the background. As Drake's unofficial shadow, I try to be unnoticed most of the time.

Tonight, though, it's a little different. After a few glasses of wine, I packed my bags with an inflated sense of confidence. Instead of neutrals and pastels, I packed things to make me stand out. Jewel tones to set off my eyes, dresses that, while still appropriate for the events, hug me just a little tighter than usual, and strappy heels that make my legs look longer and shapely. Tonight I'm in a black high-necked sheath dress that stops just above my knee, but the slit in the back and the positively curve-hugging fit turn the basic into something much more daring.

It's not until Drake is in front of me, looking at me with an expression I've never seen on his face before, that I second-guess my decision.

"I should probably change, right?" I say, already making to step around him towards the closet. "This is way too much. I can?—"

Drake stops me with a hand on my arm, pulling me to my feet and closer to him. "Absolutely not. You look amazing. Don't let me tell you otherwise." His words are firm, and his voice deep.

My heart is thudding against my ribcage. The air feels electric around us. Drake is still holding my arm, and when I glance up at him, I see that he's staring at me, his gaze focused on my lips. I lick them without meaning to, and his eyes flicker up to mine, his expression intense.

I'm frozen. I know what's happening, and I want it so badly. It takes every bit of my willpower, and the undeniable fact that sleeping with my boss could cost me my job makes me take a few steps back. "O-okay, if you say so. Ready to go downstairs?"

Drake lets out a breath, his expression going back to neutral. "Sure. Let's go, Miss White." He stands, offering me his arm. I slip mine through his, and he leads me out of the room.

The elevator ride down to the ballroom floor is tense. Drake and I stand side by side, but he's pressed up against the wall, watching me. I can feel his gaze on my face, and my skin feels warm under the weight of it.

"What?" I ask, glancing up at him.

"Just wondering what's going on in that brain of yours," he says, smiling a little.

I let out a soft laugh, shaking my head. "Just thinking about what they're going to have to eat. I'm starving."

"I can guarantee it will not disappoint," Drake says as the elevator comes to a stop. "They always outdo themselves. Climbers like to eat. Last year, they had these mini egg rolls, which were great. I ate like twenty of them."

I smile at him. "I'll keep an eye out for those, then."

He gives me a smile in return as we step off the elevator. We head towards the ballroom, and he places a hand on the small of my back, guiding me through the crowd.

We get a few looks as we walk through the lobby, and I can't tell if it's because they recognize Drake or because they think we're together. Drake doesn't seem to care, though, and his confidence is contagious. I stand a little taller, letting myself enjoy being on the arm of a man like Drake Evans. With my hair slicked back into a low ponytail and my makeup fresh, finished off with a red lip, I don't feel totally out of place among what must be the elite of the climbing world.

The ballroom is packed, with dining tables dotted around the area and a long buffet table of small bites along the far wall. A bar is set up in the corner, with a bartender dressed all in black. The center of the room is empty, and I wonder if there will be

dancing later.

My stomach grumbles, and I turn to Drake. "I'm going to grab some food," I tell him, and he nods, looking over my head as he scans the crowd.

"Sounds good. I'm gonna go say hello to a few people."

I nod and head to the buffet, grabbing a plate and loading it up with everything interesting I can find. I see the famous egg rolls and drop five on my plate for Drake, turning to go find him. Despite the hundreds of people here, I know I will be able to pick him out easily. Drake has an aura that is bright and warm to me, drawing me to him like a moth to a flame.

He's about ten feet away, but I only make it a few steps toward him before I see who he's talking with—a group of gorgeous women, skin glowing and arms perfectly sculpted. More climbers. My smile falls from my face and I exhale slowly, turning around, disappointment burning me in. I shouldn't be surprised. This is what always happens when Drake is out in public. Even when people don't know who he is, he just oozes this magnetism that draws everyone to him, including all these fit, beautiful women.

I don't understand it, and I don't understand why I feel so jealous when I see it. It's not like he's mine. But a treacherous part of me really wishes he is.

I spot a tall, empty table in the corner of the ballroom and make a beeline for it, setting my plate down. Picking at my food turns out to be a disappointment, too—I'm sure it's all delicious, but every bite tastes like ash on my tongue.

"Quite an appetite, eh?" A French-accented voice asks.

Shaken out of my reverie, I look up to see a tall man I don't recognize leaning on the

standing table across from me. He's just a little shorter than Drake, with long blond hair pulled back from his face. He's pale, with a ruddiness to his skin that tells me he spends a lot of time outside.

I look down at my plate, towering with the food I planned to share with Drake, and groan internally. "Not really. I was supposed to share with someone but he's disappeared," I lie.

"What a fool. Let me help you. My name is Claude, by the way." He reaches across the table and shakes my hand. I notice his fingers are long and slender, and as he goes for a bite of food, I can't help but notice the all-too-familiar calluses on them. Another serious athlete, then, like Drake.

"I'm Ellie," I reply. I'm not sure why he's interested in me, but he seems friendly enough.

"A beautiful name for a beautiful woman," he replies with a smile. His name strikes a chord of familiarity in me, and I sort through what I know about the people at this conference.

Surprised, I stand up a little straighter. "Are you Claude Vanderhoven?" I ask. "You were a professional climber, but you became a documentary maker instead of a competitive climber?"

His eyes light up with delight. "I am. You've heard of me?"

I laugh a little, remembering. "No, but Drake has. I'm his assistant," I say. "He doesn't care much for cinema."

"Ah." Claude looks a little peeved but shakes it off. "Drake Evans is who you're referencing, then. It does not surprise me that he doesn't enjoy art. He has that

neanderthal air about him."

Choking on a bite of my food, I snatch a flute of champagne off a passing server tray and take a few gulps. "Um, not really," I say, coughing a little. I don't know why, but I feel a little defensive of Drake. He might be a pain in the ass, but he's my pain in the ass.

"I don't mean to offend you," Claude says, flashing me a charming smile. "I'm sure you find him a pleasure to work for."

Taking another bite of eggroll to avoid answering, my eyes find Drake in the crowd again, talking to a woman with a tight skirt and low-cut top. He's nodding along with whatever she's saying, and she's laughing and touching his arm. The eggroll sticks in my throat, and I think about how much I want to be in her place for just a moment.

Claude follows my gaze and scoffs. "Looks like your boss is busy at any rate. Come, let me introduce you to my film crew. No one as lovely as you deserve to be alone."

"Oh," I say, unsure what to say. I'm not sure if he's being flirtatious, but I can't think of a way to make a smooth exit. "That sounds nice." Claude comes around the table, taking my hand and leading me through the crowd to where other people gather.

He turns out to be very good company. Claude has his film crew in stitches and even manages to make me laugh, even if I feel off-balance and out of place.

Now that I've entered the chaos of the mixer, though, I notice that I'm not nearly as invisible as I thought I was. People come and go from our little group, entering conversations and asking me thoughtful questions that have me forgetting my angst over my boss. Everyone is shocked I've never climbed, and they're obviously dying to ask me questions about Drake. Those questions I brush off, making it clear that I won't be discussing my high-profile employer.

It's been quite some time since I've had to socialize like this, but I find myself easily falling back into the swing of things, recalling parties in college and the endless networking events I had to attend once I graduated. Over an hour passes before I see a flash of navy out of the corner of my eye and turn to see Drake heading our direction.

His expression is odd. He looks angry but in a subtle, almost predatory way. When he reaches our little gathering, he all but shoulders the man next to me out of the way and slides his arm around my waist.

"I've been looking for you." His voice is gruff and low, rolling over me. His hand is tight on my hip, and when I look up at him in confusion, he just smirks at me and turns to Claude. "I don't believe we've met. Drake Evans."

"Claude Vanderhoven," the man says, holding out his hand.

They shake hands, but Drake's gaze doesn't leave my face. He's being so odd, the heat radiating off him. I can smell his cologne, familiar and expensive, and it makes my head feel a bit dizzy. I need to get some water.

"Your lovely assistant was telling me that you weren't the biggest fan of my work." There's amusement in Claude's voice, but it sounds fake to me.

"It seems like an acquired taste," Drake says.

I'm too shocked to do anything but stare up at him. His smile is sharp, and he looks every inch the cocky rake that he is. Claude clears his throat, obviously offended.

"I think your film is very touching," I blurt. "I haven't seen it, but I read about it in a magazine."

Claude beams at me and gives a self-deprecating little shrug. "A magazine, really?" he says. "Well, that is quite the compliment."

Drake's hand is burning into my hip. He hasn't tightened his grip at all, but he feels like a forge standing next to me. "I'm going to go get a drink," I say, feeling flustered. "Anyone need anything?"

No one does, so I turn and walk away, acutely aware of Drake following me.

I beeline to the bar, getting in line behind several other people. I'm still reeling, and it's all I can do to not whirl around and demand that Drake tell me what the hell he thinks he's doing.

When we reach the front, Drake orders a bourbon, neat. I order a glass of water.

He raises an eyebrow at me. "Nothing stronger?" he asks, nodding to my glass.

"I'm on the clock," I say, trying to sound snippy. But I'm too confused to manage it. "You should know that."

The bartender hands me a tall glass of ice water. I take a big gulp.

"What the hell was that?" I demand after I've banished the dryness in my throat.

Drake, unsurprisingly, ignores my question and asks one of his own. "Have fun with your new little friend group?"

I scoff. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The little Frenchman. He seemed very eager to spend time with you."

I'm getting irritated. I'm so tired of Drake acting like he didn't have a gaggle of girls hanging off him all night. "He was nice, and we had a conversation. That's it. I thought we were here for networking."

"We are," he says. "But we don't need to network with him."

I don't know why Drake has such a problem with Claude, and right now, I don't really care. "Well, did you have fun with your fan club? I think you've got a few girls who'll be up all night wondering if you're going to call them."

"I'm not interested in any of them," he says, his voice low and rough.

I roll my eyes. "Right. Whatever you say, Drake."

He downs his bourbon in one gulp, eyes blazing, body angled towards mine. The same electricity from earlier in the suite rises between us again, and it makes my breath catch in my lungs. "Stay with me tonight."

Now, I definitely can't breathe. "W-what do you mean?"

Drake looks around, and there is Claude halfway across the room. He's watching us, and when he catches Drake's eye, he smirks and raises his own drink in acknowledgment. When Drake looks back at me, his jaw is tight. "How about a bonus, Ellie? \$1,000 if you don't leave my side for the rest of this bullshit event. Not as my assistant but as my date. What do you say?"

He's trying to get a rise out of me. I know it. And it's working. I'm so irritated, and I want so badly to tell him to shove his money up his ass. But then he says, "Ellie, please."

And something inside me softens. Maybe it's the way he says my name. Maybe it's

the look on his face. I can't be sure. All I know is that I'm not leaving his side tonight.

Plus, \$1,000 to be on the arm of the man I want anyway is a hell of a deal.

"Okay," I say. "I'll stay. But you're going to be on your best behavior, Drake. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am." He gives me a wicked smile. "Whatever you say."

"Good. And you owe me \$1,000."

He chuckles and pulls out his phone. "Yes, of course. I'm positive you'll be worth it, even if you are a little too eager to drain me dry."

It's my turn to chuckle. "Oh, poor Drake. What a tragedy to be rich and famous."

He glances up from his phone, lips twitching. "You should know I've got a lot of expenses."

"Such as?"

"For one, I pay you a shitload of money to be my assistant. If you quit, I'd be completely screwed." He finishes the transfer and looks at me, green eyes full of mischief.

"If you're expecting empathy from me because of my salary, you're dreaming." I nudge him with my shoulder. "Now, show me how Drake Evans treats his dates. We've got two more hours until this thing is over."

A smirk touches his mouth. "Oh, Ellie. You have no idea what you just asked for."

I raise my brows and take a sip of my drink, determined not to show how excited I am at his words.

His hand slides to my waist, pulling me close. Immediately, I can feel the difference in our interaction, the intimacy in his touch that wasn't there before. It feels like everyone in the room is staring at us, but I don't care. "Let's get to mingling, sweet Ellie. I've paid a pretty penny to show you off."

I roll my eyes, trying to ignore the way my stomach flips when he says my name. "You're so annoying."

It's not a lie. Drake is annoying. But being on his arm as he moves through the crowd, shaking hands and making connections with the most powerful people in attendance, makes up for the annoyance. He introduces me like I'm royalty, the word "assistant" never being uttered once.

This is a game, and I'm having fun. The night is going well. We laugh and joke with the other guests, and Drake's hand never leaves my body in any fashion for long, always on my hip or linking his fingers with mine. He treats me like something precious, and it's addicting. I like being on display. Even better, I like how people react when they see us together. They're surprised, to say the least. And if I'm being honest, a little jealous. I wonder if they think Drake is off the market now. The thought makes me giggle.

Drake turns to me, raising an eyebrow. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I say, "Just enjoying myself."

He opens his mouth to say something, but then his gaze catches on something over my shoulder, and his expression falls. I try to turn around to look, but Drake holds me in place. When I meet his eye, he hisses, "Don't look, but Kate Nott is here. How in

the hell did she get a ticket?!"

