

The Bosshole's Fake Fiancée

AN AGE GAP BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

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CHAPTER 1

Garth

My assistant reads out the itinerary for the day, but I am only half listening. I am considering putting the hotel on the market and I'm trying to gauge the estimate of its value. I had already called my broker of course but I like to think things through for myself first, before seeking secondary opinions. *'The Lady'* is my baby after all.

"Are you still with me sir?" Paula snaps her fingers irritably in front of my face.

She sits across from me in my limousine, her stockinged feet crossed, and her shirt buttoned all the way to her neck. I give her one of my slow, bright smiles that is generally enough to have ladies swooning, but she is immune.

"Are you okay, sir?" She repeats, but this time her voice has more teeth to it.

I fall back against the seat, clutching my chest in mock pain. "Are you worried about me perhaps?"

She rolls her eyes and then returns to her notepad. "You have a meeting with Hillary's team at nine, and a quick brief with the regional managers at eleven." She half looks up from

the screen. "I already called that Indian place you like. There will be a lot of sweets and snacks."

I look out the window, watching the street. There isn't much to see. It's a typical Monday in New York, with enough foot traffic to make it appear as if several bodies are all melding into one. The car itself inches slowly forward, coming to a standstill every so often. I half listen to her while watching a driver honking his horn in anger at a vehicle that had just cut him up, waving his fist and screaming in impotent rage.

"You know me so well," I say. "You might as well marry me."

She ignores me. "You have a two o'clock with your mother."

I turn. "What? Why?"

"You asked me to set up a meeting last week."

"No, I didn't." My eyes narrow. I smell a rat. "Did *she* put you up to this?"

"You sign my paycheck. Why would I..."

"Damn right I do."

She returns to her notes, but she has a small smile playing on her lips and I know she has been conspiring with my mother again.

A space in traffic opens up for us, and my driver moves us forward. "Could you take a detour to *The Lady*?"

"Yes sir."

Paula consults her watch. "You don't have time to take detours. The investors from China are due to land in the next hour. We are behind as it is."

"I'm sure you guys can manage without me."

My driver pulls into the parking lot of the hotel and while Paula is momentarily stunned, I take the opportunity to pat her on the head, messing up her neat bun.

“Later, kiddo.”

Her squawk of outrage is lost as the car drives away. I chuckle to myself, but the comedy of the situation is quickly shelved. I want to avoid drawing attention to myself, so I choose to enter through a side entrance.

The corridor is empty; most of the hotel guests are either out visiting New York's plentiful supply of tourist sites or are still in their rooms sleeping off hangovers from revelries the night before. I make a mental note to give my interior designer more praise. She's done an excellent job of reworking the corridors and other public spaces to generate the illusion of luxury and opulence. The paintings on the walls are tasteful and evenly spaced, not crowding the room. The dark wooden ceiling provides an interesting, natural grain texture, the pendant lamps that hang from wires at different lengths create contrasts of shadows and pools of light on the walls, and the sleek, modern, bronze sculptures that are placed here and there along the corridor's length are accentuated by discrete spotlights that draw the eye to them as one walks past. The overall effect is modern enough to be interesting, perhaps even thought-provoking, but equally importantly, it also has plenty of the flowing lines and classical elegance that a hotel in my chain always promises to its patrons.

My phone dings and I'm tempted to ignore it, guessing it might be an aggrieved Paula, but I'm expecting several important calls today and cannot afford to remain detached from technology.

It's a message from my dad.

What does he want?

I'm about to slide it open when I bump into something soft. My phone slips from my grasp.

“Oh, my bad, I’m sorry,” a feminine voice says as she bends down to pick it up for me.

“Oh no, I should be the one apologizing.”

I follow her down to the floor, but there is barely any room for the both of us, our bodies bumping against each other on the way down. She laughs at the awkwardness, and I’m forced to laugh too. Her hands find my phone first, and she holds it up to me.

I know I should take it and focus on getting back to work, but I find myself stalling. “Thank you.”

I wait, expecting her to recognize me and start fawning over me. Instead, she waves the phone in my face.

“If you don’t want it, I will gladly keep it.” She turns it around to read the brand name and model number. “It looks pretty expensive.”

I reach out for it. “Yeah. More importantly it has half my life on it. Thank you.”

Our hands meet, and just for an instant I feel a definite buzz.

That’s weird.

As we both rise, I search for something to say, then notice her unusual attire. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Well... just to work.” She looks at me, her eyebrows slightly raised. She’s dressed in the type of scrubs you might see in a high-class beauty clinic, and her hair is bound up in a hair net.

I second-guess myself, “I do not mean to be rude I swear, but I’m not aware of any nurses or doctors working here?”

She laughs. “No, I work here as a massage therapist.”

I seize my opening opportunity. “Oh, how fortunate for me, I believe I may be in need of a massage.”

“Do you now?” The sparkle in her eyes reminds me of the look I often see in my mother’s eyes, calling me out on some

of my rapidly-cooked-up bullshit. I look away first, I should go back to the office and get some work done. I'm about to say so when she breaks into a wider smile, "Come to think of it, you do look a little tightly wound."

I find myself mirroring her smile, "See? Lead the way Miss...?"

"Kathy," she turns a little too quickly and once again our bodies bump into each other. This time, it feels different. My hands catch her around her waist and pull her close until we share the same air. "My name is... Kathy." she repeats, her voice dropping below a whisper.

She leads me back the way I had come, but I scarcely see anything else but her. She could be leading me to my death for all I know.

We arrive at a door labeled *Treatment Room 3*, which she pushes open to let us in. It doesn't squeak as the swings shut behind us, slowed as it is by its spring mechanism into a quiet click.

The room is tastefully decorated in a minimalist, oriental style. A row of ceramic bowls line the dresser in the corner, underneath wall-mounted speakers that are currently silent. Tasteful paintings of Mount Fuji and of cherry trees in blossom are on the bamboo-colored walls.

"You can take off your clothes over there," she says pointing towards a privacy screen, next to a sturdy, motorized massage table.

"With pleasure," I drawl, winking at her. She blushes and smiles looking away.

As I undress behind the privacy screen, the hunger grows within me. I keep picturing that smile, partway shy, paired with that unmistakable desire in her eyes. Delectable.

And as she walks toward me holding a basket of towels and lotions, her delicate scent only serves to stoke the hunger.

I stretch out onto the massage table without prompting.

“I’m all yours.”

She clears her throat and then clicks a button. The lights dim somewhat, and soft, traditional Japanese music emanates from the speakers. “To set the mood,” she says.

I don’t take my eyes off her as she presses another button to adjust the massage table height so she can work on my body at just the right angle. She catches me looking, but I do not look away. After a brief moment or two, she averts her gaze, and I tamp down a chuckle.

This is going to be fun.

A small part of her hair has slipped from her net, and I want so badly to set it straight.

She is truly beautiful, but beautiful women don’t typically affect me this much. What’s happening here?

She plants her hands on her hips and mock-glares at me. “Why are you staring at me?”

“I was just wondering what you are going to do to me. Also, frankly, you are a very beautiful young woman. Why wouldn’t I look at you?” I do my best to keep my expression innocent, but I must not have succeeded because she suddenly narrows her eyes at me.

“You...” She wags her finger at me, and I cannot hide my grin. “You shouldn’t.”

“Shouldn’t what?”

She sighs and selects the oils she is going to use, before making a start on my chest. After a few minutes into the session, I realize that she isn’t just a pretty face, she actually knows what she is doing and is very good at it. She finds a spot near my neck that is so tight it could strum a guitar. She slowly works out all the kinks until my eyes half close to slits.

“You are right,” she said. “You are wound up very tight Mr...?”

I do not volunteer the information to fill in the blanks, the reason being I am enjoying the interaction far too much to spoil it with my name. Any other woman would have put two and two together, but she obviously lives in her own world.

I have grown bored of the fame and fortune of being one of New York’s wealthiest hoteliers, and I am particularly tired of the “playboy” image that to be fair I guess I had earned in my younger days. The feeling of not being known is refreshing, and I am loving the anonymity. I hope it can last...

She pauses. “You’re really not going to tell me? Are you a serial killer?”

“You’ll never know.”

“Are you sure about that? I can be very persuasive,” she says, and as soon as the words leave her mouth, we both freeze. It’s the first time she has flirted back at me so obviously.

She tries to backtrack. “I’m sorry, that was unprofessional.”

But the deed has already been done, and I’m not about to let her off my hook now. I half stand, the towels that have been covering my lower torso slipping to the floor, and she immediately panics. “Have I offended you? I’m so sorry, sir.”

Just like I thought, her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are wide with apprehension. She is so distressed that she doesn’t initially notice that I am standing in front of her, entirely naked.

When she finally realizes, her eyes make a trail from my chest downwards, before quickly looking away. “You need to lie down, sir.”

Her eyes are dancing, not looking at me for one second and

then returning as if she cannot help it. I chuckle again to myself... to think I was the one worried about bursting. "Your lips are moving but your eyes are saying something entirely different."

"Sir..."

"Shh." I capture her chin, but she still will not meet my gaze.

"I'm going to count to three, and then I'm going to kiss you. If you don't want this between us, you should leave now." I count, "One... Two..." She is still here, so on the beat of number three I lean forwards and press my lips against hers.

For the last twenty minutes I have been fantasizing about that kiss, but my fantasies didn't hold a candle to the real thing. She is soft and responsive in my hands, and when she moans, I feel like beating my fist against my chest and roaring like King Kong. I break the kiss, and she looks like she has been caught up in a whirlwind.

"What's happening... why are we stopping?"

She looks completely ravished; her lovely long blonde hair beginning to escape from her previously carefully arranged hairnet, and her lips swollen red with passion. I reach out to touch them, and she nips at my hand. The move sends a thrill through me down to my hard member. I could forget about my pressing need when I wasn't focused on it, but I don't know how long I can hold out for now, and suddenly I realize how much I want to give her the experience of a lifetime. I want to erase from her memory all of the men she has ever been with in her past. Now I realize I need her like I had never needed a woman before. I hook my hand under her and pull her upwards. Instinctively, she wraps her hands around my neck as I lay her gently down on top of the massage coach.

Feeling the urge to mark her, I give in to the impulse and

place a love bite on her neck, just a tiny nibble, enough but no more. She jumps, but laughs when she realizes what I have done.

Her hair net has fallen away completely now, and the long tresses of her blonde hair have come tumbling down, framing her face. I wind her hair around my hands and use it to pull her forward to give her another kiss. Then I gently push her down to the couch. No more waiting...

CHAPTER 2

Kathy

I know before I open my eyes that I am all alone. Still, I reach out to feel the space beside me.

I pry one eye open and sit up. All traces of him; his shirt, shoes are gone. I may very well have imagined him. I'm unsure what to feel.

We certainly didn't exchange words of commitment or love, but I expected... something.

There was something elusive about him that remained untouched even though he managed to elicit so many responses from me. My cheeks turn red even as I think of how many times I begged. I begged him to stop torturing me, but as soon as he did, I begged him again to continue. None of my ex-lovers had ever made me feel such a range of emotions; excitement and joy at the masterful touch of his skilled fingers, sadness and emptiness that he left without a note or a goodbye, and finally hope – hope that he hadn't said goodbye was because that possibly meant he might be planning to return.

This is so unlike me. I have always been the very personification of professionalism. I've *never* done anything like this

at work before, in fact I have never even *dated* anyone from work before, let alone... what we just did.

This is crazy – what was I thinking?

I make use of the shower that is provided for clients who want to wash up before or after a treatment. The quick jet spray of cold water jolts me back to the place where things are slippery and deliciously wet. I can still hear his voice in my ear, and I suspect that voice will stay in my dreams for a very long time. I can still feel the sharpness of his teeth grazing my flesh as he nibbles at my skin. One hand rubs my neck at the spot where he bit me so tenderly, while the other goes south to find my sex.