My mirth flees at his words. Kate Nott is what people call a 'super fan'. In my opinion, 'stalker' is much more fitting. She comes to every event Drake attends and does her damndest to run into him in public, too. Kate is obsessed in the worst way possible. In her mind, Drake is her soulmate, and nothing will stand in her way.

"Quick." His hand flies up to cup my face while his other hand pulls our bodies together. "Kiss me so she'll leave."

I have less than a second to process his words before my mouth blurts, "Okay."

I barely have time to blink before his lips are on mine. Drake is kissing me, and I'm standing frozen, eyes wide in shock. His mouth is hot and insistent, his body so close I can feel his heart beating. I'm stunned, but after a few moments, my hands reach up to tangle in his shirt. The kiss deepens, Drake's tongue running across my bottom lip. A groan escapes him, and I'm sure I'm about to go up in flames.

Eyes fluttering shut, a little whimper escapes my throat. I've wanted this for so long, and it's better than I ever could have imagined. Kissing him feels like falling, but the best kind. The kind where you know someone will catch you.

This could go on forever, and I'd be happy, but our location is suddenly brought back to my attention when someone yells, "Get a room!"

My eyes fly open, and I see Drake glaring at the man who spoke. His jaw is clenched tight, but when he glances over my shoulder again, he relaxes. "Good. She's gone."

Oh, that's right. We were kissing to get rid of Kate. Not because of some pent-up sexual tension between us that has been growing minute by minute. When his lips touched mine, my brain forgot about Kate Nott, mixers, or even the convention.

I feel like a fool.

But that didn't feel like a kiss for show. Not even close. The passion, the desperation. That didn't come from nowhere.

Pulling away from him, I meet his eyes. He's staring at me like I'm a puzzle he can't quite figure out. My breath catches in my throat. This is it. A question rises in my mind, but my lips refuse to form the words. I can't bring myself to ask what this means.

Luckily, I don't have to. Another one of Drake's acquaintances, this one drunk, comes from behind him and slaps him on the shoulder, dragging him away from me and into a conversation I don't even bother to pay attention to. Feeling lost, I start to step away, wanting to just go back to the room, but Drake's hand reaches out and twines his fingers with mine. It stops me in my tracks.

This simple touch says, 'I'm here. Stay with me.'

So I do.

When the mixer starts to wind down, he keeps his hand linked with mine, and we head towards the elevators. I'm exhausted, but the second the elevator doors slide closed in front of us, that exhaustion evaporates and turns into something else entirely. It's just Drake and me in this small space, holding hands, the very recent memory of our kiss making my lips tingle.

He doesn't break eye contact as he pushes the button for our floor, and the elevator lurches into action.

"That went ... well," I offer, wondering which of us is supposed to pull our hands away first.

"Well enough anyway," he agrees. "I think we scared Kate off pretty good."

I smile at that. "Good. Maybe she'll finally get the hint."

I've said too much. His eyes flick down to mine, and my stomach swoops.

"Good, eh?" he repeats slowly, a hint of a smile on his lips. "I'll have to improve my technique if that's all the praise I'm getting from you."

The elevator doors open, and he steps out, tugging me behind him. I'm grateful for the cool air in the hallway. It chases some of the fog from my head, making it a little easier to think. He leads me to our door and fishes out the key card. My eyes linger on the place where his shirt gapes open, giving me a glimpse of his chest. He catches me staring, and my face heats.

"You're being awfully quiet," he observes, his eyes darkening.

"I don't have anything to say."

He pushes the door open and gestures for me to go ahead. "That's not true. You always have something to say."

I don't have a comeback for that. He's right. But I don't have anything to say now because I'm so distracted by his presence. It feels like the air is charged, like anything could happen in here, and the thought fills me with anticipation.

I kick off my heels, my back to him. I'm trying to find some semblance of control again. Then we're face to face with the single bed in the room, and I'm struggling to catch my breath again.

"I'll take the couch," he says after a moment, his voice low.

I nod, looking down at my feet, suddenly shy. I feel the heat of his body as he comes closer. He hooks a finger under my chin and tilts my head up. When our eyes meet, my knees go weak.

"Thank you for tonight, Ellie." His voice is soft, a contrast to his rough appearance. "You really saved my ass."

"Anytime," I whisper, trying to mean it.

He leans down to kiss me on the cheek, and my eyes flutter shut. I turn my head at the last second so his lips graze mine instead. His breath hitches, and my heart starts pounding so loudly I'm sure he can hear it.

We're frozen for a long moment, eyes locked. Then he's kissing me, his hands cupping my jaw, tilting my head back. His touch is gentle, but his kiss is rough. My stomach tightens.

It's just a kiss. It doesn't mean anything, I try to tell myself. But then his tongue slips between my lips, and my mind goes blank.

I've never been kissed like this before. He kisses me like he needs it. Like he can't get enough of me. It's thrilling. I reach up, knotting my hands in his shirt and holding him against me. His body is hard and warm, and when I run my hands down his chest, his muscles ripple under my palms.

My hands drift lower, exploring the ridges of his abs as I work the buttons open. I'm so distracted by the feel of him that I don't notice he's walking us backward until my knees hit the bed. Then we're falling. He breaks the kiss and looks down at me, his breathing ragged.

"Ellie, I..." His voice is hoarse. His eyes are so dark that they almost look black. He

trails off, shaking his head.

"What?" I ask breathlessly. I reach up to smooth his messy hair away from his forehead, but he catches my hand.

"Don't start something you can't finish."

My stomach tightens. Is that what I'm doing? I don't even know. All I know is that I want him. I want more of him.

"I'm not a quitter," I whisper.

He stares at me and then groans. "Fuck."

He kisses me again, rough and fierce, making my toes curl. His hands roam down my body, squeezing and cupping, and then he grips my thighs and pulls me closer so that he's settled between my legs. He's already hard, and I gasp at the feel of him pressing against me.

His kiss grows hungrier, and I can't get enough of him. My hands slide under his shirt, desperate to feel his bare skin. My fingers ghost over the ridges of his abs and his chest. There is not an inch of his perfect body that isn't muscled and toned from the hours and hours on rock walls, and finally, getting to touch what I've only been able to stare at is such a sweet relief. Drake groans at my touch, giving me the slightest shiver as I stroke his bronzed skin, and it makes me feel powerful.

He breaks the kiss and starts to kiss down my neck, and I arch against him, my breath catching. He growls, his hands gripping my hips, and he pushes up my skirt. I gasp as his fingers brush my thigh.

Alarm bells are going off somewhere deep in my psyche, but I'm doing everything I

can to ignore them. This is what I've been craving for so long, and I'm afraid if I hesitate even a little that it's all going to fall apart in my hands. But as Drake shrugs his shirt and suit jacket off and his hands get more insistent, the bells in my head go from ringing to screaming.

You have to tell him you're a virgin! the alarms yell. Virgin! You're a virgin!

Dammit. I am, aren't I? I'm buzzing from the high of being the center of Drake Evan's attention so much that I briefly consider keeping that embarrassing secret to myself, but the thought of lying to him hurts my stomach.

Dammit.

"Drake," I gasp, putting my hands on the hot skin of his bare shoulders and pushing him back just enough to break the contact between us. "Wait. Please."

Drake stops immediately, hands twitching with the need to touch, but his iron willpower wins over easily. He gazes down at me, eyes dark, concerned.

"Ellie? What is it?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

I nod. "I'm okay. I just ... I have to tell you something."

His eyes narrow. "What?"

I take a deep breath. My heart is pounding in my ears. I don't know why I'm so nervous about this. I mean, so I'm a virgin. It's not that big a deal. Except, oh God, this is so embarrassing. How do I even bring this up? I've never had to before.

"Just tell me," Drake says, his voice gruff. "Is this about Claude? That asshole is a complete moron. If he tried something?—"

"No, it's not about Claude," I say quickly. "It's just ... okay. So, the thing is..." God, this is hard. I wish I could crawl into a hole and die. I can't believe I have to explain this to my boss. I can't believe I'm doing this at all.

I can't believe that this could be my first time.

"Ellie..." Drake says, his brows furrowing.

"Okay, okay." I take a deep breath. Just rip the Band-Aid off. "The thing is, I'm a virgin."

He blinks at me. "What?"

I wince. "I'm a virgin. As in, I've never done anything. I'm a twenty-eight-year-old virgin."

His eyes widen, and his hands flex at his sides. "Are you serious?"

I nod. "Dead serious. I know it's weird and awkward and I'm sorry, but I just ... I felt like I had to tell you, you know? Like, it would be even weirder to just be like, 'Hey, by the way, I'm a virgin' when we're both totally naked or something. So I wanted to tell you now. So that you could decide if this is something you want to do. I know it's kind of a lot, and I'm really sorry to put this on you, but yeah." I look down, unable to meet his gaze. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Drake says, his voice rough. "You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm just surprised."

"I get it," I say, still unable to look at him. "It's fine. It doesn't matter, right? I mean, you're still going to kiss me, right?"

Drake chuckles, his breath hot against my cheek. "You're damn right. I'm going to kiss you." He sinks his teeth into the tendon between my neck and shoulder, just enough to make my entire body shudder in pleasure. "And it does matter, my sweet girl. It's the best damn news I've ever heard. You have no idea how happy that makes me."

I frown. "It does?"

He pulls back just far enough to meet my gaze, his eyes bright with desire. "Of course it does. To know that I'm the first man to touch you like this. Fuck, Ellie, you have no idea what that does to me."

I swallow hard. My mouth feels dry, my pulse thudding in my ears. "Wow, that's just not what I was expecting."

His smile is gentle, and I know I might sound like some kind of nervous, flighty girl to him, but for as cocky as Drake is, he's so patient with me right now it makes my heart lurch in my chest. "If you want this, then it's not going to change anything, Ellie." He leans down and presses a kiss to my cheek, my jaw, and the side of my throat, and I shiver at the sensation of his lips on my skin. "I'm going to make it so good for you," he murmurs, and I feel his teeth graze the fluttering pulse on my neck. "I'm going to take my time."

And he does.

Drake pushes my skirt up to my hips and drags his hand up the inside of my thigh, and I can feel my body reacting, my pussy clenching and getting wetter with every passing second. He groans against my lips when he reaches my center and feels my soaked panties, his fingers teasing me through the fabric. "So wet for me," he whispers. "My sweet girl is so wet."

"Drake," I whimper. "Please."

He chuckles darkly. "Oh, you don't have to beg," he says, his fingers pushing my panties aside and slipping into my folds. "I'm going to give you everything you want."

His fingers tease my clit, making my hips buck and my breath hitch. His thumb presses down on my clit while he slides two fingers inside of me, and my entire body tenses, pleasure coursing through me. I can feel myself tighten around his fingers, my body squeezing his touch, and he groans against my lips.

There's a tiny bit of pain from the stretch, and then it's gone as soon as it arrives, washed away in the absolute enormity of everything Drake is making me feel. I huff in frustration when his hand pulls away from my pussy, but then he moves down my body.

Drake's lips are on my collarbone, hands slipping the straps of my dress down my shoulders until I'm bare for him from the waist up. A string of curses leaves his lips as he sees my black lace bra, my nipples hard and visible through the fabric. His hands slide under my back, and he kisses my skin as he undoes my bra. I arch my back, giving him better access, and he growls low in his throat when the bra slips off, and my breasts are revealed to him.

"So fucking gorgeous," he whispers. His lips graze the curve of my breast, and his hand is hot and hard as it cups me, fingers teasing my nipple and making me gasp. "I've dreamed of seeing you like this for so long."

"Me too," I breathe. My hands move up to grip his hair. "Touch me, Drake. Please."

He smirks at me, the expression feral and full of desire. "Watching you walk around the office in those short skirts, your hair falling around your face while you type at

your computer, bent over and just begging for me to fuck you..."

Any other time, his words would be enough to make me melt into a puddle of need, but the reminder that we are employer and employee is unwelcome right now. He must sense me stiffen because Drake looks up at me, considering.

"You don't like that, do you? Thinking about who we are to each other outside of this bed."

I shake my head.

"Then let me be someone else for you, sweet Ellie." His voice lowers into a growl that I've never heard before. Can this really be my Drake, the arrogant, always-grinning Drake Evans? "Here, when we're together like this, you can call me Daddy."

My lips part, and I can feel myself flush. He's watching me closely, waiting for a response. What should feel taboo just feels ... right. It's a pattern my lust-addled brain is starting to notice—everything with Drake feels easy. Feels right. If he wants to take care of me, give me everything here in bed together, to be Daddy to me, I can do that. I trust him. "Okay, Daddy," I finally breathe.

Drake's eyes flutter closed. When they open again, they're almost black with desire. "Fuck," he growls. "Say that again, baby girl."

"Daddy." I grin, liking the sound of that on my tongue. "You like that?"

"I love it."

"Good." I run my hands through his hair. "Now, why don't you take these off me so you can get better acquainted with what's underneath?"

Drake groans. "Yes, baby girl."

I like that nickname, too.

He kisses me again and slides my dress down my body, leaving me in nothing but my black lace panties. The cool air of the room hits my bare skin, and I feel flush, on display. Drake stands, his eyes raking over every inch of my body.

"Holy shit," he breathes. "You're perfect." He cups my breasts, and his hands feel rough and perfect against my soft skin. "I've thought about this for so long," he whispers, dropping to his knees so he can lick my nipples.

"How long?" I whisper, the words clipped when his tongue swirls around the tips of my breasts, the sensation going straight to my core.

"Too fucking long." He smirks. "Sit up for me, Ellie, and spread those perfect fucking legs. It's time for Daddy to show you how good it can be."

"Yes, Drake."

"Daddy."

"Yes, Daddy."

"Fuck," he growls. "You don't even know what you do to me."

Slowly, he moves down until his hands are on my knees, his mouth leaving a searing line of kisses past my belly button. Lower until his lips meet my mound, still covered by my panties.

"Mmm, I think I'd like to see you wet for me. Let's see how soaked your perfect little

cunt is for me, baby girl."

My heart pounds, and I watch him, eyes wide, as he hooks his thumbs under the waistband of my panties and slides them down my legs. He brings them to his face and inhales, groaning when he breathes in my scent.

"Drake," I whisper, shocked.

"Don't worry, Ellie." He grins, tossing my panties aside. "I'm just getting started." He cups my pussy again, spreading my legs wide. "Look at you. My perfect little baby girl. Do you want me to eat you out?"

Hearing those words from Drake's mouth rocks me, lust roaring through me so hard that my head spins. "Oh God, are you really asking me that? Please, please."

He smirks. "Please who?"

"Please, Daddy."

I feel so exposed, so vulnerable, but I couldn't turn back now even if I wanted to. And oh, I definitely don't want to. This is what I've been dreaming of. When he looks back up at me, he grins, and that expression is one I recognize. It puts me back on solid ground.

He drops down, his shoulders spreading my legs wide. My heart pounds, and I can barely catch my breath. My pussy clenches around nothing, desperate for him. Drake looks up at me, his green eyes sparkling with mischief and desire.

He dips down and presses his lips to my inner thigh, kissing a trail up to my mound. I gasp, and he chuckles, the vibrations making me tremble. "Fuck, you're cute."

"Drake," I whisper.

"I'll take care of you, Ellie." He slides his tongue over my folds, his hot breath sending a shiver through my body.

Then he pushes my legs up and dives in. His mouth moves over my pussy, his tongue sliding between my folds, teasing my entrance and my clit. He's not gentle but thorough, mapping every bit of me with his lips and tongue. He's demanding. Dominating.

It's everything I've always wanted.

"You're so wet for me, Ellie. Such a good girl for Daddy."

It feels so good, so mind-numbingly incredible that I struggle to even speak. It's like I lost all language as soon as his mouth was on me. "Yes, Daddy. Please don't stop."

He chuckles against my skin, and the vibrations make me shudder. "I'm just getting started." He slides his fingers through my slickness, circling my clit.

"Oh!"

He rubs me slowly, his gaze on me the entire time. I'm so wet. I'm so fucking wet. And he knows it. "I'm going to make you come so hard, Ellie. I want to know what your face looks like when you come. I want to know the sounds you're going to make for me and only me."

"Say it," he orders, sliding a finger into my hole. "Tell me what you want."

"I want to come, Daddy."

"How?"

"With your mouth on me." I'm so embarrassed, but he groans, kissing my thigh.

"Such a good girl for Daddy. So polite." Drake chuckles, dragging his tongue up my entire pussy and making me cry out before telling me, "I'm going to remember this next time you're yelling at me with that smart mouth of yours."

He dips back down and licks my slit, spreading me open with his fingers and sliding his tongue through my folds, teasing my entrance, my clit, my sensitive skin. He sucks my clit into his mouth, and I cry out. It feels so good, so intense.

"Daddy!"

"That's it, Ellie. Come for me. I want you to come all over my face."

He pushes a finger inside me, and I whimper. He adds another finger and crooks them inside me, stroking my G-spot. He continues to lick me, sucking on my clit, flicking it with his tongue. He's relentless, and the pleasure builds so fast, it's overwhelming. I cry out as my body starts to shake.

My orgasm takes me off guard, my back arching and my hands flying to grip his head as I hold on for dear life. Pleasure ripples through me, leaving me shaking and gasping for air, and I chant his name as I ride it out on his tongue.

When I finally start to come down from the high of it all, Drake kicks off his pants and climbs into bed with me. His cock strains against his black briefs, but instead of climbing over me like I expect, he takes me into his arms and buries his face in my neck, breathing me in.

"Ellie, Ellie," he sighs. "God, you're incredible. Just let me hold you."

I melt, feeling like I'm going to burst into tears at any second, my emotions swinging like a pendulum from rapturous pleasure to the demanding need to just be comforted, cherished. This is everything I've wanted for so long. Being held by him, being taken care of by him. The knowledge of it hits me hard—lust is one thing, but I've been denying the truth of how I really feel. How wrapped up my emotions are in this man after a year of being by his side constantly.

Drake pulls back enough to see my face, looking into my heavy eyes as the intensity of what I just experienced sucks all the energy out of me. He brushes my hair from my face, gently kissing the corner of my mouth and my forehead. "Sleep, sweet girl. That's enough for tonight."

He turns off the bedside lamp and pulls the covers over us. I know I should get up, go to the couch, and pretend like this was just oral sex and not the earth-shaking experience it really was, but he wraps his arms around me and pulls me close again. Bare skin to bare skin, his heart beating next to mine—it's almost much too sweet to bear. His lips brush the back of my neck.

"Goodnight, Ellie."

I close my eyes, unable to resist the call of sleep. "Goodnight, Drake."

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4

ELLIE

Saturday morning dawns bright and unavoidable through the tall windows of the hotel room. Eyes still closed, I curse my last-night self for not having the wherewithal to close the curtains before going to sleep.

But then I remember why I didn't have any wherewithal. Or sense. Or, as my currently naked body suggests, reservations.

Oh. Drake went down on me last night, and I fell asleep in his arms. And now he's gone.

I sit up and look around, and it's obvious he's left. I don't know what to think. Did he regret everything? Was it a mistake? Did he feel trapped by the one-bed situation and have to bolt?

I get up, my body sore and tired, my eyes feeling like they've got sand in them. I go to the bathroom and stare at myself in the mirror. My hair is a mess, my lips are puffy, and I have a hickey on my neck.

A hickey.

God, I'm an idiot.

I get in the shower and scrub myself raw, wishing I could do the same to my

emotions. I tell myself that Drake probably has women all over the world waiting for him to call and that I should just forget last night ever happened. The least he could have done was wait for me to wake up or tell me himself that he was leaving.

Would I feel any differently if he had still been sleeping by my side when I woke up?
Would I regret anything then?

It's a sobering thought to realize that, no, I wouldn't regret it. Because even with him being gone, I still don't. I wanted Drake and took the chance that was offered to me. And if his enthusiasm last night was any indication, he wanted me too just as badly.

Things might be a little screwed up now or a lot—time will tell. But I'm not going to live with regrets, either.

Slowly, the sinking feeling I woke up with fades, replaced by something warm and even a little bit happy. I can't avoid the fallout of what Drake and I have done, but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy the memory of it. And who knows, maybe he'll be cool about it, and our work relationship won't have to change.

Even if it breaks my heart a little to know that my employer is all Drake will ever be to me. Last night taught me a lot of things about myself, but the most staggering one is that I don't just want to jump Drake Evan's bones—I want him in every way. He's important to me, and I care about him deeply. I want that to be mutual so badly that it hurts.

Getting out of the shower, I dry off and wrap one of the hotel's fluffy white robes around me before exiting the bathroom. As soon as I open the door, I'm greeted by the scent of coffee and the sight of Drake sitting on the edge of the bed with what looks like breakfast.

"Morning, sunshine," he greets, standing to bring me a steaming cardboard cup.

"Sleep well?"

I blush, but thankfully, the heat of the shower has already turned my skin pink, so hopefully, he can't tell. "Uh, yeah. I did."

"Good. We've got a busy day according to the schedule you've sent me no less than five times, so I figured I could feed you before we got started."

Confusion and the urge to touch him war with each other, but I end up just taking the cup from his hand and following him to the small dining table in the other part of the suite. He unrolls the paper bag and pulls out a small spread of bagels and cream cheese, a fruit bowl, and two small carafes of orange juice and milk.

It's not much, but it's thoughtful and definitely more than I expected. He must have seen the surprise on my face because he grins, taking the seat across from me.

"I'm not totally useless, you know. I can get takeout breakfast."

"It's just surprising, is all." I sit down and pick up one of the bagels. "Thank you for getting me coffee, too. I'm going to need it today."

He snorts, taking a bite of his own bagel. "Tell me about it. The itinerary you sent me is insane. I've had to rearrange everything and delegate half of it to the sales team."

I flush and shrug. "It's the job. You have to go to all of these things, Drake. I know it's annoying, but you're the star of the show here, and you need to do what you can to make sure Dragon Ascent's brand stays relevant."

He grunts in agreement, biting into his bagel. Drake often eats with a single-minded intent, and this morning is no different. I keep waiting for him to mention last night or reach across the table to take my hand—anything to acknowledge that something

huge has changed between us.

But he doesn't. This feels like any other morning with Drake Evans, my boss. It hurts, even if I know it shouldn't. He never made me any promises or even said anything to insinuate that our relationship is different now.

We finish breakfast, and Drake dusts his hands off, telling me, "Better go change unless you're working in just a robe today." He gives me a lopsided smirk. "I wouldn't complain, but I know how much you like to keep things professional."

It's as close to a mention of our previous night's activities as I will get. Shooting him an eye roll to cover up how shaken I still am by everything, I do as I'm told and go get ready for the day. It's going to be busy enough that I shouldn't even have time to think about Drake's dark head between my legs and the feeling of falling asleep in his arms. At least, I hope so.

Downstairs, the convention is in full swing.

The part of the hotel designated as a convention center is huge and new, and the event planners have gone all out. There are dozens of booths set up in the main lobby, each with its own color scheme and carefully curated theme. Several climbing walls have been set up along the sides of the room, and as Drake and I walk through, everyone is trying to get his attention. It's nothing new, and he handles it like a pro.

Drake looks fantastic in a suit, but today, he's dressed in the gear that fits him most naturally. He looks every inch the record-breaking climber, decked out from head to toe in Dragon Ascent gear.

Knowing that I will be walking all day but still wanting to impress the man next to me despite my reservations, I'm wearing a black pencil skirt and a silky cream blouse. My heels are low but strappy. I sigh, mentally preparing for the day ahead.

During a lull in the crowd, Drake reaches over and wraps one of my blond curls around his fingers. "You should wear your hair down more often."

His words send a flush through my body. I reach up to touch my hair, tucking it behind my ear self-consciously. "I, uh..."

Before I can get any words out, Drake gets distracted by someone he recognizes. He waves to them, and we head toward the other side of the lobby. I try to follow, but I feel his hand slide from my back to my butt.

I shoot him a glare, but he doesn't even look at me.

He has no idea what he does to me.

I should be used to it by now, but that doesn't stop the ache between my legs. Drake is the most attractive man I have ever met, and his touches don't help my resolve.

We head for the Dragon Ascent display booth, the largest at the convention. It's a large tent painted in the same colors as the company logo. Inside, there's a row of climbing walls, each one with a different design. Some are textured with rocks, while others have a more uniform appearance. Drake heads straight for the one set up with the new gear.

This is why we're here. This is what I need to focus on.

As we walk toward the displays, I see people from the crowd watching us. I've grown used to the attention but still find it awkward. I've never been a fan of crowds, and now that I work for someone so well-known, there are always people watching me, hoping for some kind of interaction.

Not that I can blame them. I mean, look at him.

Drake strides up to the climbing wall with all the confidence in the world. His gait is easy, and his gaze is cool and calm. I'm struck again by how gorgeous he is. The man is tall, broad-shouldered, muscular, and has the attention of everyone in the crowd.

His black shirt clings to his muscles and his matching cargo pants are fitted enough that I can see the outline of his thighs and calves. I have to force myself to look away from his ass.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I should not be lusting after my boss right now.

It's a habit I need to break, or things will get really awkward. So what if we hooked up? I need to get it through my thick head that it was just a one-time thing.

But still... Drake's body is a wonder. He has just the right amount of bulk. It's sexy without being overdone. He looks like he belongs on a poster rather than being a real person.

I feel my breath catch as I watch him turn and face the crowd, ready to give his presentation. He catches my eye and then winks at me. I flush, and I know I must be beet red. I curse under my breath.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Drake begins. "I'm so glad you could join me here today to see the latest advancements in climbing gear. We at Dragon Ascent have been working very closely with our designers to create products that are safe, lightweight, and functional."