As the water washes away the physical evidence of our time together, my mind cannot help replaying the incident. He smelled heavenly, like woody smoke and exotic spices, but with a definite masculine muskiness that drove straight to my core. The way he carried himself and spoke with authority told me that he was used to people bending over backwards to please him. I turn red, just remembering the orders that he gave me.

“Not there Kathy, touch me here.”

He made me an active participant in an activity that I previously mostly took a passive role in, and just hearing his voice echoing through my head gets me aroused once again. My hands slip down to my vulva, and I work fast, bringing myself closer and closer to a climax.

When he entered me, I thought I was going to tear apart. He did his best to prepare me for him, but it wasn't enough. He was too big, but the pain was delicious, he rubbed against places I did not know I had and kindled them alive. Even now as I think of it, those parts of me light up and I gasp.

He pulled out almost immediately and slammed back into

me. I wanted to touch him, but he held my hands above my head.

I recall how he loosened his grip and allowed me to reach for him, holding onto him for dear life. I forgot my own name, forgot where he began and where I ended. My fingers work double time; fueled by my memories, bringing me quickly to the promised land.

I cum with a soft cry. My ears ring for so long, eclipsing all sounds.

When I come to, I know even without checking the clock that I've stayed away from my duties far too long. I rinse myself quickly and hurriedly dry myself before reaching for my clothes.

He'd ripped my panties, but the rest of my clothing remains untouched. I suppose I will have to go commando for the rest of the day until I get home. After a quick tidy-up I head to the Spa Reception to see what's happening and to show my face. Sophie, the Spa Manager is there with Tom, one of the physios that has recently joined us.

"You've been gone a long time, what happened?"

"Oh, I err... I had a client for a massage."

"What client?" She asks. "I didn't see anyone."

I tamp down the urge to tell her to stop interrogating me. But if I act like it was a big deal, she will surely continue to question me.

"He's one of the hotel patrons. He was looking around when I roped him in for a session."

She raises an eyebrow, "Did you indeed?"

"Stop it, Sophie. You know I'm good at my job."

I feel bad knowing I'm lying to her like this but what can I do; tell her the truth and possibly lose my job for unprofessional conduct? No way. I had worked too hard for this. A part of me reminds myself that I should have thought about

the stakes before I let my impulses take control. I bury that part of myself and focus instead on selling my innocence.

I can feel her eyes on my back as I walk away. Sophie is naturally paranoid, but I doubt anything will come of it. She will never learn the truth and I am sure that my stranger will not want to be roped into a scandal.

Satisfied that my secret is safe, I join Tim by the cash register. He is counting cash and sighing every second or so. "Be careful," I say. "Sophie is right behind me."

"Whatever. Sophie doesn't have to count this much change, does she?"

I take a guess. "Did a kid break their piggy bank and decide they wanted a spa treatment?"

"That'd be right. A teenager. Abigail is handling her in the other room." He looks up. "You were in there for a long time."

I roll my eyes, choosing to stick to the previous topic of conversation. "Girls that age are often doing drugs and having sex in the back of a dingy car. There are far worse things than paying for a spa treatment with their change."

"Did you ever have sex in the back of a dingy car?" he asks. His tone is playful, but I can see the genuine curiosity behind those eyes.

I laugh, slapping him on the shoulder. "HR is not too far from here either, Tim."

He rolls his eyes. "*I* should lodge a HR complaint, for making me count these many damn coins."

I am about to start to laugh at him again when Sophie walks past, and we fall silent. I expect her to scold me for occupying space and sitting around idly but she ignores me.

"She's such a boss." Tim says after she has gone.

I nod. "That she is."

Tim looks around the room like he is checking for spies.

The reception desk for the spa is fitted into one corner of a small, cozy room that you couldn't swing a cat in, yet he looks around like he thinks there might be a listener hidden from view. Like many men who choose to work in spas, this guy loves drama, there's no two ways about it. "Have you heard the rumors?"

I nudge his side, "What's going on?"

"You've not heard?" He tucks the rest of the change into the cash register and turns to give me his full attention.

"Heard what?" I am half checking a notification on my phone, only half listening as I am certain he is relying on cheap theatrics to make whatever he is about to tell me sound more important than it really is.

"It seems that the big man is getting ready to sell the place."

I freeze, certain I have misheard.

He continues to speak, oblivious to my shock. "I overheard Sophie on the phone talking to the front desk manager about it."

Hearing the news came directly from Sophie makes it appear even more authentic. I look at Tim, no longer half-listening. He doesn't seem too banged up about the news and that isn't surprising. He's from out of town, and he's not been here long. He seems to be very much a free spirit that is able to take pretty much everything in his stride. But I really enjoy my job here at *The Lady*, and especially since my mother recently died, the hotel has almost become a second family to me – a home from home. I have no desire to give it all up.

He must have noticed my countenance because he becomes more subdued. "I know you really like this job Kat, but the chances are strong that whoever buys the hotel will want to keep on all the staff anyway."

"It's fine," I sniff and look away, "I'm fine."

I head towards the ladies' restroom, knowing all I want to do is burst into tears. I recall how long it had taken before I got this job at this hotel. I cannot risk the possibility of going broke again, or of having to get back into the job hunt game. Not now, when I am still recovering from the shock of my mother's sudden death. We had been very close – best friends as well as mother and daughter – and the car accident had come out of the blue, as car accidents do. If it hadn't been for my routine at *The Lady* I am not sure if I would have pulled through. To be honest I am not even sure if I *have* pulled through, though I know how much more normal I feel now, compared with just a few weeks ago.

I try to give myself a pep talk but I am failing miserably at it. This may very well be fake news, and even if it is true, as Tim said, the chances are that the new owners will want to keep the staff on in order to keep the place going. I don't know the hotel's current owner personally, but being friends with him had never seemed important, and I made a point of keeping myself to myself at work, sticking to the spa and treatment area and rarely venturing out into the rest of the hotel except when necessary. What will I do if I am out of a job? Do I have the emotional strength to look for work right now on top of everything else? Truth is I'm not sure.

Sophie opens the door. "Kathy, there's a client waiting for a full body massage treatment in Treatment Room Three."

I splash water on my face and pull myself together. Tomorrow may be uncertain, but I still have a job, at least for today.

I get home to find my best friend Maggie on the couch with a

tub of ice cream on her lap. It's as if she has read my mind. I throw my bag on the floor and reach for the container.

"Gimme." I say, using the baby speak that the two of us often share in such moments of relaxation.

She pretends to attempt to hoard it and I frown in mock severity. "I'll collect the key to my house."

"Hey now." She hands me the tub. "You are way too harsh."

"Nobody stands in the way of me and Ben and Jerrys." The delicious explosion of sucrose and ice is just what I need to dull the ache of today's news.

She rubs my back soothingly, "That bad huh?"

"Mmmhmm."

She allows me to gulp down two spoonsful before retrieving the tub and helping herself. She eyes me as she takes her own large swallow. "Want to talk about it?"

I sigh, where do I start? Should I talk about having sex with a man I barely knew, simply because I felt the need to be wild and spontaneous, or should I talk about potentially losing my job, or how I'm still not feeling ready to take on the full rigors of life after the demise of my mother?

I shake my head, "I'm fine."

"Really? When did we start keeping secrets from each other?"

I bite my lip, contemplating. She throws her hands around me and shakes me, "Come on Kitty Kat. If you don't tell me, it'll eat at you forever."

She's right. I relished every moment of my afternoon of passion but as the day wore on, I'm beginning to realize that it may have been entirely unwise.

I place my hand over my eyes. "Oh God, Maggie. I just want to forget."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I know that it's not

quite true. Actually I don't want to forget even one second of my erotic encounter with the handsome stranger this afternoon. It was deliciously wrong, but I know I would do it again in a heartbeat.

"Okay, let's play a game. I'm gonna take a wild guess at what happened today, and you'll tell me if I'm right or not." Maggie clears her throat and speaks in her best British Announcer from the Fifties accent. "You had your first one-night stand with a complete random stranger you met at the hotel?"

My hand drops from my face, my jaw dropping as I stare at her. "That was a very lucky guess."

She shrugs. "Well, your hair is all mussed up and you have that 'just had sex' look about you."

"I have a 'just had sex' look?"

"Yeah," she grins. "Don't worry, it's not obvious to everyone. But I'm your best friend, so it's my job to notice these things."

She injects just the right level of unseriousness into the situation, making me feel less awkward. Many women my age embrace their sexual liberation and enjoy casual sex, but until now it had never appealed to me. Now? Now I was no longer sure of anything. I had to think.

I smile shyly as I nod slowly.

"Well... was it at least good?"

I give her a shove and her head disappears under the woolen throw she is wearing. "Shut up."

CHAPTER 3

Garth

Club 36 is an exclusive club that caters to celebrities and other wealthy people in the top one percent of society. I'm at the age where I prefer to spend my evenings at home after enjoying a simple dinner and a bottle of fine claret, but this charity event for the New York rich and famous is an important one to show up at. With my business finances delicately poised and a large acquisition on the horizon, I cannot afford to play hooky.

In truth, my mind wanders back to this afternoon and my encounter with Kathy.

I didn't want to leave her like that, but I had an important meeting in my diary that I couldn't miss.

She looked so peaceful, lying in my arms. I wondered if she had put the pieces together yet, and figured out who I was. Would she think I was deceiving her, or worse, would she expect to be paid money for "services rendered"? You'd think such a thing would never happen, but people seem to lose their minds a little when they realize I am billionaire.

Across the room, Dale Johnson, the CEO of rival hotel

chain Bicorp, lifts his glass to me in salute. I take that as an invitation to join him.

“Sorry ladies,” I say as I extricate myself from the group of women that surround me. I wink, hoping to soothe the sting of rejection. “I need to have a business discussion. Come find me later.”

They giggle. “You bet we will.”

I shiver a little as I walk away, feeling their gazes on my back like a pack of hyenas. Women can make an evening a little more bearable, but there's only so much girlish laughter a man can take before his ears start to bleed. Honestly, I have grown tired of the playboy life, and these days I only act like a player to avoid awkward questions about my single status, or (worse still) marriage offers. Kathy is different. She has a deep, rich, genuine laugh that seems to come from her belly. Her face is so expressive and bright, I have no doubt she means every single emotion that flies across it.

I shake myself loose from my enjoyable thoughts about Kathy's smile as I reach Johnson and shake hands with him.

He smiles, nodding towards the women I'd left behind. “Aren't you a little too old to know better?”

I signal the waitress, and she makes a beeline my way. I hardly drink these days, especially out in public, but I like to hold a glass as a prop. I occasionally exchange it for a fresh one so that it looks as if I am actively consuming the alcohol. I grin, “Women are one of God's exquisite creations. Why can't we enjoy? But yes, you're right. I'm not quite the young playboy I was once. These days it's more a habit than anything else.” I reach for the drink but notice something odd in how my waitress is acting. Her hands are shaking, barely balancing the tray, and the drinks look like they are in danger of falling over. “Are you okay?” I ask.

She glances at me briefly before looking down. “It's... it's

nothing sir. It's just that another guest a moment ago said something that... No, no it's nothing really, I'm fine. I must have misunderstood." She hurries away nervously, and Johnson raises his eyes skywards for a moment as if to say "Women!".

I cast my eyes casually across the room, taking in the rest of the guests all wearing their Sunday best. There are more diamonds and pearls in here than adorn an entire Tiffany store. A small chamber orchestra is softly playing Mozart symphonies in the background, and I quietly applaud the choice. The ostentatious setting and the number of wealthy guests provide an aura of exclusivity; a lot of checkbooks will open today and donations to the charity will no doubt be hefty.

"My sources tell me that you are putting *The Lady* out on the market?" Johnson says.

I let my eyes continue their journey round the room while I mull over his statement. He's fishing but I don't know why.

Our eyes finally meet, and his simple brown irises convey seriousness. "You want to make an offer?" I ask.

He cocks an eyebrow. "Do you think I should?"

The Lady is in the busiest part of town and is almost always fully booked. It's a very profitable investment and I would love to hang on to it, but right now my company needs a large pool of cash to invest in another, much larger acquisition that, if I played my cards right, would be even more lucrative.