Now is about the time I tune out. I have a passing understanding of the gear that Dragon Ascent produces, but my main job is to be Drake's handler. I don't need to be all that educated on the gear, just the CEO.

Drake is a natural speaker, in total command of the space without being overbearing. I check my watch and look over my shoulder at the rest of the convention going on. Since he's going to be occupied for a while, giving his talk, demoing the new gear, and answering questions, I have some time to myself to just peruse.

In situations like this, Drake likes me to scope out the competition, even with my limited understanding of everything. Really, I think he sends me out to get me out of his hair for a few minutes, but I'm glad to be free of the stuffy crowd anyway.

I make my way around the room, looking at the different booths and trying to be discreet. I feel bad for all the people who are stuck manning these things, answering inane questions about their products. It's not exactly thrilling stuff.

I'm making my way past a booth when I hear someone call my name.

"Ellie?"

I turn and see Claude Vanderhoven standing behind me, a huge smile on his face. I plaster one on mine, even though I'd really rather not talk to him.

"Hello, Claude."

"I'm glad I caught you," he says. "I was hoping you'd be interested in attending my film screening tonight. It's a private showing, and I realized I didn't get a chance to invite you last night."

"Oh, well..."

I trail off, thinking about how I'm actually interested in attending. Not to be around Claude but just to do anything besides work. A private screening, which I assume will have drinks and appetizers, sounds much better than sitting in a shared hotel room

with a man who may or may not feel the same way I do.

Sensing my hesitation, Claude continues, "It's called 'The Ecstasy of the Summit'. You'd be my special guest, Ellie. It will be lovely."

I glance over his shoulder and see that Drake's presentation is over. There's a line of people waiting to talk to him, but he's glancing around, obviously looking for me. I can see the frustration and annoyance in his eyes when he sees I'm not there.

"Claude," I begin, and he smiles, knowing I'm going to say yes. "I'm not sure that Drake has that event on the agenda."

He waves away my words. "No matter. We can still have a nice time, no? I will send you the information for the screening. Just give me your number."

That's a bridge too far, even if I do want to attend the showing. So instead, I pull out one of my business cards, figuring that Claude having my business email is a safer bet. He frowns as he takes the card, glancing down at the information on it.

"You can contact me with the information there," I explain, giving him a fake smile, hoping to avoid further questions. "I'm sure you've got networking to do today, so I'll leave you to it!"

I spin on my heel and head towards Drake before Claude can say another word. I feel his eyes on my back, but he doesn't call out or chase after me, thank God.

Drake looks relieved to see me, which makes me feel a little guilty for ditching him. But then he gives me that smug smirk that drives me crazy and says, "Enjoying yourself, Ellie?"

"Immensely," I reply sarcastically.

"Good to hear."

He leads the way back toward the Dragon Ascent booth, and I follow, keeping an eye out for any potential business contacts.

"There's a private screening for Claude's documentary tonight," I tell him as we walk. "I figured it might be a good idea to attend. Network, maybe pick up some new clients."

Drake stops, and when he speaks, it's with an authority I'm completely unused to coming out of his mouth. "No."

I stop walking, stunned. "What do you mean no?"

Drake turns and walks back towards me, and I swallow thickly at the intensity I see in his eyes.

"You're not going," he says simply.

"I don't think that's your decision to make," I reply, doing my best to stay calm.

"I'm sure as hell not going, and there's no way I'd trust that prick around you. You're with me, and I'm not letting you out of my sight."

His words make my heart flutter, but I ignore the feeling. Instead, I'm already starting to scheme in my head how I can make this thing work. I mentally scan through his schedule tonight and the glaring gap at the exact time of the documentary screening. There are dozens of requests for Drake to attend smaller showcases and demonstrations, but I mostly kept those options off his itinerary unless it could benefit Drake or Dragon Ascent in some way. But if I need to keep him busy long enough for me to go to the documentary...

Why am I even doing this? It's not like I really care about Claude's movie, but a part of me is bitter that Drake is ignoring what happened between us last night. This is a grasp at independence, a way to show him that I can do what I want, especially if he's going to take zero interest in me romantically.

"Okay, whatever, Drake," I huff, pulling out my phone and pretending to look something up. "On a different subject, there's a showcase tonight you've been asked to attend." I watch Drake's face. His expression is inscrutable, but he turns and looks down at me. I have to crane my neck to meet his gaze, and I swallow.

He doesn't seem convinced that our argument is over this quickly. "A showcase?"

I nod, trying to maintain a straight face. I feel bad about lying to him, but he's backed me into a corner. No man, not even Drake, will tell me what to do.

"NatureCo Industries has this new indoor climbing thing. It's a new wall that's supposed to replicate climbing outside. The manufacturer wanted you to demo it for them, and if you agree, they'll carry Dragon Ascent gear exclusively in the first climbing gym they open with the new wall type. What do you think?"

I watch as Drake considers it. I had written it off before. Dragon Ascent is a world-renowned company, and NatureCo is still small enough that it wouldn't be that much of a get. But I don't tell him any of that.

"I have it marked as high priority," I add, trying to convince him. "You'll have plenty of time to get ready for your big presentation tomorrow."

He sighs and glances down at me, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"I guess I could do that," he says, "if you think it's worth my time. I trust you."

My stomach twists at his words, but I put on a fake smile anyway. "Perfect! I'll email you the details. It should be over by 9:30, and I'll meet you back at the hotel room."

He frowns at me. "I'm not sure I like the idea of you wandering around here on your own. A few of my old climbing buddies here brought their wives?—"

I wrinkle my nose at the idea, holding up my hand to stop him. Even if I wasn't lying about my intentions, palling around with some women I have zero in common with sounds like a nightmare. "Okay, no. First, I'm your assistant, and they are your friends' wives. Second, I don't make a point of hanging out with strangers. Third, I have some work to catch up on."

He shakes his head, stepping closer. I feel like I'm being pinned to the wall by his eyes, and my heart thumps against my chest as his hand cups my face. His thumb brushes across my cheek, and I have to remind myself to breathe.

"I just worry about you," he murmurs, his gaze drifting over my face.

"I can take care of myself," I say, annoyed by my breathlessness. I brush his hand away, annoyed beyond measure that now, of all times, is when he decides to show me any ounce of affection. "You should go."

"Yeah, I should."

He doesn't move away from me, though. In fact, he seems to be leaning even closer, his head tilting down, eyes fixed on my lips. My breath catches in my throat as I realize what he's about to do, but I don't want to stop him. I should push him away, I know, but I can't. I don't want to.

Before I can make a decision either way, his lips brush mine, the lightest of touches. His breath is warm against my face, his hand coming back up to cup my cheek.

"Don't do anything to get yourself into trouble, Ellie. I know you're a troublemaker at heart, no matter how much you pretend not to be."

"You think you know me so well," I murmur, my eyes locked on his mouth.

He chuckles. "I know you better than you think. I've been watching you for a while now, El."

My heart skips a beat as he leans in again, and I close my eyes, waiting. I can feel his mouth hovering inches away, so close that I could lift my head and close the distance myself. I want to.

Before I can, Drake steps back, smirking a little. I open my eyes, feeling my cheeks flame with heat as he looks me up and down. "Have fun tonight," he says, taking another step away from me. "I'll see you later."

We barely cross paths for the rest of the day, and I watch Drake's icon on my device tracking app and make sure he's out of the hotel room before I go up to change. I'm already regretting my subterfuge to attend the screening, which I don't even care about, but I've set my plans into motion, and I have to follow them through.

Now, I look at myself in the mirror and tug my skirt down my legs, wishing it was longer. The cream-colored sheath dress hugs every inch of my curves, and while it's not exactly revealing, it's much more form-fitting than anything I would usually wear.

I run my fingers through my curls, trying to get them to behave, but that's a losing battle. They're wild, and there's nothing I can do to tame them. I slip my feet into my black heels and take a deep breath, smoothing my hands over my hair one last time before picking up my clutch and heading downstairs.

At this moment, Drake will be starting the demo for NatureCo, so there's no chance

I'll run into him on my way to the screening. The thought makes me smile a little. Even though I'm angry with him for the way he treated me earlier, I can't help but be relieved that I'm avoiding him. He already doesn't like me going out alone. He'd be even angrier if he found out I was going to see Claude's documentary.

I walk through the lobby, trying to look as confident as I feel. My heels click on the marble floor as I pass the bar, and I can feel the eyes of several men lingering on me. The thought makes me blush a little, but I ignore them all the same. I'm on a mission. A mission to be an independent, confident woman and to pretend that my every waking thought right now isn't on Drake and how pissed he'd be if he knew what I was doing.

The theater is on the second floor, and I hurry to the elevator while it's still empty. There's someone outside taking names, and just like Claude promised, I'm on the list of special guests. The usher escorts me down to the bottom level, where a portion of the seats are sectioned off for VIPs.

Claude is standing in the center of the VIP area, greeting everyone personally and in a suit that looks much too formal for the event. His eyes light up when he sees me, and he hurries over. "Mademoiselle White," he says, taking my hand and kissing it. "How wonderful to see you."

"Likewise," I reply, taking my hand back as soon as possible and discretely wiping it on my dress. He's so slick. It's off-putting, especially compared to the straightforwardness of Drake.

I don't realize I've thought of his name until Claude speaks again. "It's a shame Mr. Evans couldn't make it."

I give him a tight smile. "He was needed elsewhere."

"Of course." Claude smirks. "We wouldn't want to bore him with a documentary, would we? Mr. Evans seems the easily bored type."

Another dig at Drake's intelligence. It pisses me off, but I say nothing. It's clear he's baiting me, and I won't let him win. Instead, I change the subject, asking him about the film. He's all too eager to tell me about it, and were he not so full of himself, it might be impressive. He tells me about the locations, the people he worked with, and the logistics of filming while climbing a dangerous mountain.

Before long, the lights go down, and the film begins. I can't ignore the feeling that I'm cheating on Drake, even though I know I shouldn't. We aren't a couple. I have every right to be here, watching a movie about climbing, something he has no interest in doing. But still, I feel guilty. Guilty enough to keep my phone face down in my lap so I won't be tempted to check it every two minutes.

The breadth of my mistake becomes even more apparent when Claude takes the seat next to me. There's no reason for us to be so close, but he continues to lean over to try and explain the documentary to me every few minutes. At one point, he puts his hand on my leg, and I almost jump out of my skin, trying to shuffle away.

There's a brief intermission where Claude stands to speak about his movie so far, and I try to make small talk with the other VIPs around me. I recognize plenty of them—world-class climbers, other companies CEOs, and even a pair of B-list movie stars—and groan internally. If even a single one of them recognizes me, Drake will know I was here.

Isn't that what I want, though? For Drake to realize I have a life outside of him and that if he wants me, he needs to act?

Once the movie restarts, Claude ups his efforts to get into my space. The fake-casual touching, the talking so close I can feel his breath, makes my chest tight. I don't want

this. I don't want him close to me at all. I have gravely misunderstood what Claude thinks tonight is going to entail.

"Can you get me some water?" I blurt out to him, and he stops mid-sentence, furrowing his brow.

"Now?" Claude whispers back. "But we're almost at the part?"

"Please."

He huffs in annoyance, but once he remembers that everyone around us can see him trying to dismiss my request, he stands up to do as I ask. Letting out a breath of relief, I look around and try to decide just how I'm going to make my exit. Maybe I'll be able to get upstairs and change before Drake is done with his demo, and he won't ever have to know I was here.

Spotting an exit at the bottom left of the screen, I start to rise out of my seat when suddenly someone drops into the seat Claude was just occupying. I immediately know it isn't him—the sprawled-out, almost lazily casual body language of the newcomer is different from the stuffy Frenchman.

In an instant, without even turning to look, I know it's Drake, even in the dark. Swallowing hard, my pulse kicking into overdrive, I turn to look at my boss.

He's still in his climbing clothes from the demo, loose shorts showing off his perfectly defined legs and tight white shirt bearing the Dragon Ascent logo, leaving little to the imagination.

If he weren't obviously pissed beyond measure, I'd take my time to enjoy the view.

As it stands, I can tell he's already about to explode. His green eyes are lit up with

anger, his hands clenched into fists on the armrests of his chair.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Drake growls out, and I quickly look around to see if anyone is paying attention to us.

A few people have turn, curious, but no one seems to notice who Drake is. He's holding himself loosely, but his face tells me that's all an act. There's nothing casual about Drake right now. He's seconds from igniting.

I've never seen him so angry. All over me.

"I-I got an invite?—"

"And you came?" Drake hisses. "I told you no. I told you I didn't want you alone with Claude, and you lied to me, Ellie."

"It's not like that," I whisper, trying to keep my voice down, even though I'm getting mad too. "I never lied to you. I asked, and you said no, and that was that. I didn't think it was your decision to make."

"When it comes to you, it is," Drake snaps back, eyes flashing. "You're mine. Mine, Ellie. You're my responsibility, and you're here alone with that asshole when I specifically told you to stay away."

"You're not my dad, Drake," I spit, crossing my arms over my chest. "I don't need a babysitter, I'm an adult. And I'm not going to let you dictate my life. We're at a conference, we have things to do, and I thought this would be a good networking opportunity for me."