Hence, the somewhat reluctant decision to put *The Lady* on the market.

But I'm determined to be selective about who I sell to. My staff have been loyal to me, and I don't want to sell *The Lady* to a tyrant who will suck the life out of the place, or a

businessman with poor judgment who will run it into the ground. Besides, *The Lady* was the first hotel in my father's chain, and I hold a certain affection for it. It may no longer be mine after I sell it, but I want to ensure that it gets a new owner that will take good care of it.

"My brother stayed there while he was in town, and he said the service was impeccable."

It's my turn to raise my eyebrows. "You know that flattery won't get you anywhere with me."

He shrugs. "It isn't flattery if it's the truth." He downs the rest of his drink and hands the empty glass to me. "Well, I have enjoyed spending my money on a good cause, but this old man has a curfew. My people will be in touch about *The Lady*."

I watch him walk away, his steps even and his back razor straight. Eighty-six years and there is no stopping in sight. "Old man my ass."

Still, he would not make a bad owner, and he'd probably be willing to move fast, which is exactly what I need. The only issue is that his chain specializes in business hotels with conference facilities, rather than tourist hotels with fine dining and treatment spas. So, would it really fit his portfolio without a lot of alterations?

It was definitely something to think about though.

I observe the rest of the party for a while, in a desultory mood, not really feeling inspired to get involved.

Suddenly, I want to turn in early too.

I'm well acquainted with the hosts of the charity event and courtesy demands I bid them goodnight before I leave, so I do. As I say my goodbyes, I see the triplets from earlier waving at me and they look like they intend to come over, so I make a beeline for the nearest exit I can find. Going through

some double doors and turning randomly right, then left, I find myself in another wider hallway, witnessing a scene.

Zion Aguielo is with one of the waitresses. It looks like it might be the young-looking girl I'd taken a drink from before in the other reception room. He is laughing, putting his hand around her waist only for her to remove it.

"Come on honey," he says. "I already told you earlier that I want you, and when I want something, I take it. Don't play hard to get."

Her voice is tiny, I almost didn't hear it. "Please don't, sir."

He has her cornered with her back to the wall, the tray of drinks the only buffer between them. He is several inches taller than her, so I have to look around him to see her face.

It is the waitress from earlier.

Her eyes are glued to the floor, her shoulders stiff and her face pale. Heat rivulets through me. Aguielo is abusing his power, and the poor woman is probably too scared to tell him to go to hell where he belongs.

The club has a strict no fraternizing policy for its staff of course, but it is not entirely unheard of for patrons to go home with a cute girl for the night. *If* they were willing, of course.

Several people walk by, but they avert their gaze once they see what is happening. A security guard stands at the other end of the hall with his back turned, even though I'm sure he can hear everything. going on. Nobody is going to stand up to Aguielo. I know from firsthand experience that you can get away with pretty much anything if you have enough money. I also know that Aguielo is a real piece of shit. His father happens to be in the same business as me, and in fact Zion and I attended private school together. More recently he sometimes tags along with his father when I'm

forced to do business with him. To be honest the father's piece of shit too, but he's nowhere near as bad as the son.

I stride toward them and put my hand on Aguielo's shoulder, applying just enough force to draw his attention. "She said no."

He freezes, then glances over his shoulder. An easy smile crosses his lips. "Aw, come on, Garth. When I'm done with her, I promise I'll send her your way."

His words send disgust spiraling through me, and I'm sure it shows in my expression.

The fact he would even suggest such a thing...

The fact he thinks I'm going to close ranks with him immediately makes me see red. I squeeze harder. "I don't want to have to repeat myself, asshole."

His smile disappears and a snarl twists his lips. His eyes are slightly too wide, which tells me he's probably drunk.

As if to prove it, he spins around and instantly swings on me. I dodge and return the blow. It is immensely satisfying when my fist connects with his jaw, driving him back into a wall. He slides to the ground with a shout.

"Fuck Garth. What the fuck was that for?"

"You swung first asshole," I remind him just as a second voice intervenes.

"Ouch!"

I glance to the side, where a tipsy-looking woman stumbles, her cellphone in her hand.

I ignore her and turn back to the waitress. Her eyes are wide, and shocked.

"Sorry you had to see that," I say. "Are you ok?"

"Y... yes." She telegraphs her thanks through her eyes, and I feel shittier about the whole thing. She shouldn't have to go through this, and someone should have intervened long before I did.

“Go get your coat. I’m about to leave anyway. I’ll drive you home.”

“But I’m not...done with my shift yet.”

The more she speaks, the more I understand why Zion Aguielo is troubling her. She’s beautiful but nervous. Shrunk into herself so that she appears smaller. A woman like her is just what a bully like Aguielo likes; scared, isolated. The type that if you push her hard enough, she will do whatever you ask.

Fucking asshole was trying to do just that.

And while I sympathize with her, for her safety, she should probably find a different type of job. She certainly needs some training in how to handle assholes. Right now, though, she’s in no state to carry on working. “You’re done if I say you are.”

Zion stands and boldly inserts himself between us, holding his jaw shut. He speaks with a slight lisp. “If she says she doesn’t want to leave, why force her?”

Something snaps within me. The second punch I throw breaks his nose. He howls as his back hits the wall again. He reaches into his pocket, maybe for a weapon, so I punch him again, in his midsection. This time he goes down, clutching his ribs. I seize the opportunity to grab the waitress by the hand and pull her away. I don’t want to be here a moment longer.

“I expect her to still have a job when she returns. Tell Boyce I said that.” I say to the security guard who witnessed the scene, as I continue to pull the young waitress towards the exit. The tipsy woman is still holding up her cellphone, pointing it at me. I can’t think what she thinks she’s doing, but right there and then it doesn’t seem too important. I put it out of my mind and head for the door.

We wait outside for a few seconds, while I text my driver to pull up with the Mercedes. When it arrives, I pull open the passenger door and direct her in. Then I follow in after her, nodding at the driver up front.

“Drive,” I tell him, ignoring his surprised look. He can sense my mood, so he doesn’t ask silly questions about the destination. He continues to drive around town until I feel some of my senses return.

I look at my knuckles under the sulfur yellow of the streetlights. I flex my hand open and shut. The hand has started to bruise but the pain is almost welcome.

I face her. “Where do you live? My driver will take you home.”

“Um...” She bites her lip and shakes her head. She’s looking around the car, probably still in shock from what happened.

“I just want to say thank you.” Tears were hanging from her lashes. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t shown up.”

I lean forward and kiss her on the forehead, feeling like a big brother.

I rub her arms. “You don’t need to thank me. Just tell me where you live. And if anyone bothers you again when you go back to work, I’ll take care of it.”

I stay in negotiations with Bicorp for a week. I need to move as fast as possible to get the necessary capital released for my new investment, but I stall for as long as I can, because I want to be sure that I’m making the right decision. It’s true that *The Lady* would still exist, and most of the staff can carry on

exactly as before. But as I suspected, Bicorp plan to build more conference rooms where the spa and treatment center is, and so that part of the hotel would close, and the staff would be out of a job. I sigh inwardly. There is usually some collateral damage in any sale, and in this case it's fairly minimal. I'll do my best to find the spa staff other roles within my hotel chain if I can.

What else can I do? The deals as good as done. We've shaken hands and it's now up to the legal teams to negotiate the contract details.

Right now, I'm in the back of my Mercedes, heading to *The Lady* to meet with the staff for an official announcement. I don't want the news of the sale to take them by surprise. I at least owe them that. I'm just entering the hotel lobby when Paula, my assistant, calls me on my cellphone. She knows where I am and what I am doing and she wouldn't interrupt me without a good reason, so I pick up.

"Hello, darling," I answer. It's an inside joke between us.

Paula is a sharp, no-nonsense woman who is the only one besides my mom that can set me on the straight and narrow. I'm grateful for her and in reality, I'd do anything for her, but I have to live up to my reputation of trying to sleep with anything in a skirt.

"There is a video all over the internet of you punching Zion Aguielo," she says, without acknowledging my greeting.

I stop in my tracks. "*What?*"

"I just sent the clip to your phone."

I pull the phone from my ears and stare at the screen, just as the message comes through.

Then, I watch the video.

I watch Aguielo stumble in front of me, telling me to leave the waitress alone. He looks like a bloody hero who is

doing his best to protect a poor woman from a brute. I cringe when I see how I pull her away from the room.

I sigh. "If the idiot who recorded this had started recording a few minutes earlier, things wouldn't look so bad." *Or perhaps they deliberately edited it this way?* I add to myself.

"Anyone who knows Zion Aguielo knows he deserves that punch and more."

I rub my eyes, feeling a headache coming. I'm too busy to be doing damage control.

She pauses for a beat, her voice coming out softer. "I'm already working with the lawyers to ensure that the video gets taken down but there's more bad news."

I sigh. "What is it?" I did not care about Aguielo or whatever statement he put out to the media. The news outlets would move on as soon as another celebrity gets engaged, files for a divorce, or is found drugged to the eyeballs in a callgirl's hotel bedroom..

"Bicorp is reconsidering their offer. You know how conservative the old man is."

I do know how Johnson can be, but I'm certain that if I explain the circumstances surrounding the incident, we can see eye to eye.

Anticipating my thoughts, Paula says, "I just called Johnson's assistant and managed to squeeze in a last-minute appointment for you, and I've delayed the announcement at *The Lady* to give you time to get it sorted."

"You're the best," I say, blowing her an invisible kiss.

As soon as she hangs up, I have the driver take a detour to Bicorp headquarters where old man Johnson conducts his business. Thankfully it's only a few blocks away from *The Lady* and right now the traffic is not too bad.

The pretty but somewhat frumpily dressed receptionist at

the front desk shows me up to old man Johnson's personal meeting room, fixes me a coffee in a delicate cup and saucer that look like they should belong in a museum, and reassures me that "Mr Johnson knows you are here, and he'll be with you in about five minutes."

I smile and nod my thanks.

Good – gives me just enough time to get my story straight. I take a seat on one of the leather-upholstered wing-back chairs and think about what I want to say.

Five minutes later and the door opens again. This time it's Johnson himself. I stand and we shake hands and exchange pleasantries. He gestures for me to sit back down again, and unbuttoning his suit jacket, he seats himself in the opposite chair. "So, you decided to get a little exercise in after I left you the other night. Traded blows with my old friend Aguielo's son Zion eh?" He's smiling as he talks, but there's steel in his voice, and a definite inflection of a question in there too, that seems to demand an answer.

"Mr. Johnson." I open my hands in a gesture of honesty. "Believe me when I say I had no desire to get into a fight with anyone whatsoever that night, let alone Zion Aguielo. But do you remember that waitress who was having a trembling fit when she served me whilst we were talking?"

"I do." He wouldn't have gotten where he was without both excellent observation skills and a good memory.

"Well, it turns out that Zion Aguielo was the reason for her misery. Apparently he'd been making a move on her and was not taking "no" for an answer. What you saw was me educating my dear friend, that a woman's 'no', means 'no'."

"Educating huh?" Johnson raises an eyebrow.

"Yes. But, between you and me, Aguielo has always been hardheaded. So, he needs more persuasion than most."

The old man looks me in the eye and says, "And that was

really all there was to it? He started harassing the lady, and you were provoked, that's what you're telling me is what happened, right?"

"Yes." I stare him straight back, my eyes never moving from his for even one flicker. "That is exactly what happened."

"Very well." He says. "Your father was always a straight talker, and although the video I saw could be construed to tell a different story, what it shows is in no way contrary to your own account. On this occasion I am minded to believe you. We'll forget about it." He stands, holding his hand out to shake mine. "And now I have to get back into my shareholder's meeting. Just promise me to stay out of any more trouble until the sale is over, okay son?"

"Sure," I respond, relief coursing through me.

Within moments, I'm back in the car and heading for *The Lady* once more. We are just pulling back into the traffic when my phone rings again. It's Zion Aguielo. I contemplate ignoring it, but the temptation to gloat over his recent ass-kicking is too great.

"Well, well, well. To what do I owe the pleasure, Aguielo?"

"You think you won? I am going to ruin you, Garth. I swear it." He still speaks with a lisp, I guess his surgeon hadn't gotten around to wiring his jaw closed yet. Too bad, he could benefit from keeping his mouth closed.

"You're in no position to be making threats."

"I'll damn well say what I please."

I lean back against the headrest. "You sure about that? My lawyers are already talking with the girl you assaulted last night. If you so much as blink the wrong way, I'll provide her with the monetary support to sue your ass to hell."

It was a bluff, but one I was willing to hedge on. He splutters, “How...how dare you! I’m going to make you pay.”

“Are you making more threats, Aguielo?”

He hangs up immediately and I laugh. Zion Aguielo is a coward. He and his father, who happens to be one of my biggest competitors in the New York hotel business, are very much alike. Plenty of bravado and fluff on the outside but give them even just a little push and they fall straight over.

CHAPTER 4

Kathy

“Just right there, luv...hmmm.”

As my fingers glide down my client’s spine, I feel all the pent-up tension ease through her body. She relaxes with a weak but satisfied sigh on her face.

“As always, you deliver. Remind me to send my baby your way,” she says, while rewrapping her towel around her perfect, surgically enhanced breasts, and sitting up on the massage table.

“You don’t have to worry about that. Tipping me for two or three is all I need,” I say as I wave my hands to dismiss her comment. I walk towards the handbasin to rinse my hands.

She smiles slowly, like she has a secret nobody else knew. “That’s what you all say until you see my baby. Naked.” She winks.

In fact, I *have* seen her womanizer of a boyfriend, and he had zero effect on me, but as I slowly apply hand sanitizer, I lift my eyes to hers and return her smile. Elena Finch is a generous tipper and a nice enough lady, so I don’t want to tell her how much of a dog her new boyfriend is.

She wouldn’t believe me anyway.

But somehow, her words bring back memories of the last man who had been on this massage table. The man with no name...

I blink to banish away the mental daydreams. I whisper, "Help me, Lord."

She pauses, her long, sleek legs halfway to the floor; her no doubt expensive hair extensions moving freely. "Did you say something?" she asks.

"I said thank you, and don't forget to book your next visit at Reception as you leave."

"Of course, dear. See you next week."

"See you," I wink.

Ms. Finch waves once more before she leaves, in a bright orange Louis Vuitton sundress that matches her hair. The room is finally quiet, but my thoughts aren't.

"Forget about him, Kathy," I mumble to myself.

"Forget about who?" Sophie's voice suddenly sounds as she enters the treatment room, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"No one," I answer a tad too quickly.

Sophie checks the roster, looking for the previous occupant's name. "Elena Finch? She's not...wait, I hope you're not talking about that *putz* of a boyfriend."

"Ew, no, never." I send her an offended look. "I was thinking about someone else."

The horrified look drops from her features and she nods, satisfied. "Good."

"What's up?" I ask, shooting her an enquiring look.

"We need everyone to come to the conference hall right away. It's urgent," Sophie taps the clipboard she's holding. "Don't be late."

I sigh. She knows of my aversion to meetings or conferences in general. I love the physical aspects of my job; but the

constant reminders about profit margins and quarterly targets hold little to interest me.

Somehow, this does not seem like a regular meeting about the usual topics though. For one, the meeting was impromptu, not preplanned.

My curiosity is piqued, "What's going on? Is something wrong?" I ask, placing the towel I am using to dry my hands back on the rail.

"There's a surprise announcement from our owner Mr. Huxley. I don't have all the details, but it seems important. We've been asked to gather everyone in the conference hall immediately."

I open my mouth, but she beats me to it. "If you want to find out what all of this is about, you'll have to be there." And with that, she turns on her heel and leaves.

I cannot help but feel a surge of curiosity tinged with apprehension. "Mr. Huxley? The owner, Mr. Huxley? That's a first. He's never shown his face here before." I continue mumbling as I grab my wristwatch from the essential oils table and walk to the door.

I meet Tim in the corridor. "What do you think he wants?"

He shrugs. "Like I said the other day, he's probably going to tell us the place is sold."

My heart picks up a beat, but I do my best to play it cool. "Don't be ridiculous. A simple letter would suffice, not a meeting."

Even if Tim's right and Mr. Huxley is selling *The Lady*, I have hopes that everyone will be retained on the strength. I'm good at my job, and I receive a lot of recommendations. I don't see why I should be made redundant.

Still, I'm worried about being under new management. I just don't want anything to rock my emotional boat for a few months while I lick my wounds and get over the worst of the

grief. No doubt the pain of losing my mother will stay with me forever. But just a few months more and I'll be so much stronger...

I walk behind Sophie as we make our way out of the treatment spa and into the main reception area.

"Marcus! Abigail!" Sophie calls. "Conference room in five!"

I take a pit stop by the ladies' restroom. I splash cold water on my face and note that my hands are trembling a bit. Something warm flutters in my stomach and I suddenly feel the urge to vomit. "Calm down old girl." I tell myself. "There's nothing bad going to happen, even if the hotel does get sold. It's not like you ever met the man anyway, so who cares if it's under different ownership?"

I splash more water on my face before going to the conference hall, feeling a little bit better after my pep talk to myself. The hall is already abuzz by the time I arrive. Watching other people looking calm and unworried helps me calm my own nerves down a little more.

I'm feeling almost normal as I make my way through the front of the small crowd to get a good view. But as I move forwards through the sea of my fellow workers, a direct line of sight to the stage opens up for me and my eyes lock onto the figure at the podium for the first time. Tall, confident, and undeniably handsome. With just one clearing of his throat, he commands the entire room's attention. His dangerously strong hands and fingers halt the whispers in the hall like a military commander giving the signal to his troops on parade to come to attention.

No, surely not – it couldn't be!

The recognition of his handsome face and expensively cut, salt-and-pepper hairstyle is instant. After all, that face has starred in my dreams several times in a row. Not to mention

those strong fingers.. My heart suddenly falls to my stomach, and my vision blurs. My legs become numb as if drained of blood, and my hands fall weakly to my sides.

Even though recognizing him takes just an instant, it takes me a little longer to fully register that this man who gave me the best sex of my life a few weeks ago and who I have been dreaming about ever since turns out to be the same Mr. Huxley who owns *The Lady Hotel and Spa*.

I imagined the owner as a wrinkly old businessman whose hands probably shook with arthritis. My stomach drops– how wrong could I have been.

I notice Sophie standing beside him with all the other heads of the various departments in the hotel. She makes a signal asking what's wrong.

I shake my head and mouth back, "I'm fine."

She looks away, unsatisfied. Desperately, I try to count down from a hundred to zero to calm my raging pulse and rapid breathing. How could I not have realized he was the owner of the freaking hotel? Of course, it all makes sense now. How we met in the hotel corridor, and how commanding and in charge he seemed to be, right from the very first moment. Well of course it's his hotel so he is in charge isn't he? Or at least he was up until now.

As my gaze focuses on his form on the podium, I catch him watching me back. My heart plummets for the umpteenth time in less than thirty minutes.

He meets my gaze but then moves on without any spark of recognition in his eyes; his stare just as bland as the one he gives to the next person.

Doesn't he remember me?

Surely our liaison must have meant something to him?

However, his apparent memory loss soon becomes the least of my worries as he begins to address us.

“I’ve had the privilege of employing you all here as my diligent and hardworking team. Your contribution to the steady operation of *The Lady Hotel and Spa* has been a major part of this hotel’s ongoing success, and I thank you for all that each of you have done to maintain this hotel’s status as one of the finest in the whole of New York.”

I’m melting inside while his voice is bold and sure.

“As some of you might know, *The Lady* was the very first hotel in my father’s chain, and so it is with a great amount of personal sadness that I am announcing the sale of *The Lady Hotel and Spa*.”

At that moment, my world turns grey.

The whispers begin to rise, and he takes a moment to pause. He turns to the deputy manager; his eyebrows raised.

She nods and suddenly yells, “Decorum!” The desired effect is achieved, and the crowd quietyens down, allowing Mr. Huxley to deal the final blow.

“The hotel will have a new owner, effective in three months. The good news is that I have negotiated very hard on your behalf to ensure that all of you can retain your current positions and salaries, so you have nothing to worry about in terms of your personal situations.”

There is a general excited buzz of relief and smiles of happiness amongst the team as they stand listening. Once again, he turns to the deputy manager, and again she shouts out, “Shush, Mr. Huxley hasn’t finished.”

“Unfortunately, however, there is one small aspect of the hotel that the new owners are committed to changing, and nothing I say or do will change their minds. I regret to say that the new owners have decided not to keep the spa and treatment rooms, and instead they want to convert the space into business conference facilities, which is what their chain is particularly well known for.”

He turns now to Sophie, who is standing with the other managers, a fixed smile on her face, but looking considerably less than happy at this point.

“It’s not quite as bad as all that though.” He smiles at her. “You Sophie and any of your team who wish to do so, will be found roles in one or other of my chain’s other hotels. It may mean a small upheaval, but it will not be too much of a change, and I am sure you will fit in elsewhere admirably. Those who’d rather not take this offer up can choose four months’ salary as compensatory payout, and of course we will be happy to give references to future potential employers when asked.”

He looks at his gold Rolex. “Well, that’s my announcement, and now I have to be going. But once again thank you all, and of course your managers will be able to tell you more details as the sale date draws nearer.” And with that he turns his back and starts making for the rear exit.

It’s as if a bomb landed. I stand rooted to the spot as my fellow colleagues disperse back to their various stations. *The Lady Hotel and Spa* is the one space outside my home I have come to adore – the place feels like my second home. Dammit it *is* my home since my mom died. Here I feel comfortable. At home, the memories crowd in so much more easily.

Hearing this jerk of a man take that away from me weakens me. It’s as if the ground beneath me has crumbled, leaving me in disbelief.

Suddenly I’m very, unreasonably angry. My emotions rush to the surface as if I’m a volcano waiting to explode.

I understand it’s irrational for me to be this mad, or even really blame the boss for this. Like all businessmen, he likely made a business decision that would benefit his company. It’s what he’s supposed to do. Additionally, he tried his best to miti-

gate the damage to his employees, and even found us other roles. He's being more than generous with the severance package too.

But in that instant, none of it matters to me.

None of that is going to make up for what I'm losing.

Fueled by frustration and an odd sense of betrayal, I run to the exit. Seeing him approaching his car. I follow behind and I quickly close in on him with rapid steps, determination pulsing through my veins.

His eyes meet mine as soon as I reach him. His driver stops half-way in the act of holding the car door open for his boss. The driver's facial features are pinched as if hastily crammed together on his face. It would have looked comical, except he is a six-foot six giant with the body of a brawler. I am beginning to reconsider my earlier bravado.

"Do you need something?" Even these polite words, coming from the behemoth, sound like a threat.

"Uhh..."

Mr. Huxley turns to his driver. "It's ok Austin, I'll handle it."

It? It?? He'll handle *it*? My anger returns. I glare at him but there seems to be a flicker of confusion as if he struggles to place where he knows me from. "Well? I don't have all day, Miss."

Is he acting like he doesn't know me, or he truly doesn't remember that we fucked a few days ago?

Either way, what a jerk!

I should probably play along, if only to save my pride, but the words slip out of me regardless. "Do you make it a habit to sleep with your staff, Mr. Huxley?"

He turned his eyes away from me, but my question brings his gaze back. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." I don't know where this bravado is

coming from, but it's seized hold of me, and it isn't letting go. Perhaps it's as much to do with my mother dying as it really is about losing my position here, but all of a sudden I feel like the last straw has finally broken, and I truly don't care any more.

Huxley smiles but it's all teeth and no humor. Suddenly he looks more menacing than even his driver. "Take a walk, Austin."

Austin walks away without a backwards glance in my direction. What a gentleman.