"For you?" Drake scoffs. "If you wanted a networking opportunity, you should have told me. I would have made it happen. Why would you choose to spend time with

him instead of me?"

His words are laced with hurt, and I feel a twinge of guilt. "It's not that," I say quietly. "I just..."

Both of us go silent when another figure hovers over us—Claude returning to find Drake in his seat.

"What is going on here?" Claude demands, placing a hand on my shoulder. I immediately shrug him off, but Drake has already seen the movement. His eyes flash.

"You two seem to have gotten to know one another," he growls.

Claude gives Drake a look, obviously annoyed. "She is my guest here tonight."

My boss stands, taking advantage of his height next to Claude. "The fuck she is," he says, his voice low and dangerous.

No one is paying attention to the movie anymore, not that I can blame them. There is a furious energy passing between Claude and Drake, and I want to be anywhere but in the middle of it.

With the two men a breath away from fighting and fixated totally on one another, I slip behind them and run up the aisle.

As soon as I burst into the bright light outside the theater, I let a breath of relief escape. I didn't think this would go down like this. I knew Drake would be pissed about me coming, but I never would have thought he'd come to find me ... never thought he would care so much.

I shake my head and make my way out to the lobby of the conference center, but

before I can go anywhere, a hand grabs my arm from behind—not tightly, but just enough to stop me in my tracks. Just from the touch alone and the buzz that shoots through me from it, I know it's Drake.

Slowly, I turn, and Drake is even more delicious looking out here in the light. There's still a sheen of sweat on his skin from the climbing demo, and the animalistic part of my brain wants to lick it off him.

Focus, Ellie. Focus.

To my surprise, when I meet his eyes, he isn't nearly as angry. Instead, there is a possessiveness that is totally new to Drake. And here I thought I've seen every emotion this man can possibly feel.

"That was quite the scene, Drake." I finally break the silence stretching between us.

Drake doesn't say anything for a moment. "Come on," he says finally, and my heart skips a beat. Is he taking me back to the room? Before I can answer, he takes my hand and pulls me to the side of the lobby, where we are alone.

"Are you okay?" he asks gruffly.

I blink, taken off guard. I expected a reprimand, but this...? "Of course I'm okay," I reply. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because Claude is a fucking prick, and..." His voice trails off. He looks confused, like he can't decide what he is feeling right now.

"And what?" I ask, genuinely curious.

He just shakes his head. "I don't fucking know, Ellie, but you look beautiful tonight."

That is the last thing I expect him to say. Stunned, I look down at my dress and smooth out the fabric, blushing. "T-thanks?"

"Please tell me" —he comes forward, closing the space between us— "that you didn't wear it for that fucking asshole Claude."

Before I can think better of it, the truth falls from my lips. "I wore it because I wanted to make you jealous."

Drake's nostrils flare, his pupils dilating. His hand is on my face, pushing back to run his fingers through my curls before cupping the back of my head. "Then I guess it worked," he breathes, "because I am."

I'm breathing fast, like a rabbit running from a wolf. I know he's going to kiss me, but the need for his lips on mine becomes even more urgent when I spot Claude over Drake's shoulder in the distance, clearly looking for me.

Thinking back to when he kissed me to avoid his stalker, I take a page out of Drake's book. "Turnabout is fair play," I breathe, running my hands down his firm chest before grabbing two handfuls of his shirt. "Kiss me."

I've never seen Drake look so thrown off. There's a flicker of confusion, a hint of amusement, and then his hand tightens on my head and he slams his lips against mine.

It's like a dream. In that first second, he's just holding his lips against mine, the feeling of his warm, firm mouth on mine so achingly familiar. Then his tongue presses against the seam of my lips, demanding entrance. I gasp in surprise, and he's in.

Drake kisses me like he's starving for it, like he needs this more than he needs air. His

fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer to him, and every hard line of his body presses into mine. He groans, and the sound makes me weak in the knees. He pulls away just long enough to catch a breath, and then he kisses me again, biting my lip.

I moan as his hips press into mine, feeling how hard he is. One of his hands trails down to cup my ass; the other grips my hip hard. I'm dizzy with it all, with his scent, his taste, the way he feels, and I have to pull away to catch my breath. He stares at me, his pupils dilated, his chest rising and falling. I want him. I want him so much.

I only come back to reality when I hear a scoff from behind us and look over Drake's shoulder once again to see Claude storming off. Drake turns to see what has caught my attention, and when he turns back to me, his smile is vicious and victorious all at the same time.

"You, sweet Ellie," —his grip on my hip tightens, pulling me more firmly against him— "drive me so crazy that I don't even care you just used me to get rid of that asshole." He leans in, nose brushing against my wild hair as he whispers, "Do you want to do it again, just for good measure?"

All I can manage is a squeak, but Drake reads my unspoken agreement in the sound and kisses me again just like I want. It's only when someone passes by us and clears their throat that the two of us separate long enough to collect our thoughts.

"I wasn't using you," I clarify, looking up at him, needing him to know he's so much more to me than just a distraction. "I mean, I guess I was trying to get Claude to leave. But I wanted to kiss you anyway."

"Ah, then this isn't just a ruse to get me to forget that I'm angry with you?" He's teasing, but there's a note of seriousness in his voice. Drake isn't going to forget that I manipulated the schedule just to come to this showing.

"It would be an added bonus, I guess." I try to smile and joke with him, but he still stares down at me like he's not sure if I'm being honest.

Drake runs his thumb across my lip, and the motion is so intimate that I almost lean in to kiss him again. "You haven't messed up once in the time I've known you. I just want you to be more careful."

I'm not sure how to respond to that. He's trying to be kind, I can see it in his eyes, but the last thing I want is for him to think that I can't take care of myself. I want him to see me as strong and smart and capable. I want him to see me as an equal.

"I don't want you to think I'm not careful. I am." I bite my lip, hesitating for just a moment before I tell him something that I've never told anyone before. "I didn't drink, so don't worry. I don't drink much in public because my father was an alcoholic. He's a mean drunk, and I don't want to be like him. I don't want to be like anyone in my family."

Drake's face softens even more, and he leans down, kissing my forehead. "You're not anything like them. I promise. You're strong and kind and clever. You're everything."

The words make me blush, and I look down, still not used to compliments from this man who usually seems so gruff.

"Ms. White," he rumbles, "would you like me to take you upstairs and finish what we started last night?"

My entire body feels flushed with heat, and I inhale, nodding slowly. He chuckles, and I wonder if I'm playing into his ego by letting him think he has the upper hand here.

It doesn't matter because Drake wraps his arm around my waist and leads me toward

the elevators, his pace quick as if he's afraid I'll change my mind. I know I won't. I'm not sure I ever could.

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5

DRAKE

I want her so damned bad, this siren sent to test my restraint and drive me wild. She's perfect and soft and sexy, and every moment we're not kissing is a waste of time.

I keep my arm around her waist as we head upstairs, and the anticipation of what is about to happen is the sweetest torture.

Ellie. My Ellie. I will be the first man she's ever been with and, even if she doesn't realize it yet, the last. Now that I've had a taste of her, there's no damn way I can let her go.

When we reach our door, I pause for a moment to look down at her. She's so damned beautiful. "We're really doing this."

Her expression is pure adoration as she looks up at me. "Only if you want to. We don't have to."

"Oh, Ellie." I pull her close, loving the way she sinks into my embrace. "I want this more than you know."

The door opens under my touch, and I push her inside, kicking the door closed behind us. I take her hand and lead her to the bed, knowing that I won't be able to wait any longer.

She stands next to the bed, her gaze flickering between the king-sized mattress and me. I step closer, running my fingers through her hair before cupping her cheeks in my palms and tilting her face up to mine. "You're sure this is what you want?"

"Yes," she breathes.

I kiss her again. I can't get enough of her lips, soft and yielding and so damned sweet.

I deepen the kiss, groaning as her tongue finds mine and her arms wrap around my neck. It's like she can't get close enough, and neither can I. Her hands move to my chest, and she slides her palms down, humming her appreciation of my body. We're totally mismatched, her in her tight little dress and me in my climbing clothes, but despite that, I've never felt so right. So perfectly aligned.

We keep kissing as I turn her around, pulling her back flush against my chest as I reach for the zipper at her lower back. I love how she gasps as I tug it down, the sound only growing louder as I slip the straps off her shoulders and push the fabric to the floor.

She spins in my arms, standing before me in only her lacy bra and panties, looking almost nervous. "Ellie, do you remember what you're supposed to call me when we're like this? Just you and I?"

She nods. "I remember."

"So let me hear it. Let me hear my name on your lips."

Her face flushes even darker. "Daddy."

I can't resist any longer. I slide my hand behind her neck, pulling her forward and claiming her mouth in a demanding kiss. Her hands find my shoulders as she returns

my kiss with enthusiasm, her tongue sliding against mine and her fingers gripping my shirt.

She's so damned sexy, I can barely take it. I break our kiss, trailing my lips along her jaw and down her neck. I can feel the fluttering of her pulse beneath my touch, and I love knowing that she's just as turned on as I am. I nip at her sensitive skin, and she gasps, her head falling back and her body pressing against mine.

My hand finds its way into her hair, and I wrap my fingers around the golden curls, giving a gentle tug. Her answering whimper has my cock hardening like a crowbar, and I know I need more. I want her laid out before me, bare and begging for me.

I nip at her earlobe before leaning down to whisper, "Take the rest off and lie down on the bed."

"Okay, Daddy," she whispers back. My little Ellie is always ready to please.

She steps away from me, looking over her shoulder as she reaches back to unfasten her bra. She lets it fall to the floor, and my gaze locks on her full breasts, her nipples already stiff and begging to be licked and sucked. She hooks her fingers in her panties next and slides them down her legs. When she stands back up, I can see her arousal glistening on her inner thighs, and my cock pulses with need.

"Lie down," I repeat, jerking my own shirt over my head and pushing my shorts down as I stalk towards her. All those nights with my cock in my hand dreaming of her, all those times I wanted to push her tight little skirts up her legs and devour her. Finally, I have her. No more fantasies, just the reality of Ellie spread out before me.

My hand wraps around my length, stroking myself as she crawls onto the bed. She lies on her back, her knees drawn together and her hands gripping the covers as if she's afraid she'll touch herself without permission. I move to the end of the bed,

sliding my hands up her calves and then her thighs, easing them apart so I can see her glistening pussy.

"God, baby. You're soaked for me." I lean forward and place a kiss on her hip, feeling her shiver beneath my touch. "Are you aching for my cock, little girl? Do you want Daddy to fuck you?"

"Yes, Daddy," she whimpers. "Please, I need you."

"You're going to get me, don't worry." I slide my hands beneath her ass, tilting her hips up and raising her knees towards her chest. "I'm going to taste your pretty little pussy, and then I'm going to sink my cock into you. You've been teasing me for too long."

She's doing so good, giving herself over to her desires here in the bedroom with me, but this makes a little bit of stubborn, feisty Ellie shine through. "Me teasing you? Do you know how many times I've had to watch you walk around shirtless and glistening like some underwear model?—"

She doesn't get another word out before I bury my face between her thighs, my tongue flicking against her swollen clit. She tastes sweet, and I groan in pleasure as I lick her. She cries out, her hands grabbing at my head, and I reach up to pull them away, holding her wrists in one of my hands as I devour her. She's so responsive to my every touch, and I can feel her clit throbbing beneath my tongue.

She begs for more, pleading for me to fuck her, and I slide my hand down to test her readiness. My fingers slip into her wet heat, and she cries out my name as I thrust them deeper inside of her. She's so tight, gripping my fingers as if she's trying to hold me inside of her, and I can't wait to feel that grip on my cock.

"Are you ready for the real thing?" I ask, curving my fingers to hit that bundle of

nerves deep inside her. "Are you ready for me to be your first, Ellie?"

"Yes!" she screams, bucking her hips against my hand. "Oh God, yes!"

I don't waste a second. I slide my fingers out of her, wiping the wetness on my leg as I position myself between her thighs. She's trembling, looking up at me with those big blue eyes, and I lean over to press a kiss against her lips. Her mouth opens beneath mine, and I can taste her arousal on my lips, mixed with the sweet taste of her.

I take my time, aligning myself with her entrance and slowly pushing in. It's going to be a battle to fit inside of her, but little by little, her pussy stretches to accommodate me as I kiss and lick at her nipples. She's writhing beneath me, and I nip at one of her breasts, feeling her clench around me at the sensation.

"Fuck, you're so tight," I groan, finally sliding home. I'm all the way inside of her, my cock surrounded by her warmth, and it's taking every ounce of self-control I have to not fuck her hard and fast. "Are you okay?"

"Y-yes," she says, her walls fluttering around my cock. "Oh my God, Drake, you're inside of me."

There's disbelief in her voice, and I understand exactly why. I'm in shock, too, that this moment I've been waiting on for an entire fucking year is finally here. I feel like I've wanted this from the first second I laid eyes on her, but I had to be patient. I had to wait until she was ready. I had to wait until she felt the same way.