"Considering the news I just delivered, I'll forgive your rudeness."

"Speaking of the sale... *sir*... are you sure this is what you want to do? I mean, the massage and treatment spa is the cornerstone of this hotel. Getting rid of it is ripping out what makes *The Lady* so unique." I want to be strong, but my voice trembles with anger and hurt.

He sighs. "If this is about keeping your job, I already mentioned that there are other opportunities in my other hotels..."

"What about here?" I cut him off, knowing I'm probably being unreasonable but being unable to stop. "Can't you make them keep the spa, Mr. Huxley? Please."

His eyes narrow and he starts to speak, but I don't let him continue, "Look, I work magic with my hands," I say. His eyes darken now, but I ignore him. "I love this job and I love this place too. I don't *want* to move to another hotel like some kind of farm animal. I'm happy where I am."

I think for a second that my passion got through to him, because he remains silent for a while before speaking.

But then he starts again with, "Okay, if you don't want to move to one of the other hotels in my chain, I just lost a

personal assistant at Head Office. You obviously need a job so..."

"No!" I respond, frustration making my voice echo over the parking lot. *What part of the fact that I love working as a masseuse at The Lady didn't he understand?*

He smirks darkly and replies curtly, "I've offered two alternatives. Instead, you're being ungrateful and frankly bratty. There are plenty of people who would jump at the opportunity to get work anywhere."

My anger ignites, and I can't hold back any longer. The words that have been plaguing my heart pour out, filled with a mixture of anger and profanity. "With all due respect, you're a fucking jerk!"

I lash out at him, cursing his arrogance and lack of empathy.

"You don't even remember who I am, do you? Well, I won't let you ruin my life any further. You can take your offer and shove it!"

With that, I turn on my heel, my heart pounding in my chest, determined to distance myself from this infuriating man. Not wanting to admit to myself that deep down inside, a large part of my reaction is due to the emotions arising from our liaison and his seeming to not even recognize me after what we had shared together. It has been special to me. Doesn't it mean *anything* to him?

CHAPTER 5

Garth

My eyes are fixed on my Samsung screen throughout the drive, but my mind dwells on the scene between myself and Kathy.

I'm mad at myself for putting on that act and pretending not to know her. Of course, I recognized her the moment she walked into the conference room. That long flowing hair, those piercing green eyes, the quiet charm of her smile... it was all I could do to break her gaze and look away as nonchalantly as I could manage, but I knew she'd caught me staring at her.

I try to stay angry at her audacity to chase after me and confront me, but I find myself getting aroused instead. All the talk about her skillful hands just got me hot and bothered. And anyway, I agree. her hands *are* far better suited to giving massages rather than filing records for the hotel's management.

But is that all there is to it? Why is she so vehemently against working anywhere else other than *The Lady*?

Does she want money perhaps? Or is there really some-

thing to what she said about how she loves *The Lady* Hotel so much.

If so, why?

As Austin drives me home, my mind is surrounded by images of her naked body lying next to mine. But guilt isn't letting me enjoy the thought as much as I should be.

I shouldn't have pretended not to know her.

How can a woman in scrubs look so damn irresistible?

"We're home, sir," Austin says, drawing me out of my reverie. "And your mother's car's outside."

The familiar rosso corsa hue of my mom's vintage Ferrari makes me sigh. When is she going to grow up and get a sensible car?

"My favorite son finally shows his face." The familiar, cultured yet now slightly croaky with age voice calls out to me, as my elegantly dressed mom steps out of her car and trips delicately across the gravel driveway to greet me with a hug and a kiss. A waft of expensive perfume and the swish and shimmer of pastel colored silk envelopes me for a moment as she does so. She reminds me of a hummingbird, with her delicate features and iridescent clothes.

"Mom, why are you still going around in this damned museum piece? Don't you think it makes more sense to get a modern, sensible car?"

"No thank you Garth dear. You know how much I enjoy driving it, and besides, it was a present from your father to me, as well. You wouldn't deprive an old lady of one of her last great pleasures, would you? Besides, I'm tired of having to be sensible all of the time. You're as bad as my doctor. There's plenty of time for resting in the grave."

"Touché" I allow her to wrap her hands around me, noting that they feel thinner than they had been the last time I had

seen her. “The old man finally letting you off your leash then eh?”

“Stop it, Garth.” She swats my shoulders. “You are the one who has been ignoring me this past month.”

That's because I don't like to see you wasting away, I think to myself. I search her face, turning it from side to side to make sure she's okay, just like I used to do, back in the day. It wasn't uncommon for me to get back from school to find that father had gotten drunk and yelled at her, before heading off to his room to sleep off his drunken stupor. How I hated my father, as a defenseless young boy. That was before I got old enough to be able to put a stop to his nonsense. A stop that came at the cost of my own relationship with my father when one day I finally plucked up the courage to confront him and fight back. Literally. We came to blow that day after he nearly called mom an ugly name and I swung at him. I didn't win – he gave me a thrashing I'd never forget – but it was enough to stop him from ever yelling at my mother again.

Since that time, which was twenty or so years ago now, we have hardly exchanged one single word outside of work, though he still lives with my mom just a short drive away in Short Hills, New Jersey.

It was a beautiful house that father had designed and built for the two of them when he retired sixteen years ago. They seemed destined to remain in for the rest of their lives together.

I'm suddenly in need of a glass of chilled water. Maybe she's right. Maybe he *is* the changed man she makes him out to be. And if deep down I'm honest with myself, then I need to ask myself whether or not there's a part of me that actually might not want him to ever change, might in fact quite like

my father continuing to play the role of the monster, so I can play the role of the avenging knight in shining armor.

I mentally shrug this thought away. The problem with thinking is that it can lead you anywhere.

I don't want to fight; lord knows I am hardly in the mood for it. I wrap my hands around her waist, and I drag her towards the kitchen.

"You don't spend enough time with him, to influence him. You don't spend time with him at all," she said, raising her voice slightly.

"You know I don't like him."

She was quiet for a while before letting out a sigh.

"That's why I tell you every day to make sure you settle..." She begins to speak, but changes her mind. "Never mind, Garth dear. I don't suppose it really matters. Not now. Not anymore. But please do try to remember that whatever else he is, he *is* still my husband. Oh to hell with it." she exclaims, making a mock dramatic gesture with her arms. "Let's change the topic and talk about something else. You for instance. How are you my dear?"

"Selling *The Lady* has kept me pretty busy these last few days."

"It's always business with you Garth. When are you going to find a nice young lady and settle down and produce some grandchildren for me?" she says, dropping her gaze as she completes the latter part of her statement.

"Not this again mother" I groan. 'Finding a wife for Garth' and 'complaining about not having grandchildren' are two of my mom's favorite and at the same time most irritating pastimes.

"You're an asshole Garth, you know that?" she exclaims, laughing.

I clutch my chest dramatically, “You hurt my feelings.”

“Those girls from my art class paid me a visit, you know.”

At her words, I roll my eyes but say absolutely nothing. I am far too well used to my mother playing matchmaker to let any of her broad hints receive anything from me but the standard look of utter contempt they deserve. She leads the way inside.

After dark, I drive mom home in my car, and Austin follows behind, driving her Ferrari back for her.

Then I return to my home, and go on to prepare for tomorrow's work before bed. But despite my best efforts to concentrate, my mind constantly drifts back to the angry exchange of words I had with Kathy in the parking lot. I think up all sorts of excuses for pretending not to have recognized her, but at the end of the day in my heart-of-hearts I know these are just appeasements to try to make me feel better about the situation.

Truth is I was taken aback, scared of how happy I was to see her.

And so I shut down.

As I sort through the details of the legal proceedings for selling *The Lady*, I make up my mind. If I'm going to have any peace with myself, I need to do this. I book another spa session for tomorrow afternoon under an assumed name, and request Kathy as my masseuse. It's a risky move, but a calculated one. I'm willing to face the consequences if everything backfires.

After gym the next day, I pop into my home office to sign some contracts and deals. After I finish, I ask Austin to prepare the car. Five minutes later, I'm heading out to *The*

Lady, looking forward to having a certain masseuse's hands on me.

When I enter the treatment room, I regard her surprised expression and realize the boldness of my actions. But I'm not the type to back down once I've made a decision.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asks, her voice laced with annoyance and caution. She takes a step backwards, clearly ready to leave. "Please excuse me, I'm currently indisposed to serve you, I'm expecting a client." Her voice is a tad too high.

"Yes I know, that's my booking under a pretend name."

She gasps in outrage and I continue. "Kathy please. If you're upset about the sale, my hands are tied. But I will do my best to get you employed as a masseuse in the best place I can find." I stretch my arms wide in a gesture of peace and conciliation. "But there's something I want to say to you about what happened in the parking lot yesterday. Hear me out."

"You jerk..." She starts to say, but she stops, takes a deep breath and then nods at me.

"Okay," she says. "Say your piece, then you can go."

"Thanks Kathy," I smile and taste the name on my lips. "Kathy's a sensual name, you know?" I walk closer to her and to my relief, she doesn't move back. Her eyes follow the movement of my hands as I bring them to her shoulders, pressing firmly.

She stays quiet and still for just a moment, and suddenly shakes her head, catching her lower lips between her teeth. She shrugs off my hands and opens the door, making a step forwards to leave. But with my fast reflexes, I quickly close the door again, placing my hands on the lock, and turning the key.

I corner her against the door, placing my body in front of

hers. I gaze into her eyes, searching for a glimmer of the connection we had both of us felt the other day.

“I can’t forget the way you felt to me, Kathy. I can’t pretend that what happened between us didn’t keep me satiated for days, but I still want more.”

Conflicting emotions flicker in her eyes, but she laughs bitterly, “See who’s talking about pretending. You’re a freaking...”

I lean in, taking her lips and angry words into my mouth in a passionate kiss. She stands there, stock still, as seemingly immovable as a statue. After a few minutes, I release her lips and look into her eyes, seeking permission.

I don’t have to look for long as her lids flicker closed, a pink color rising to her cheeks.

“Say it,” I command her, my voice breathy with need.

“Take me.” These last words fill the room before I pick her up and carry her across to the massage table.

The room is filled with longing and desire as our bodies are again entwined. This time, there’s a subtle shift. It feels different, more meaningful, somehow more real. Her moans fill up the space between the walls and send me to yet another level of desire. I tear at my clothes, and she fights alongside me, ripping off my shirt as I step out of my pants and pull down my shorts. Then I’m on her, pulling off her carefully pressed uniform and touching my lips to her firm, flawless skin beneath. I find a nipple and I bite down – not hard, but enough to make her gasp.

Finally we are naked, and now there is no going back. My member is stiff and throbbing, standing upright to attention. She knows what to do. She slides to her knees and takes my aching cock into her warm, sensuous mouth, her eyes staring up at me like two glowing emeralds. My whole body stiffens and I cum so hard that it shakes me, leaving

me gasping for breath, like a fish that has been landed in a net.

Almost before she swallows my semen I'm hard again, and this time I'm much more in control. I lift her up and hold her against me as I slide into her in one smooth motion that has her gasping out an "Oh!"

As I hold her buttocks in my hands she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me passionately, her whole body wriggling and writhing against me, my member penetrating her to the core, transfixing us together as if we were one and the same. Two animals intertwined, yet also one new animal made from the two of us. Symbiotic, completely in rhythm with the other half.

She rises and falls, lifting herself and dropping back down onto my shaft in a pulsating rhythm that has my heart pounding, and once again I can feel my orgasm building. But this time Kathy is with me all the way. "Yes" she cries out. "Yes, yes, yes!" And like two perfectly synchronized engines we arrive together, squeezing and shaking as we both explode. Gasping and moaning as we cum, our eyes locked in each other's passionate gaze.

I come to my senses, realizing that I'm still standing in the treatment room, still holding a naked Kathy, her arms and legs wrapped tight around me. Gently, I lower her back to the couch, stroking her lush, silky her and kissing her sensuously swollen lips one final time.