And now she does. Now she's mine.

"Ellie," I groan, rolling my hips and making her gasp. "I need to move. I need to fuck you."

"Yes," she moans, her fingernails digging into my back. "Fuck me, Drake."

It's all the permission I need. I pull out of her and then slam back into her, making her cry out. She's so tight and warm around me, and I know this isn't going to be enough. This isn't going to be the only time I fuck her tonight, not if I have any say in it. I'm not going to be able to let her go after this, not when I've finally got her exactly where I want her.

I can't stop myself. I kiss her fiercely, swallowing her moans as I fuck her. Her pussy clenches around my cock, and I already know that I'm addicted. I can't imagine ever going a day without being buried inside of her.

I pull back, breaking our kiss and resting my forehead against hers. "You feel so good, Ellie," I say, my voice husky. "So tight and perfect. I'm never letting you go. You're mine."

"Yes," she gasps, her legs tightening around me. "Drake, please..."

I know what she wants, and I give it to her. I thrust into her hard and fast, feeling my balls tighten as the pleasure starts to build. But I need her to come first. I need to feel her orgasm around me.

I reach down between us and start rubbing her clit, making her gasp and writhe beneath me. I fuck her hard, and I don't stop touching her clit, driving her closer and closer to the edge. I'm so close to coming myself, but I force myself to hold off. Not until she's there with me.

"Oh God," she cries out, her fingers digging into my back. "Oh God, Drake, I think I'm going to come."

"Yes," I growl, rolling my hips and hitting a spot inside her that makes her moan and

tremble. "Come for me, Ellie. Let me feel you come on my cock."

The room is filled with the sounds of her moaning, and the sound of our flesh coming together as I fuck her senseless. I thrust into her hard and fast, and it's too much for her. Her whole body tenses up, and she screams my name as her inner walls spasm around me. The feeling is intense, and I can't hold back any longer. I let go and come inside her, filling her with my seed.

The world seems to stop, and all I can focus on is Ellie. She's all I can see, all I can feel. She's perfect. And she's mine.

I lean down and kiss her gently, and she sighs against my lips. We're both panting and sweaty, and I know we should probably get up and clean up, but I can't bring myself to move. I want to stay here with her in this moment. I never want to let her go.

"You're incredible," I say, kissing her again. "So beautiful."

She blushes and looks away, and I can tell she's still a little embarrassed by my words. But I mean every word. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"I meant what I said, Ellie," I say, my voice low and serious. "I'm never letting you go. You're mine now. Do you understand?"

She looks up at me, her eyes wide and uncertain. But then she nods, a small smile playing on her lips. "Yes," she says softly. "I'm yours."

I want to tell her that these aren't just bedroom games anymore, that I mean every single word that I say. But that can wait. There's no way I'm doing anything that might put this perfect night at risk.

"Take a shower with me," I suggest, nuzzling her neck. "And then we'll order room service before I fuck you again, this time with you on top."

She laughs softly. "You've got all this already planned out, huh?"

I grin against her skin. "For once, maybe I'm the one a few steps ahead."

We do everything according to my plans, and I make sure Ellie is fully satisfied before we both fall into an exhausted sleep, tangled up with each other.

I don't know what it is that wakes me up, but at 2:45 AM, my eyes crack open, and I'm alone in bed. My first assumption that Ellie is in the bathroom is proven wrong when she doesn't return, and a shard of worry pieces through me.

Where the hell could she be?

After pulling on my shorts, a quick but thorough search of the suite is fruitless. Shoving the keycard in my pocket, I rush out into the hallway, not even bothering to get dressed. What if she's in trouble? What if she needs me?

Or what if she regrets what happened so much that she fled?

I don't have to look far. Hearing hushed voices in one of the alcoves where the ice machines are, I spot Ellie immediately, with a half-dressed man practically hanging on her. My blood boils. It's that stupid Frenchman.

"Oh, hello, Drake!" Claude says brightly. "This is a pleasant surprise. We were just talking about you."

"Get away from her," I say, my voice low and dangerous.

Claude smiles slyly, obviously enjoying the tension in the air. "You don't want me touching her? That's interesting. She's just your assistant, right? But I'm more than happy to take care of her." He looks at Ellie and raises an eyebrow, his smile growing wider. "I bet she'll like being with a real man for once."

The words are barely out of his mouth when I lunge at him, my fist connecting with his jaw.

Claude stumbles back, shock registering on his face as he brings his hand up to his mouth. "You son of a bitch," he spits out. "How dare you?—"

"Just stay away from her," I growl, moving in front of Ellie to block him, "or next time, it'll be more than a punch."

Claude narrows his eyes, his gaze shifting between me and Ellie. He must have bit his tongue when I hit him because there's blood on his lip. Good. "You're both fucking crazy, you know that?" He spits out a mouthful of blood and turns on his heel, stalking down the hallway toward the elevators.

As soon as he's gone, Ellie sighs shakily, picking up the abandoned ice bucket next to the machine. "Thank you. I had no idea he was even staying on this floor, and I was just so hot and thirsty and?—"

She's in my arms before she can finish her sentence, and the sweet smell of her slowly drives away the fury boiling inside me. No rock face, no impossible peak, has ever made me feel like I just did seeing Claude trying to touch her. "It's fine. As long as you're okay." I smooth her hair back and take the ice bucket from her, setting it back down on the ground.

"I am, but?—"

Her words are cut off by my kiss, our lips meeting in a frenzy. I didn't expect to need her this badly again so soon, but the need is too strong to ignore. My hands cup her face, keeping her close as my tongue slips into her mouth. A low moan comes from her throat, her fingers tangling in my hair, and I'm lost.

"Back to the room," she pants, squealing in delight when I sweep her into my arms.

"I couldn't agree more."

Waking up the following morning is heaven, or at least the closest approximation to it that I've ever experienced. Ellie is still curled up in my arms, her head under my chin, and her breathing slow.

If it wasn't the last day of the convention, and I didn't have to make a damned speech for the masses, I'd be happy to just stay like this forever. Hell, I'm more than happy to skip the speeches just to hold her for a few more hours. But this is Ellie White, and she's likely to strangle me if I mess up her perfectly concocted schedule.

I kiss her forehead, and she stirs, blinking her big blue eyes open to look up at me. "Mmmm, good morning," she mumbles, rubbing her cheek against my chest. "What time is it?"

"A little after seven," I tell her, stroking her hair back from her face. I can't stop touching her now that I know my desires are reciprocated. "There's still plenty of time to get ready for the day."

Ellie yawns, stretches, and sits up. "Good. I need a shower." She climbs out of bed and picks up one of the complimentary robes from the foot of the bed, slipping it on.

I watch her move around the room, taking note of each curve as it disappears beneath the silky fabric. I'm not sure how I'm going to survive the rest of the convention when

all I want is to strip her naked and act out the fantasies that have been plaguing me for twelve long months.

"Are you just going to lie there?" Ellie asks, standing in the bathroom doorway with her hand on her hip.

I lean up on my elbow and smirk. "I was hoping to join you in the shower."

"You wish." She flicks her hair over her shoulder and heads into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

A moment later, I hear the water running, and I consider letting her shower in peace for ten entire seconds before I'm out of bed like a shot. I take the handle in my hand and twist, surprised when the door opens easily. Something tells me she's left it unlocked on purpose. Steam has already started to fill the room, making it impossible to see anything but the outline of her body through the glass door of the shower.

"What are you doing?" she huffs, already giggling.

"I'm joining you, as I said." I pull open the shower door and step in behind her. I don't give her time to protest before my arms wrap around her waist, pulling her against me.

"This isn't part of the schedule," she protests but leans back into my embrace.

"Fuck the schedule." I spin her around to face me, kissing her before she can say another word.

The warm water feels good, but it's nothing compared to the sensation of Ellie pressed against me. I want to explore every inch of her, to find out what makes her tremble and moan. I reach for her body wash and squirt some into my hand, working

it into a lather before gliding my palms down her arms. Her head tips back against the wall as I massage her skin, paying careful attention to each finger, her palms, the insides of her wrists.

"Does that feel good?" I whisper.

"Mmhhh," she hums, her eyes drifting shut. I take my time, massaging her shoulders and her neck, sliding my hands down to knead her breasts. I cup them gently, rubbing my thumbs over her nipples until they stiffen into pebbles beneath my touch.

Ellie grips my shoulders as I continue exploring her body. "I want to take care of you," I whisper in her ear as I stroke her stomach and hips. "I want to make sure you're clean everywhere."

"You do, huh?" Her voice is breathy and soft. She's lost in my touch, melting at my fingertips.

I get more soap and wash her thighs, taking my time to move between her legs. I brush against her pussy, biting back a groan when I feel how wet she is. "Are you going to let me?"

She nods, and I press my fingers against her. "Good girl."

"Oh, fuck." She moans as I stroke her clit, teasing her before moving away again. "Be gentle. Last night was intense, to say the least."

"Did I make your pretty little pussy sore, Ellie?" I ask, brushing the wet weight of her hair off her shoulder. "Maybe I need to focus elsewhere then?"

Ellie is warm and pliant in my hands, and my words don't fully click with her until I'm washing the full globes of her ass with my open palms, slowly letting my fingers

glide inward. "Drake?" Her eyes fly open, and she turns to look at me.

"No?" I ask innocently, giving her a squeeze. "I just want you to be clean, Ellie. It's the responsible thing to do."

"I..." She trails off, purring in pleasure as I massage her cheeks, pulling them apart gently and then letting go. I tease her tight hole, and she bites back a moan. "You're very convincing, Mr. Evans..."

"Is that a yes?" I kiss her ear as I cup her pussy, slipping my fingers inside her slick folds. "Or do I need to work harder?"

"It's a yes. Don't stop," she whispers, her thighs trembling as I stroke her clit. "Please, Drake..."

I soak up the way she moans my name as I finger her back entrance little by little. I want to hear it again and again, so I can file it away in my mind, saving it for the times when she's not here.

The thought makes me ache, and I press my cock against her ass. I need her, all of her, and the way she's giving herself over to me tells me she is all too willing.

I can't wait anymore. I slip my fingers out of her and spin her around. Ellie gasps as I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist like they were meant to be there. "I've got you, Ellie. I've got you."

She kisses me hard as I walk out of the shower to the edge of the bed. We're both literally dripping wet, but fuck it. I'll tip housekeeping whatever they fucking want to clean up the mess because I can't wait a second more to have my girl.

"On your knees. Grip the headboard." I drop her on the bed, and she quickly obeys.

Her body is flushed with need, and when she moves to her knees, her round ass is in the air. I palm her cheeks, spreading her apart and teasing her wet hole with my finger. I take a second to squeeze my cock. Fuck, she's so gorgeous, I can't believe she's mine.

"Drake, please." She's begging, and it's the sweetest sound I've ever heard. "I-I have some pure coconut oil that I use for my hair in my pink makeup bag in the bathroom."

"What?" I can't think straight, can't focus on anything but the need to be inside her. "Why?"

"For lube!" Her whole body shivers as I press the head of my cock to her hole.

"You can't be serious," I groan, gripping her hair and tilting her head back. "How are you even real?"

"I'm a girl! I'm prepared for anything." She wiggles her ass, making my dick twitch. "Though I have to admit this wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I packed it."

I chuckle, slapping her ass lightly. She moans, her body quivering with need, and I know I can't wait any longer. "You're going to need to be patient if I'm going to fuck your ass, little Ellie. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes," she whispers, her fingers flexing on the headboard.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Daddy."

I grab the coconut oil as quickly as I possibly can and squeeze some into my hand.

It's still cool, and she squeals when I rub it against her ass, coating her little hole with the oil. Immediately, I know she's right, like she always is. This is better. Way fucking better.

I slide one finger fully in, and then another, prepping her back entrance for my cock. Ellie is as taut as a bowstring, quivering from how tense her muscles are as she takes everything I have to give her.

"I'm going to fuck your ass now, Ellie. Are you ready?"

"Please."

I spread more of the oil over my cock, lining it up to her ass. My fingers dig into her hips as I push inside, trying not to come instantly at the insane pleasure of being inside her. I've never felt anything like this before, and I'm not sure I'll ever recover.

Her body is so tight and warm, and with the lube, she's taking me in easily. I'm almost all the way in when she moans, and I have to stop and try to catch my breath. "Ellie, you have to stop moving. Otherwise, I'm going to come."

She giggles, looking back at me with a face flush with need. "That sounds good to me."

I growl, my cock twitching inside her. "Oh, you're going to pay for that." I pull out slowly and then thrust in, making her squeal. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes, Daddy. Oh God, yes!" Her words are a litany of soft pleas and moans.

I hold her still and thrust again, pulling her back onto my dick over and over again. My fingers grip her hips, the tips leaving indents in her soft skin. "Fuck, Ellie. You're going to be the death of me."

"Drake, please don't stop," she pants. Her hands grip the headboard, knuckles turning white, as she arches her back and moves her hips in time with my thrusts.

"Touch yourself, baby girl. I'm about to fill you up, but I need you to come, too." She does as I say, her hand rubbing her clit furiously. "Come with me, Ellie. Come with me."

"Yes! Daddy!"

She screams my name, and the sound of her pleasure combined with all of her muscles bearing down on me is enough to push me over the edge. I push into her one last time and let go, my vision blurring as my orgasm consumes me. "Fuck yes, Ellie. You're mine. All fucking mine."

My hips rock forward, and I empty myself into her, my breath coming in ragged gasps as I collapse onto the bed next to her. My body feels completely spent, and all I want is to fall asleep right now with her in my arms. I'm about to pull her into me when she sits up and looks at me.

"Wow."

I grin at her, my head falling back onto the pillow. "That's one way of putting it."

I bask in the afterglow with her for a few moments before peeling myself away and going to restart the shower for a second time so we can clean up. Once alone in the bathroom, though, I lean against the glass shower door and take a shaky breath to come to terms with what I've just realized.

She's everything. Ellie White is everything to me, and I'm in love with her.

6

ELLIE

Coming out of our suite and rejoining the conference doesn't even seem real. Our hotel room, the bed, the shower—it all felt like our own little world, and going back to reality feels impossible.

I don't want to do it. But I have to. Dammit.

It doesn't even feel like we're the same people, back in our professional clothing, ready to do our jobs. We almost didn't make it out of the room when Drake saw me in my slate gray pencil skirt—apparently his favorite item of clothing on the planet—but I retained enough of my professionalism to get us out the door.

Now we're backstage as Drake prepares for his speech. Being one of two keynote speakers, the crowd is enormous. None of us mention that Claude is speaking after him, technically the final speaker for the entire convention. Every time it's brought up, I remind Drake that it was simply done that way because of alphabetical order, but I can tell that doesn't help ease his anger at having to precede the climber he hates so much.

But he manages to put that out of his mind, and I straighten his tie, fighting the urge to kiss him. Drake didn't have time to shave this morning, and the stubble on his jaw is driving me wild. "I'm going to go find a seat. Good luck."

He gives me his trademark smirk, lopsided and dashing. "Luck has nothing to do with

it. I've got this."

"Of course you do. Don't forget you've got the interview for the New York Times with Kenneth Hopper after this. You're meeting at the hotel cafe. I'll catch up with you afterward."

"Ellie..." His laugh is low and soft. "I know, baby. I know. We've been over this a million times."

"Fine. Fine." I give in to the urge to touch him one last time, resting my hand on his forearm and squeezing gently. Drake gives me a small smile and turns to chat with the stage manager, and I walk out into the crowded auditorium.

I've been to a lot of big meetings and conferences over the years, and I'm usually excited by the energy. There's something about being surrounded by a bunch of people who are all passionate about the same thing that just feels right.

But today, it just feels stifling. I'm hot and cramped in a chair in the middle of the auditorium, surrounded by climbers waiting for Drake's speech to begin. It's a huge crowd, and I'm starting to feel claustrophobic. I look around and try to figure out if there's an easy escape route, and then I catch sight of a familiar head of golden hair. Claude. Ugh.

I'll deal with feeling crowded. There's no way in hell I'm going to stand and risk him noticing me, especially after Drake knocked him senseless last night. I do glance back long enough to see the purple bruise on his jaw sloppily covered with makeup and allow myself a satisfied smile.

Introductions are finished, and it's finally time for Drake to go on. He wrote his own speech, which I went over and carefully edited for public appropriateness. One instance of 'fuck' in a speech is funny; five instances are bordering on insane. But

despite my editing, the speech oozes Drake Evans, climber, CEO and unwilling heartthrob—confident, blindingly intelligent, and maybe just a little arrogant.

It's brilliant. He's brilliant. I love him.

Wait, what?

I'm so distracted by my own thoughts that I miss the entire first half of Drake's speech. I've seen it dozens of times, anyway. I know how it begins, a story about how he started climbing as a kid, and then progressed from there to the summit of Mount Everest. I know how it ends, too, with an inspirational quote about dreams and working hard.

It's the middle where he's really got the audience on edge. He's talking about climbing the Dawn Wall, a particularly difficult climb that earned him his reputation as a rockstar climber. I remember when he told me about this particular climb, about the difficulties he faced, and the determination he needed to make it to the top. I remember his enthusiasm and passion as he told the story.

Drake is in his element. He's passionate and bold, his eyes bright and his hands gesturing wildly as he tells the story. It's hard to believe that just a few hours ago, he was standing in our suite, completely naked, with me in his arms.

He finishes his speech, and everyone claps. There's a quick break, and the moderator takes the stage again. "Next, we'll hear from the star of the new documentary, 'The Ecstasy of the Summit', Claude Vanderhoven. That captivating speech will start in thirty minutes. Don't miss it!"

My eyes snap to where Claude is standing, and my stomach twists at the sight of him. He's in the middle of the room, just a few rows in front of me. His blond hair is perfectly styled, his suit immaculate. Luckily, the crowd is standing from their seats

and moving, many of them desperate for a drink or a bathroom break between the speeches, and I figure I'll be able to slip out before I'm noticed.

What I don't anticipate is the absolute chaos of the crowd trying to leave through two small doors. I'm ready to tear my hair out ten minutes later when I finally manage to shove through the throngs of people and into the hotel lobby again. I can almost let out a breath of relief.

Except somehow, Claude has managed to catch up with me. He's leaning against the wall near the doors, casually scrolling through his phone. I turn to go in the opposite direction, hoping to flee unnoticed, but then he looks up and catches my eye.

"Ellie!" he shouts.

I grit my teeth. "Claude," I reply, trying to sound cheery. "How's your face?"

Fury flashes over his expression before he quickly controls it, smoothing down his suit jacket in a calming gesture. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. To apologize for how forward I was last night. Not that it excuses your ... boss' abominable behavior, but I didn't know you two were sleeping together."

His words, blunt and dripping with disdain, have me both embarrassed and pissed off at the same time. "How dare you assume?—"

"Is it a lie?"

"It's none of your damn business is what it is!"

Claude shrugs one large shoulder. "If Drake wants to pay someone to both be his assistant and warm his bed, who am I to judge? I just got the impression you weren't that kind of woman."

I see red, my anger flaring bright and hot. "Listen here, you smug bastard—" I start, ready to tear into him. A few other people in the lobby turn to look at us in alarm, and I inhale deeply, trying to center myself and find some control. "He is not paying me to sleep with him, okay? Again, not that it's any of your damned business, but any personal relationship I have with Drake is outside of our working relationship."

"Oh. So you don't mind that he's having brunch with another woman right this second?" Claude asks.

I open my mouth, then snap it shut again. What the hell did he just say? "Brunch? With another woman?"

Claude shrugs again, that insufferable grin still on his face. "Yes. My assistant was picking up a coffee for me and sent me this picture. After what happened last night, he thought I would find it very interesting."

Claude holds his phone up, and no matter how much I want to deny it, the proof is right here on the screen—Drake sitting across from a tall, dark-haired woman who is certainly not journalist Kenneth Hopper. She has her head tilted back, laughing, and Drake is relaxed and grinning. They look cozy, even from the distance of the photo.

A sinking feeling settles in the pit of my stomach, and I swallow hard. "I see," I say quietly, my voice sounding strained to my own ears. "I'm sure it's just a business associate."

"Ah, Ellie, but wait. It's a video."

Before I can spare myself and turn away, he hits the play button on the screen and the video starts. Above the sounds of the crowded cafe, I can hear Drake's deep voice cutting through. I would recognize it anywhere.

"Ellie was just my assistant?—"

The video ends as abruptly as it began, but the damage is done. I swallow hard, pushing the bile rising up my throat back down. "You know what, Claude? Go to hell."

Claude's smirk only grows. "What's the matter, Ellie? Upset that Drake is fucking someone else?"

I want to slap that smug look right off his face, but I can feel tears building behind my eyes, and I refuse to let them fall in front of Claude. Instead, I whirl around, intent on finding Drake. I manage to hold them in until I'm at the door of the cafe, and then I see them, still entrenched in their meal and each other's company. He ditched an interview to be with this woman. He lied to me.

My chest heaves, and the tears fall, and I know I'm going to start ugly sobbing if I don't get out of here right now. I take off as fast as my legs can carry me. I don't stop, running as fast as I can until I'm back at our suite, shaking as I lock myself into our room.

All at once, I sob, ashamed that I didn't rush the happy couple and make a scene right in the middle of the cafe like Drake deserved and heartbroken that I was stupid enough to fall for him. I look at the bed where we spent so much time just hours ago, now freshly made by housekeeping, and want to puke.

But I can't fall to pieces. If I'm just an assistant to Drake, then that's all he'll ever get of me. I will never open myself up to be hurt by him again.

Actually, no. Fuck that. If he thinks he can sleep with me, take my virginity, and toss me to the curb, then he won't get assistant Ellie either. He will get none of me.

Heartsick and furious, I pack my bags as quickly as possible, intent on being out of here by the time he returns. If I'm lucky, I'll be on a plane back to Denver before he even realizes what happened.

Drake wants to abandon me? Fine. Two can play that game.

After paying an outrageous amount for an Uber, followed by a last-minute ticket back to Colorado, I don't start to feel any regrets until I'm seated on the airplane and the adrenaline of my escape from Drake starts to wear off.

I turned my phone off as soon as I left the hotel, knowing that if he called me and begged me to stay, I'd fold. Now, as the airplane starts to taxi down the runway, I hate realizing that I want to fold without him even speaking a word to me about staying. I want Drake that much. I love him, even if it makes me an idiot.

But that doesn't mean I have to hang around while he wines and dines other women. I might be an idiot, but at least I can be an independent one.

A few hours later, the plane lands, and I'm exhausted. I have a long drive ahead of me, and I'm not looking forward to spending more time in the car. But I've made my bed, and I have to lie in it. I take a deep breath and start the drive back home, grateful that at least I'm away from the man who broke my heart.

The entire drive is spent alternating between crying and anger. I should have known better than to let my heart get involved. Drake is my boss and nothing more. I'd been so careful to keep my feelings to myself, to keep everything professional, but in one night, all of that had gone up in smoke.

I've given Drake Evans my virginity, and he doesn't even want me. Now, I've lost my job, the man I love, and my pristine career reputation. Everything I've worked for is ruined.

I don't want to think about it anymore, but I can't escape it.

I yearn until I'm home, sinking onto my couch as I take out my phone. I switch it back on, dreading what I'll see. And immediately, my phone buzzes with an incoming call.

My heart sinks.

It's Drake. I can't deal with this. It might make me weak, but I can't.

Ignoring the call, I pull up his contact before he can dial again, and with my heart shattering inside me, I hit 'block'.

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7

DRAKE

It isn't until I get the notification that a plane ticket has been purchased on my business credit card that I even realize anything is wrong. Because apparently, I'm the densest man in the world.

Kenneth Hopper called me just before I went on stage, telling me he was ill, but his intern Meredith would be meeting me to conduct the interview instead. Never once did I consider telling Ellie about the change. I guess I take it for granted that she isn't omnipotent. She seems so all-knowing all the time that sometimes I forget.

So when the interview runs long, and I return to our suite late, I figure she's just gone to get lunch without me. I text Ellie, and when she doesn't respond, I call her.

No answer. Frowning, I go to call again, just as the alert for the plane ticket pops up.

A flight has been purchased. In Ellie's name.

I stare at the screen in shock. And then I call her again.

Still no answer.

Fuck. She's left me.

I'm going to lose it. I'm going to lose my mind. Because I don't understand. How

could Ellie leave like this? What am I supposed to do? I can't believe she would go like this. I feel like my heart has been torn out of my chest. I don't know what to do.

I sink onto the bed, resting my head in my hands. I'm not usually a man who loses control, but this is too much.

Think, man. Think!

I saw her in the crowd during the speech, but once it was done, I went to the interview just like we had planned. The only change was doing the interview with Meredith instead of Kenneth. And then there was that weirdo with the French accent at the cafe counter I caught taking pictures of us?—

Dammit. A French accent. That bastard wasn't some creepy fan; he was one of Claude's lackeys.

From there, it's easy to put the puzzle of what must have happened together. A video of me with Meredith, shown to Ellie by Claude. Fuck. No wonder she bolted. She thought I was seeing another woman, and I didn't even consider giving her a heads-up that the interviewer had changed. This is all my fault.

I have to find a way to get through to her. This time, I don't call Ellie; instead, I call the hotel concierge. He doesn't even get the greeting out before I'm speaking. "I need a car to the airport and a ticket on the soonest flight to Denver." Then I pause, a wild, spontaneous, insane idea comes to me. "But before the airport, I need to go to a jewelry store. The best one in Salt Lake City. Hurry."

There's no time to waste. If Ellie needs me to prove myself to her, I sure as hell will. And I'll do it in a way that she will never, ever forget.

Ellie is mine. I'm not just going to win her back. I'm going to make it official.