After our encounter ends, we lie on the massage table together, with my hands wrapped around her breasts, refusing to run away from the aftermath this time.

I look deeply into Kathy's eyes, my voice filled with

sincerity. "I'm sorry, Kathy. I should never have treated you the way I did, pretending not to recognize you. It was thoughtless and selfish. I genuinely regret it."

I watch as her defenses begin to crumble, and a shimmer of vulnerability appears in her eyes. My apology reaches her on a deeper level. A moment of silence passes before she finally responds.

"I was that good huh?" She smirks.

I chuckle but hold her eyes, "You're the best I've had."

The redness spreads quickly across her cheeks, and she hurriedly buries her face between my neck and shoulders to hide it.

"After all I've done and said to you on this massage table, do you still feel shy?"

She ignores my question but turns her face towards me again.

"Your apology is a start, Mr. Huxley."

"Garth," I correct. "Mr. Huxley is my father."

Her lips twitch. "Fine then. Your apology is a start, Garth. But actions speak louder than words." Kathy starts off in a firm, no-nonsense voice, and then her tone softens. "I need to see these words in your *behavior*, a genuine effort to make things right."

I nod. "You have my word, Kathy. I want to make it up to you, to prove that I'm capable of doing much more than wearing you out on a massage table."

She giggles loudly, and I realize that the sound of her giggles hits my groin, makes me hard for a third time.

"Yeah, you're not so bad," she says, her fingers reaching down and stroking my stiffening member in a sweet, pulsing, up and down motion that soon has me panting with desire.

"I'll show you what's not so bad," I whisper into her neck, already peppering it with kisses.

She continues to giggle, and this time her giggles quickly turn into moans of pleasure.

Later, as I watch Kathy drag on her clothes, I feel like more of a jerk for pretending not to recognize her beforehand, especially at the meeting. She deserves more than that from me. I've treated women as objects either to avoid or to use for far too long I realize. It's time I changed my attitude.

I at least want to try doing that for Kathy.

"Nice ass," I say, folding my hands under my head.

"Tooting your own horn?" She throws back at me, her face spreading with a smile.

Suddenly filled with a strange but warm feeling, I break my rule of avoiding relationships or dates and I gather the courage to ask Kathy out to dinner. "So, Kathy, one of my hotels is opening its newly refurbished restaurant tomorrow evening," I say, looking straight into her eyes, trying to sound casual. "I'll be needing a plus one, and you're the perfect one." She looks away, hiding her smile.

"That's a terrible way to ask a lady out to dinner, Garth. And anyway, you're my boss."

"That doesn't matter, I have no reputation to protect. Do you?" I ask, trying not to assume she is not involved with someone.

Kathy hesitates, searching my face for signs of my authenticity. After a moment, she smiles with a hint of vulnerability. "Okay, I'm free tomorrow evening," she states confidently.

"And night?" I ask, throwing her a wink.

As she blushes, relief washes over me, knowing I've been granted an opportunity to make amends.

She moves to the table with the essential oils and other equipment before she says with a wide smile, “But right here and now, and seeing as you don’t have your clothes on, let’s get you up lying on your front like a good boy, so I can work some of that executive tension out of your muscles, Mr. Huxley.”

CHAPTER 6

Kathy

I stare at the stain on the countertop, wondering what could have made it and why it won't come off. I press the brush hard against the surface and rub rigorously.

It doesn't budge.

"Why...why?" I slam my hand against the table, tossing aside the scrubbing brush before I lose my temper.

Maggie pokes her head up from the couch where she is watching a movie. "What's up, Kathy?"

"I'm fine." I stroll past her to my room, certain I will lose my mind if I have to answer questions right now.

I lie on the bed, wondering why my world has been tilted on its axis. I just cannot stop thinking about Garth.

The last time we met, it was a complete 180 from the previous meeting. He was so sweet to me. But what if I am just his current fascination?

My stomach churns at the thought of what will happen to me when his interest wanes. I know men like him – men who are fascinated by women in general, but not by one woman in particular. I already know he can be cruel, he showed that to me when he pretended he didn't know me. What other games

might he like to play that might trap and snare an unsuspecting girl, causing who knows what type of pain and damage? I am already suffering enough with the loss of my mom. Am I ready for this?

The door opens, and I force myself not to groan. Maggie lies down beside me on my bed, mimicking my position, so we both end up staring at the ceiling fan as it whirrs away above us. At one end of the ceiling, the plaster has come down, leaving a gap that has slowly widened over the last few months. It's not a problem right now, but come the winter I know I will regret not getting something done about it sooner.

"You need to get that plaster fixed before winter. I don't need to tell you how awful the cold is."

I sigh. "The landlord has been avoiding my calls."

"I told you from the start that he looked sketchy."

I don't have a rebuttal. She's right; Maggie's an amazing judge of character. She can see right through anyone, even the landlord, no matter how smooth they are.

She half rises from the bed, propping her head up on her arms. I can feel her eyes digging into my face, but I refuse to meet her gaze. "What's eating you up Kathy? Come on, out with it."

I take in a breath to speak, but she beats me to it. "I swear if you say you're 'fine' one more time, I'm going to slam you against the bed."

I sigh. "He asked me out."

She searches my face. "Who?"

"You know who."

"Wait! You are still talking to *him*?" She races out from the room and then re-enters with a bottle of bourbon and two tumblers.

She pours a generous measure into each glass, picks up hers and stares expectantly at me. "Well, spill!"

I roll my eyes.

“You have to tell me everything!” She adds, pushing the other glass into my hands.

The absurdness of the situation isn’t entirely lost on me. Garth’s effect is so deep that I feel like I am lost. All he has to do is look at me once, and I cannot say no to him. I want to please him. I’m like his pet dog. I shudder. How to explain this to Maggie?

I shut my eyes. “I’m not going out with him.”

She pauses for a minute. I feel her climb back on the bed and lie down beside me again. Her tone is quieter, “Don’t you like him?”

I like him; I like him a whole lot. And that’s part of the problem – perhaps the problem itself. I get up off the bed and go to stand by the window, feeling almost aggrieved that I feel so alone and upset in such lovely weather.

“He’s a rich man. I’m...me! What happens when he doesn’t want me anymore?”

I turn back to look at her, wondering if I’m the crazy one. Wondering if she will quickly jump in and say that I am overthinking things, but the look of pity in her eyes clues me in that she thinks the same.

She approaches me and takes my hands. “It doesn’t have to be serious, you know? You could just have a little fun. You’ve been very uptight since your mama passed.”

If only she knew that I couldn’t be unserious about Garth. He has my entire attention now. When he looks at me it’s as if I am spellbound with no choice but to obey his wishes.

I’ve done some personal digging on him, and what I found out about his escapades with some of the beautiful women in the country doesn’t please me. It just confirms who I thought he was.

He has a singular intensity, making you feel like you're the only woman in the world.

Just thinking about it now makes me shiver.

Maggie's eyes catch the shake, and she rubs my arms. "What is it? Are you cold?"

I shake my head. "You baby me too much."

She pulls me close so I can rest on her chest. Her large breasts provide a pillowy comfort for me. As she rubs circles on my back, I can hear her waiting, expecting.

I pull back. "Don't ask me to explain my reasons, Mag, but this is what I have to do."

She pulls me into another hug. "It's going to be okay."

I'm a coward for making the call as late as this. Tomorrow night is our date. I pray that he'll be asleep so I can leave a message on his phone rather than having to tell him in person.

Maggie has gone off for her night shift at the hospital, so I'm home alone listening to the dial tone.

The house is too quiet, so I turn on the TV to provide the perfect backdrop for the conversation. He picks up on the first ring.

"Hey baby, miss me already?" The soft drawl of his voice over the phone is enough to make me wish I could change my answer to 'yes'.

I close my eyes and steel myself. "Actually," My voice cracks at the end, and I have to clear my throat. "I called to tell you that I can't make it tomorrow."

"Why? Did something happen?"

"I...I just can't make it." Dang it, I was so focused on gathering the guts to call him, I forgot to think of a convincing line as to why I couldn't attend.

He pauses for a beat, and in that brief moment of silence, I contemplate hanging up the phone and ending it like an idiot. But I can't.

"Is it something I did?" he asks.

It's simply sad that he thinks that he is the problem. In a different world, I'm certain we could work it out, but not here, not when we have so many differences. Not when my heart is already too fragile.

I recently mourned the loss of a mother I loved with all my heart, and I'm not sure I can take another heartbreak right now.

My eyes slide shut.

I knew men like Garth, and the only way my story ends with him is in heartbreak.

I open them again, and my resolve is stronger.

"I'm sorry, Garth but I just can't make it."

"Oh, I see. Okay, that's fine. Thanks for letting me know." The flat tone in his voice shows me that I made the right decision.

After I decline, I'm sure he'll have a line of women waiting for him to call them up to take my place. It's stupid, but a feminine part of me wishes he could have done a little more to persuade me to change my mind.

I reach into that part of myself and twisted it until it shut up.

"Goodnight, Garth," I whisper.

He hangs up the phone without a goodbye. My heart beats faster and my lips slightly quiver, but I know I have done the right thing.

This time, there's no warm bosom to cry into. Depression drags me into a nice long sleep, right there on the sofa, too tired and too lazy to move to my bedroom or get properly undressed and into bed.

When I open my eyes, Garth is right here, kneeling over me.

I squeal and jerk up on the sofa soothed by the gentle waft of his expensive cologne cluing me into his presence. He seems like a spirit that breezed in. I blink, certain I'm imagining him.

But no. He seems too real.

"What are you doing here?"

He leans closer, crowding me on the sofa, his knees pressing between my legs until they fall open. This can't be right. I had gone out of my way to avoid him in the first place.

Yet I can feel my body giving in just from my proximity to him. "Garth I..."

"Shhh... don't say anything. Just feel me on you."

He presses forward to kiss me. I want to think that I am strong, but I can feel my body stirring as his lean, muscular frame brushes up against me. I close my eyes, allowing myself to get swept up, kissing him back.

But when I open them again, I'm staring into an empty living room.

I realize it was just a dream.

I fell asleep on the sofa, and he came to me in my unconsciousness, bidden by my lust.

I tiredly rub my eyes, refocusing on the room.

The television is still on, an old sitcom repeats from the eighties, but with the sound muted, I watch it without actually paying attention to it. I might wait up for Maggie to finish her late shift and get home before I put on something good.

So, I lie there until I can't stand it any longer.

Then, I drag myself off the sofa and head to my room to

prepare for bed. Maggie won't be back for several more hours and by then I will surely be too tired to talk anyway.

I study my reflection in the mirror as I floss and I check the time – still only 9pm. My eyes are too bright for someone who wants to turn in early. I look at the sink and I see that my hands are trembling; I had carried the phone to the bathroom with me. I know my internal motivations; I want to call Garth to apologize and reschedule, but I know it won't do us good. Letting all of this end before it gets too deep is a much better idea.

“You know if you really mean to cut off contact with him, you may want to start looking for a new job.”

The next day, a Saturday, I'm eating mashed potatoes, engrossed in a thriller novel. It's doing a reasonably good job of taking my mind off things. Well, it had been until Maggie butted into my thinking .

I take another bite, pretending not to have heard her. But that doesn't deter her from talking.

“Think about it, he owns the hotel. He could breeze in at any time over the next three months, and demand another massage, and you would have to see him.” She slides next to me on the sofa and steals a forkful of my food.

I keep my voice to a monotone, my eyes struggling to fully capture the novel's letters and make sense of the sentences and paragraphs. “He doesn't own the hotel anymore, Mags. Bicorp does.”

“Not for another three months, And so what anyway? You think that will stop him?”

I slam my spoon against the table. “Well? What do you want me to do then?”

I didn't realize that I was yelling at her until I see the stunned look on her face. Regret instantly stretches through me. "Mags...I... am so sorry."

She smiles and injects some cheer into her voice. "Hey, it's okay. I understand you're under a lot of stress." She cleans up the mess from my spoon.