I'm going to make us forever.

It isn't until the next morning, when I'm finally on the ground in Denver, freshly showered and standing in the middle of my apartment, that I realize I don't even know Ellie's address. I'm in love with a woman, and I don't even know where she lives because I haven't paid attention to a single damn important thing since I hired her. She's done all the remembering, and now I've fucked myself.

Oh well. Just another hurdle. Just another mountain to climb. I'll find her one way or another.

No amount of Googling gives me an address, so I find myself in the humiliating position of asking my own secretary at Dragon Ascent, Stacy, for it. After getting over her shock at seeing me back in Denver a day early, Stacy hesitates at my request.

"Legally, I can't give anyone any personal information?—"

"This is me asking you," I say through gritted teeth, "as your employer."

Stacy winces. "I understand, but as your employee, I still can't legally disclose any information."

Unbelievable. I've somehow managed to hire the most morally sound secretary on the planet, and it's biting me in the ass. "Stacy, I own the damn company."

"I know, I know, it's just..." She bites at her thumbnail, looking away from me, obviously in distress.

"Stacy." I lower my voice, trying to be soothing, but the edge is still there. "I just need her address."

Stacy lets out a long breath. "It's against the rules."

"No one has to know."

She glances up at me, a calculating look on her face. "She's on the company credit card, right? So her address might be on the account statements..."

"Yes," I say, nodding. "If I could just see one of my business statements, and it just so happens to have her address too, well, that's nothing you did wrong."

"Okay, but only if you promise never to tell anyone I helped."

"Promise." I give her a charming grin. "You're the best, Stacy."

"Oh, stop." She blushes and waves a hand at me, but she's already turning to the filing cabinet behind her desk. "I'll go grab the statements."

After looking them over and Googling the address—an apartment building with an open roof garden—I formulate a plan in my mind at lightning speed.

"Perfect. Oh, and Stacy? I'll write you a bonus check right now for \$1,000 if you'll do me one more favor. This one is really easy. All I need you to do is send a text."

Stacy Blanchard: Hi Ms. White. Mr. Evans just stopped in and said to meet him on your roof tonight, and he'll give you your bonus check. He also said you two don't have to talk; you can just take the check if you want.

Ellie White: Tell him to go to hell.

Stacy Blanchard: Oh, well, no. I won't do that, considering he's my boss and all. And he's already left, anyway. Have a good night!

After paying a party planner an obscene amount of money to set the scene, I wait for twenty minutes on the candlelit roof for the love of my life to come out. Rose petals are scattered everywhere, and the mood lighting is unmatched. I hope it will be enough to show I'm not just a bonehead climber.

She's taking so long that part of me thinks she isn't going to show. I'm ready to leave when the door to the roof finally opens, and Ellie appears, wearing a thin white summer dress. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. She's fucking perfect. It takes everything in me not to sweep her up into my arms immediately.

"You really think I'm going to come up here just because you told me to?" she seethes, her annoyance with me so achingly familiar and beloved that it takes my breath away. There's my girl. "I only came because I didn't want you harassing my neighbors if I didn't."

I don't buy it for a second. "And that's why you're wearing that pretty little dress?"

She scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest. "It's not for you."

"Then for who?" I challenge, stalking forward until I'm looming over her. There's a high color on her cheeks, making affection rush through me.

"It's just a dress," she insists, but I know our close proximity is breaking her down. Ellie looks up into my eyes, and then away. "Stacy said you have my bonus."

"I do. But first, I want you to tell me. Why did you leave Salt Lake City without talking to me?"

She huffs, taking a step back and wrapping her arms around herself. "I didn't want to interrupt your date."

I knew it. This is all a huge misunderstanding, and all I have to do is set the record straight.

I smile triumphantly. "I knew you were jealous."

Her head jerks up, her eyes wild. "I was not."

"Then why did you leave?"

She throws her hands up in frustration. "You're so infuriating! You have these women throwing themselves at you, so why are you here with me? You don't even care. I'm just your assistant!"

"I do care!" I shout, taking a step toward her. "Ellie, I care about you more than anyone else in my entire life. Kenneth Hopper had the flu. That woman was his intern filling in for him! I was never seeing someone else. And if you'll have me, I never will again."

Ellie has to brace herself against the brick wall of the stairway entrance to steady herself as shock rolls through her. "His ... his intern? Are you serious?"

I nod, suddenly exhausted. "I know I'm a lot, Ellie. And I can be demanding, stubborn, and rude. But the truth is, I need you. Not just for the company, but for me. I've been falling for you ever since you came into my office with that ridiculously detailed resume, and I'm tired of pretending otherwise."

I can see her processing this information, her face going slack as she tries to take everything in. It's nerve-wracking, being so open with her, but I know it's worth it. "But Claude showed me this video, and I could hear you talking in it. You said, 'Ellie was just my assistant'.

I feel like I've been slapped across the face. Oh, my poor girl. All this time, she only had a fraction of the picture, and that fraction had been purposely pulled out to devastate her as much as possible. Next time I see Claude Vanderhoven, I will knock that ridiculous smile off his face and his teeth out of his mouth.

"Would you like to hear the entire sentence?"

Already swaying towards me, she nods, trust starting to bleed back into her wide blue eyes.

"Meredith, the intern, asked me about the rumors that I was dating my assistant. A lot of people took pictures the night of the mixer when you were my date. I told her, 'One minute Ellie was just my assistant, and the next I was realizing that I loved her. It happened that fast. So yes, I am seeing the woman who was formally my assistant but is now so much more.' Is that what you needed to hear?"

"Y-you love me?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, Drake." She chokes back a sob, and then she's in my arms, her hands tangling in my hair as she presses her lips to mine. This time, when she kisses me, I can't hold back. I don't want to. I pour everything I have into the kiss, tasting her, reveling in the feel of her soft body pressed against me.

All around us, the candles flicker in the wind, red rose petals stirring. The lights of the city surround us, and I can't think of a better moment to do this. I pull back from our kiss, looking down at her shining, tear-streaked face. "Ellie, I love you. I want you in my life forever. Will you marry me?"

"W-what?" I didn't think it was possible to shock her more than I already had tonight,

but apparently, I was wrong.

Digging the black velvet box out of my pocket, I open it so she can see the ring. It's a platinum band inlaid with three delicate diamonds.

I can't believe she loves me. After all the crap I've put her through, she's still here, staring up at me with adoration in her eyes. My chest tightens with emotion, and I realize I'm terrified she'll say no. But she wouldn't have kissed me like that if she didn't care for me as much as I do for her. "I'm asking you to marry me."

Her eyes fly to mine, lips parted in surprise. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. I've never been more sure of anything in my life." I reach out and cup her face, the ring still held out to her. "Ellie White, will you marry me?"

"Yes!"

With a relieved laugh, I pluck the ring out of the box, slip it on her finger, and pull her back against me. "I love you."

Her fingers curl into the back of my neck, and she pulls me down for another kiss. "Even if you have to hire another assistant?"

I laugh, "When you're my wife and co-owner of the company, I highly doubt I'll need anyone else."

She kisses me again, the press of her lips to mine telling me exactly what she wants. I'm happy to oblige. "Let me take you home," I say against her mouth. "I need to show you just how much I love you."

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EPILOGUE

ELLIE

One Year Later

I t's hard to keep my breathing even, and the television the nurses have turned on isn't exactly helping.

"Newscast Blast Yosemite Valley! We're here at the base of El Capitan to watch as climber Drake Evans, owner and CEO of Dragon Ascent, makes his first free solo climb of the granite monolith! He's made it about halfway and is on track to make it in record time. But wait! He's descending! What on earth could make this hardened climber leave an attempt like this midway through?"

"Oh, you better hurry, you idio—ah"

The nurse watches the replay of today's earlier events on the television with me as she mops my damp forehead, quietly talking me through the contraction. "I'm sure he'll be here, Mrs. Evans. Anytime now."

We've been in California for months now, overseeing the construction of the new Dragon Ascent factory. I was due to be induced next week and insisted that Drake could still attempt his climb today. I want to go back in time and slap my former self for even considering it because now I'm giving birth alone and?—

The birthing suite doors fly open, and then a tall figure, still dressed in half his

climbing gear, rushes towards me.

"Drake!" I reach out for him, relief crashing through me.

"I'm here, Ellie," he says, voice calm and controlled as always.

I shake my head as another contraction grips me. "I'm so glad you made it. I shouldn't have?—"

He takes my hand and gives it a reassuring squeeze. "It's all right, baby." His smile is filled with such tenderness and love that my heart swells. "You can do this. I'm here now."

He settles himself behind me as the nurse helps prop me up on the side of the bed, and I lean against him, taking comfort in the safety and warmth of his body. He's right. As long as he's here, I can do this.

Four hours later, the chaos of the birth is over, and I'm exhausted and sore, but there's also a strange, buzzing energy under my skin. Drake has been by my side the entire time, holding me and letting me squeeze his hand until it goes white. Now, he cradles our tiny daughter in his arms, looking down at her with a mix of wonder and concern. He's terrified but oh so in love.

"Drake," I whisper. "She's beautiful."

"She is, Ellie," he murmurs. He kisses her forehead softly. "Just like her mother."

I blush, still getting used to the sweet things he says to me. We've only been together for a year officially, but in that time, he's shown me just how deeply he feels for me. He may be gruff and brash when we're at work, but the man I've fallen for is kind, gentle, and fiercely protective. I can't believe I got so lucky.

We got married just weeks after the proposal, not wanting to waste a second. Now we're here, together in this moment, looking down at the tiny person we created. It's still hard to believe that Drake and I are parents.

Drake shifts our baby girl in his arms, and her little hand flails up. He smiles and takes her tiny palm in his much larger one.

"Hey, sweetheart," he coos. "It's your daddy. I'm so glad you're finally here."

My heart melts as tears well in my eyes. I love seeing Drake so gentle. It's so nice to see his softer side. I reach out and take his empty hand in mine, and his green eyes turn to me.

"We did good, Ellie," he says, voice a low rumble. He kisses her forehead and then leans over and kisses me, too. "You're an amazing woman. I love you."

I smile and kiss him back. "I love you and our little Teagan."

Drake strokes Teagan's soft baby cheek, and it might just be the dimmed lights of the room, but I swear his eyes are shinier than usual.

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DRAKE

Ten Years Later

I expected to feel more as I finalized the document with my signature, but really, all there is left is relief. Dragon Ascent has now been sold for nearly forty million to REI Co-op, and now Ellie and I are free.

I turn to my wife, her blue eyes shining. She reaches out and takes my hand in hers, and I pull her close, pressing a soft kiss to her lips.

"I'm so proud of you, honey," she says. "You made your dream come true."

I smile because my dream was never to run a climbing company. It was always this. My wife and my kids. Ellie and I have three, a girl and two boys, and our days are full of chaos and love, but I wouldn't trade it for the world.

"No," I say softly. "You did."

She gives me a soft, happy smile. I'm still so in love with her after all these years. We've been married for a decade now, and I fall more in love with her every day. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

I pull her into my lap, and she rests her head on my shoulder. I stroke her curly hair, and she sighs contentedly. "What happens now that you have no strings holding you down, Mr. Evans? Maybe another ascent of Everest?"

I laugh, "Absolutely not. I was thinking more about a beach vacation while the kids stay with my parents. Just us, a private cove, you in a little white bikini..." As I'm tracing my hand down her legging-clad leg, Ellie stiffens. "What? Did I say something wrong?"

She cringes. "Oh, nothing. It's just ... maybe not a bikini." She gestures to her middle, where I know stretch marks from giving birth to our kids grace her skin.

I squeeze her hip gently and press a kiss to her soft neck. "Oh, sweetheart. You're so beautiful. More beautiful now than ever. Those marks show how strong you are, and I love every one of them."

She shivers and leans into me. "I know," she says, but there's still uncertainty in her voice. "It's just you're ... you. In perfect shape. And I'm?—"

"The hottest fucking woman on the planet is what you are. These curves drive me up the fucking wall. I love that you're not as delicate anymore, I love that I can fuck you nice and hard without worrying about hurting you. You're. Fucking. Perfect."

"You mean it?"

"I sure as hell do."

Ellie sighs happily, and when I kiss her, I can see her pulse jump in her throat. I can feel the heat coming off her skin, and I know she wants me just as badly as I want her right now.

"Come on, sweetheart," I say, pulling her up and guiding her out of the study and towards the bedroom. "I'm going to show you just how much I love your body."

My cock is already rock hard, and I have to fight the urge to rip her clothes off and bury myself deep inside her. No, I have to go slow and show her how much I mean

every word I say.

When we get to our bedroom, I lay her back against the pillows and step back to look at her. Her cheeks are flushed, and her hair is a mess. She looks so beautiful I can hardly stand it.

"You know what? Maybe not a bikini. When I have you all to myself, I want you wearing nothing at all on our private beach."

Ellie squeals with laughter as I gather her in my arms, her sounds of joy quickly fading into gasps of pleasure as I worship her the way she deserves.

The End

Thanks for reading!