I rub my head. I've had a headache since yesterday, but that's half because I refuse to fall asleep. *He* appears whenever my guard is down, even slipping into my daydreams. He is almost haunting me at this point.

"You're right. Maybe I do need a break from everything Garth Huxley-related."

But... the idea of life without Garth Huxley seems like a grainy old black and white film compared to a full color movie in surround sound, and the idea of not going to work at *The Lady* at least for these final three months seems like more than I can bear right now.

CHAPTER 7

Garth

On Monday, my financial strategist presents a graph showing my corporation's anticipated revenues and expenditure by the end of our first trading quarter of the financial year, and whilst the numbers genuinely seem to be excellent, I just can't seem to focus.

I love money – spending it, using it to get what I want, but most of all, making more of it. The financial projections are typically the part of the meeting I am most interested in, but today I can't stop thinking about a certain blonde-haired, green-eyed woman who had the audacity to turn me down.

I cannot even remember the last time I was turned down by a woman.

And the funny thing is that with any other woman it really wouldn't matter at all. Seems it's only this particular one who holds the power to determine my emotions, to make me happy or to leave me sad and blue with her rejection

Why is she so bent on fighting what's between us? It's a pure attraction, right from the get go. We should follow it to its natural conclusion. Why can't she see this?

"Sir?" I jump, startled by the voice next to me.

I turn in my chair to find the entire board staring at me.

“I uhh... nice work everyone. I expect we’ll more than exceed our targets this quarter.” I clap my hands. “Let’s get back to work.”

I rise and leave the conference room.

Paula follows behind me. She likes to wear flats in the office to keep up with my usually fast pace, but even so she has to jog a few steps to catch up with my extra-fast stride this morning.

“What was that all about?”

I adjust the lapels of my suit, realigning the position of my tie even though I know it’s already perfect. I also slow my steps. “What was what about?”

She’s now walking by my side. The corridor is large enough for both of us but insufficient to allow more people through. Other employees have to squeeze through her to get to their workstations.

I smile. “And they say I’m the asshole.”

I can hear her teeth grinding as she clicks open her iPhone. “I’ve had your father on hold for over an hour now.”

“What does he want now?” I turned down the hall, ignoring the greetings from my employees. I feel my mood already plummeting.

“The same thing he always wants.” I can feel Paula double-stepping again – almost skipping – to keep up with me, but agitation has quickened my steps one more.. “To talk.”

I snort. “Write him a blank check. Hopefully, that’ll get him off my back for some time.”

One of Paula’s assistants steps up to her to brief her on what’s happened in our absence while we were at the meeting. I never really get to learn all their names or what they

each do, because she keeps them away from me. As if I would ever mix business with pleasure.

Just as the thought arrives, I immediately grimace. I *had* mixed business with pleasure.

I know I should be happy that Kathy gave me an out by turning me down, but I'm not. I can't stop thinking about her and her rejection.

Did she find someone better? Someone nicer?

"Sir?" I didn't realize my palms had formed fists, and I have been squeezing them tight enough for my knuckles to turn white, until Paula attempts to shake them loose. "Are you ok?"

"What? Are you worried about me? Don't worry, I've already looked after you in my will."

She mumbles something unintelligible under her breath.

"What was that?" I put my face up against hers, so she has to push me away.

"I said I don't care about your money."

I pat her on her head but this time I'm careful not to mess up her bun. After all, she knows where I sleep. "Of course, you care about my money. Why else are you still around?"

I keep walking and almost reach my office when I realize that I'm alone. I pause by the door, looking about me. I turn and see Paula, standing still in the corri.

I simply walked out, grabbed a taxi and went elsewhere, making it poor old Paula's problem to arrange for someone to follow on with my luggage and settle any details. Nevertheless, I told her not to pay them the hotel cent and to make sure we got the full deposit back, or I'd make their lives a living hell for the rest of their professional working careers.

That experience taught me that I may hold my own hotels to very high standards, but I know others don't do the same.

“You know what?” I tell Paula now. “I trust your judgment.”

I see her eyes widen a fraction before she quickly recomposes herself. I bite my cheeks to stop laughing.

Paula prides herself in her calm and composed demeanor - remaining unaffected, unamused, and unperturbed no matter what gets thrown at her. She exists in a constant state of unruffledness. She could be a poster child for Stoicism, which of course is precisely why I spend my time doing my best to rile her. It's a game that has kept me amused for over a decade so far.

I shut the iPad and return it to her. “Before you ask, this isn't a test. I simply trust your judgment. Lord knows you deserve that trust – you probably know me better than I know myself.”

She looks down quickly, and I wonder what's wrong with her. Being shy isn't one of Paula's usual attributes.

“Will that be all, sir?”

“Yes, you may go.”

I am booting up my laptop and gearing myself to get to work. If I can't stop thinking of Kathy, the best I can do is distract myself from the thoughts that keep playing like a never-ending film loop in my head. I hope that work will keep me from wondering about her.

I look up to see Paula still staring at me. I wave my hand at her as if shooing a pesky fly. “You may go, unless of course you want to stay here and watch me work.”

She sniffs as she walks away while I chuckle to myself. Women!

Halfway through the workday, I'm in an online conference meeting with some new investors I'm trying to woo. It's going well, although they're a little reluctant to commit. I

reason that a few follow-up meetings should be enough to get them to where I want them.

I am wrapping things up when Paula bursts into my office. She halts at the door and mouths “Emergency” at me.

I continue to smile my best confident, trustworthy smile into the conference camera, “Have a good day Gentlemen, we’ll be in touch.”

I mute the microphone, turn off the video stream and ensure the call has ended. Then I turn to Paula, “What’s wrong?”

“I think it’s best I show it to you.” She hands me her iPhone, open on a YouTube page, and I see a video of Kathy and me arguing outside the parking lot of *The Lady*. It was taken during that time when she had learnt who I was and was passionately fighting for her job. The time I screwed up by pretending not to know her.

In the video, Kathy’s hands are propped on her hips as she challenges me. I know Paula is studying my face, watching my reaction, so I school my features to be neutral. The audio is set to mute, but the captions are set to display and I can read the words Kathy is saying: “With all due respect, you’re a fucking jerk!” and then: “You don’t even remember who I am, do you? Well, I won’t let you ruin my life any further. You can take your offer and shove it!”

Paula clicks on the comments under the video and scrolls through them. “This one is my personal favorite, and I’m not alone, it has over a thousand likes.” She reads it out to me,

“I know guys like Huxley, they walk all over you and mistreat you until you can take no more.”

I shrug, “So? The deal with Bicorp is signed. This will blow over.”

“I think we should do something about it, regardless. It’s not good publicity, to say the least.”

I hate bending to the media and apologizing for something private that should never have been their business. “Who the hell made this recording anyway?” I ask petulantly.

Paula shrugs. “Who knows? It looks like it was taken on a pretty powerful telephoto lens, but the sound is still good quality, so I’d say it was professional. But as to who hired them or why... who can say?”

“What is it with people recording every darn thing?” I mutter, half under my breath.

“They get to sell their story to the blogs and the fashion magazines. You should know how these things work. More importantly, you should learn to be more careful.”

The office phone rings, and we stare at each other. Paula moves round the table and picks it up, speaking into it for a minute. I run my hand through my hair, recalling the other recording, also showing me in a bad light, just a few weeks ago.

I wonder for a minute if Kathy is the one who has orchestrated this.

She covers the receiver with her hand and says, “It’s the finance team. Our stocks are taking a hit.”

“What? By how much?”

She purses her lips. “Sir, I think...”

“Don’t make me repeat my question again.”

She set the phone down and sits on the chair opposite me, clueing me in to how serious she thinks the situation is. She hates the monster-sized chair, which to tell the truth I got only in part to annoy her. “We’re down by 15%.”

“Fuck.”

I rub my temples as I calculate what to do. Ordinarily things like this don’t matter too much. It all blows over and in a few months’ time the share price rises back to where it was as common sense prevails once more in the money markets.

But right now I need our share price to be high not low. I have a large investment that I need to make. I cannot afford for our share price to go much lower. If it does I'm going to be in trouble. My decision is made. We'll take strong, affirmative action, all guns blazing. "Get the lawyers on the phone. I want every single copy of that video scrubbed off the internet."

She stands immediately, and I add. "Also get the private investigator and find out who is doing this and why. I want answers before the end of the day."

"Yes sir," she says.

I look down at the time the video had been posted. It hasn't been more than a few hours, and it's already wreaking havoc.

Paula adjusts her skirt – there isn't much out of place as always. "Okay, sir."

She pauses as she steps past me. "It'll blow over soon, and we'll make sure the damage doesn't remain permanent."

I nod. "I know that. But someone is after me and I'd like to know who it is."

"Do you want me to get you a glass of water?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you, Paula."

I have my suspicions regarding who's doing this, but I have to rule out all the likely suspects, and yes if I am completely honest with myself, maybe a part of me wants to hear her voice. I hide my caller ID, and she answers on the first ring, her voice hesitant. "Hello?"

"It's me, Garth."

She remains silent for so long I almost think she hung up.

But I can hear the sound of her soft breathing over the phone.

"Kathy? Don't tell me you haven't seen the video."

"Why are you calling me, Garth?"

"I want to know if you did it."

"Did what?"

She's going to play obtuse, is she? Well, I'm going to spell it out. "I want to find out if you orchestrated that scene you made in the hotel parking lot, so you could make a video to post on the internet and ruin my image."

"You know I wouldn't do that."

"Do I? I barely know anything about you after all." *You won't let me know either, because you keep pushing me away and you won't even let me take you to dinner,* a part of me wants to add, but I shut it down quickly.

"No, I guess we don't know each other well." She sighs. "Look, you can choose to believe me or not."

"Quite the contrary, I can sue you for every last cent you have."

"Are you kidding me? You do know that people are always whipping out their phones to record anything, right? Anyone could have recorded that video." Her voice radiates indignation. "Why do you act like everyone is out to get you?"

Because they are. I shut my eyes and run through the facts. The more I think about it, the more right she seems. The confrontation had seemed spontaneous, unplanned and not a carefully set trap. "Give me an answer as to why you won't go out with me."

"Garth..."

"I don't want any of that bullshit or brush offs. I want the real answer. *Please.*"

Her voice drops down to a whisper...

"I'm afraid."

CHAPTER 8

Kathy

I tie my shoelaces and place the noise-canceling headphones on my head. My face in the mirror is a reflection of my worried state. I've tossed and turned through the night, determined not to fall asleep so I wouldn't have to dream of Garth. The area under my eyes is darkened by huge eye bags. My skin is flushed red and irritated and no amount of moisturizer can conceal it.

Luckily, I didn't have any early appointments today, so Sophie doesn't complain when I call in sick. She gives me a few more days to work it out of my system too, which is extraordinarily nice of her.

If only I could enjoy this little break.

I sigh and select some punk music. This is my last resort. I hope the run will do some good to clear my head and tire my muscles a little. I pump my arms and legs as fast as I can. My thighs burn as I move, trying to cover as much ground as possible. My smart watch peeps, alerting me of my increasing heart rate.

The rage from the music fills me with enough energy to push myself beyond my limits. Paramore's *Pressure* blasts in

my ears, and I run until my vision fades out, and all I can see are colors. I pause by the side of the road and throw up what's left of my meagre breakfast. The sun is fully out by the time I drag myself back to the apartment.

I shower and settle into bed, ready to doze off. The curtains are over my windows, blocking out all the sunlight. I've worked my muscles just hard enough that they feel like rubber. Sleep is on the horizon.

The sound of the phone ringing comes seemingly from afar. I roll over, choosing to ignore it, and enter heavy-lidded bliss once again. I roll over to my side to get comfortable and continue my rest. But again, I hear that cursed ringing tone. I press my pillow down over my head, but now the sound has penetrated my subconscious there's nothing I can do, I cannot get it out again.

I grab the phone, ready to turn it off and silence the ringing, when I notice it is a strange number. Curious, I press the button to accept the call.

"Hello?"

As soon as I hear his voice I realize my mistake. "It's me, Garth."

I squeeze my eyes shut. Why won't he leave me alone? Doesn't he understand the meaning of *No*?

I'm about to hang up when he drops his bombshell on me. "Kathy, don't tell me you haven't seen the video."

"Why are you calling me, Garth?"

What video? I pull the phone from my ear and minimize the call. That's when I realize I already have several messages from Maggie and Tim. Most of them include a URL and several exclamation points.

I put the phone on speaker just as Garth says, "I want to know if you did it."

"Did what?"

I rub my eyes and shake my head to clear my wooliness, but I cannot understand what the messages are talking about. I'm trending on YouTube... is that what they are saying?

I see that Maggie sent me a link. I click on it and find myself watching a video of the confrontation between myself and Garth.

I slap my hand over my mouth. Mortification rushes through me..

Someone took a video of us arguing.

Does he really think that I did it, that I set him up? The thought both annoys me and makes me pity him.

How much betrayal has he suffered to end up distrusting so many people?

"Give me the answer as to why you won't go out with me," he says. "I don't want any bullshit or brush-offs.... I want the real answer."

I feel the air leave my body as though someone punched me. I should stop this now, but maybe he deserves to at least get the truth. I was going to tell him how wrong he is for me, but what comes out instead was perhaps even more accurate, "I'm afraid."

There's a moment of silence.

And then, a dial tone.

Did he just hang up on me?

I sigh, considering the matter now closed for good. He must realize now just how much baggage I'm carrying.

Any chance of getting the sleep that I have been yearning for has completely left me, so I get out of bed.

I take another shower and try not to imagine him with me. I scrub my hair and skin and turn the heat up until my skin is scalding. After drying my body briskly with a towel, I get dressed. Then I decide to take a walk in the park. I fix myself a sandwich, and because this is meant to be a fruit day for the

diet I am trying, I pack a couple of apples and oranges into a small basket.

I text Maggie my impending location just as a formality. I know she can't join me anyway since she has an afternoon shift, but I just like to let her know where I am, in case of emergencies.

The street is quiet as I walk, which is common since it is a little past noon. Most of my neighbors have already left for work, but the couple across the street are retired and very nosey. Maggie hates them, but I think they're cute. I see their curtain twitch and I wave, laughing when they quickly close up the curtain gap.

The sun is nice, the warmth on my back comforting, and a soft breeze blows in my direction. I lift my face, pointing it toward the sun, letting the rays bathe my skin. The leaves of the trees that lined the street have just started to turn golden yellow, and the air has a faint scent of firewood and the promise of pumpkin pie.

I barely reach the end of my block when a black Mercedes pulls over beside me, startling me into a stop.

I peer at the car, as the door opens and a tall, imposing figure steps out. My heart stops.

Oh no.

Garth is here.

I wish I could face him as a composed, cool person, but my nerves are too raw. I jump back, my basket slipping from my hands, the contents spilling out onto the sidewalk.

Even more embarrassing, tears spring to my eyes.

Garth circles the car toward me and pauses. He blanches at the sight of my tears, turning slightly pale and taking two steps back.

Is he about to leave? To leave me to pick up the pieces after he has ruined my moment of peace?

So fucking unfair.

I stalk closer, grab him by the collar and bang my fist against his chest. “How dare you! How dare you do this to me?”

He grasps my small hands in his huge paws and pulls me closer, though not very roughly. “How dare I? How dare I do *what* to you, Kathy?”

I suddenly realize how close we're standing. We're sharing the same air. I try to put some space between us, but he holds me by the waist and almost lifts me clean off the floor until I am standing on his toes.

His eyes frighten me the most. Those blue orbs— warm and bright as I am used to seeing them — have become cold. It feels like I'm in Antarctica. I shiver. “I already told you Garth. It wasn't me.”

“Whether you were directly involved or not. You have to admit that you played a part in this.” he vents.

“I didn't. I don't know why you won't believe me, you persistent, hardheaded ass.”

The veins in his head have gotten so big I worry he might have a heart attack.

“Sweetie? Are you ok?” Someone calls from a distance.

We both turn in unison to spot Natalie and John, the old couple I wave to, on their front porch. Natalie has her little sphynx cat in her arms, while John has a baseball bat in his.

I wave and try to smile. “I'm ok.”

“Hold on, we're coming over.” Natalie's voice is shrill, nervous, but determined. While Mag would definitely mark this as part of their nosiness, today, I'm grateful for their intervention. Garth's grip on me loosens and then slips down to my waist. Beneath perfectly erected smiles, I can hear his teeth grinding. “Call off your guard dogs.”

I want to pull away, but he holds fast. I know how strong

he is, and attempting to pull away will only cause me to hurt myself.

Natalie and John are out of their house and by the edge of the road now. They wait until a Toyota drives past before attempting to cross the road. As I watch them come over, it crosses my mind that I am not really afraid of Garth hurting me. No matter how annoyed he seems, the thought never crossed my mind that he would actually harm me.

More than anything, I have anger of my own, and I'm unwilling to go down without sticking in a few verbal jabs. I pull away slightly, "If you didn't act like such a jerk, they wouldn't be here in the first place."

"Everything ok?" John says to me, looking Garth up and down uncertainly, taking in the 6ft 3in of pure solid muscle. John doesn't back down though and it's sweet that he's still willing to protect me.

I would let John continue to give Garth more grief, but I know Garth is right. We don't need another scandal on our hands.

"Yes," I answer John. "Garth is a friend. We were just talking."

John turns those eyes to look at me. They're already cloudy with age, but don't seem to miss a beat when it comes to boyfriend trouble. He scoffs. "A friend huh?"

"Yes, we just...got a little carried away that's all."

Garth holds his hand out for a shake, but John doesn't take it. I hide my grin, pretending to stare down at the floor. Garth retreats his hand, coughs awkwardly and stands up straighter.

Is Garth finally being put in his place?

If I had realized an older man would do the trick, I'd have stuck him in a nursing home for a month.

"I'm sorry if we may have disrupted your day in any

way,” Garth says, putting on his best “pleasant young man” voice.

“We consider little Kitty Kat our sweetheart. It’s no bother at all,” Natalie says.

“Kitty Kat huh?”

I blush all the way to my toes.

I feel Garth chuckle, and I get a sudden urge both to throw something at him and kiss him simultaneously. I quickly dismiss both thoughts from my head.

He leads me back to my house, and as we wave goodbye, he whispers, “Let’s go, girlfriend.”

“I am not your girlfriend.” I feel silly saying it, like I’m back as a teenager at school or something.

Garth stops in step. Then he snaps his fingers, his eyes widening as though a realization just hit him “That’s it! You can be my girlfriend!”

I frown, then reach up to press my palm against his forehead. “Has the heat started to get to your brain?”

“No, no.” His eyes are wide, and glossy. “It’s perfect. In fact, better still, you can be my fiancée. Come on... *sweetheart!*”

He continues walking, faster this time, pulling me along at his long-legged pace until we reach my door.

Once there, he presses on me to open the door as fast as possible, but I find my hand is no longer steady. Be his girlfriend? His *fiancée*? Is he insane?

Impatient at my shaky attempt to open the door, Garth snatches the keys from me and takes over, unlocking the door and pulling me inside.

“It’s perfect! The best way to make this whole thing blow over is to wrap a little bow on it. Give people something more interesting to talk about.”

I fold my hands, "I'm not doing it Garth. Nothing you say can convince me otherwise."

"Kathy..."

It would have been better if he had tried to threaten, offer blackmail or something else but the simple pronunciation of my name made it difficult for me to steel myself to him.

I turn around, "I've already made up my mind. Besides, who is going to believe you? You already have a reputation for being too hands-on with women."

"You believe that I would hurt a woman?"

He maneuvers us so that he is standing between me and the door. There's no place to look except straight at him. Of course, I hadn't believed it. The moment I saw that video, I knew something else was at play.

"You believe that I could hurt you?"

He looks heartbroken; I strive for something light-hearted to kill the tension. "It doesn't matter what I think here." I state. "Who will believe that I am in a video berating you one day and the next, we are happily engaged?" No one will swallow it.

He smiles, a wicked glint entering his eye. "Rubbish. That's exactly what relationships are really like. I bet we can do a really good job of tricking them. Look Kathy, think of this as purely a business arrangement. I need you – correction, my *business* needs you – to perform a service, purely as a business transaction. If the share price continues to go down then we're going to be in trouble, and if we can keep it where it is or maybe even get it shifting upwards again then not only will we not be in trouble after all, but I can make the investment I have planned, and my company will make an absolute killing from it.

"But it all rests with you Kathy. I need you to pretend you are my fiancée, pretend we are in love. That way we can

show everyone that these YouTube videos are misrepresentations, plotted by my enemies to deliberately try to make me look bad. The investors will regain their confidence in me, and everything will work out fine.

“Well, I don’t know...” I start, but he cuts me off.

“Remember – this is a business transaction. I’ve told you what’s in it for me and for my business. For you... how would \$200,000 help you out right now? I’ll pay you \$100,000 in cash, direct into your account right now today, and the balance in a couple of months’ time or so, once the investment transactions have all gone ahead. Now, what do you say? Just say the word and I’ll call my PA and have her transfer the money right away.”

It’s all happening so fast, his words rushing through me. I feel like I need to run, but I cannot escape him fast enough.

I turn to walk away, but he pulls me closer, tackling me to the floor, and at the last minute he twists so that his body bears the hit. His hands find the sensitive side of my tummy and start tickling me. I try to stay strong, but there’s nothing I can do. I try to wiggle away, but his legs have tangled up with mine, and he is easily holding me in place with one hand, tickling me with the other.

“Stop!” I manage to wheeze, “I’ll die.”

“Say yes, Kathy. I know you don’t want me really. I know you don’t think much of me as husband material – God knows you’ve made that obvious – but this’ll only be for a while. We *are* friends, right?”

I nod, gasping for breath.

“Then do this as a favor to your friend. We’ll put on a good show and have everyone talking. My family want to see me married anyway, so they’re just waiting to believe it. Besides, everyone loves a romantic story, no matter how

suspicious the characters appear to be, or how ridiculous the plot gets.”

At the mention of marriage, my heart skips a beat. He pushes a lock of hair that had fallen across my face back into place. “It will only be for a couple of months. Just until all these deals have gone through and the share price has settled down. Please, Kathy. Do this one thing for me. Please.”

I know that I am already halfway in love with him. How can I protect myself from him when I would gladly give up *anything* just to spend time with him? That’s not the problem though. The problem is, when the time comes for me to give him up, will I be able to?

My answer comes from inside me. It’s almost like someone else is saying it for me.

“Yes.”

He laughs and leans in to kiss me, but I stop him. “I have one condition though.”

“What is it, I’ll do anything?”

“There’ll be no sex. You won’t kiss me or touch me except as necessary to keep up the pretense in public.”

His smile wanes a little.

“We’ll do what we need to do to fool everyone, but I want to be able to walk away when the time is right.”

He looks like he is about to say something, and I hold my breath, wondering what he’ll say.

But then the moment passes and he gives me a chaste peck on my cheek, “You drive a hard bargain ma’am, but I accept your condition.”

CHAPTER 9

Garth

“You’re insane!” Paula walks into my office and slams the newspaper magazine onto my table. She stabs at the picture with her finger like it’s a sacrilege.

Our gaze meets. I do not look away. “It’s *Sir* to you.”

She jerks back as if I have slapped her. Her lips pressing so flat together they’re almost non-existent.

“I’m sorry *sir*.” A definitely sarcastic tinge has entered her pronunciation of the word ‘sir’. “What I should have said is that I would have liked a heads up before having to field about two hundred calls from journalists and newspaper outlets all day... *sir*.”

“Sit down, Paula.”

“I’d rather stand.”

I try not to laugh. If she could, I think in that moment she’d rearrange things so I was lying on the floor, bleeding, with my head chewed off.

It’s been a few days since I started the scheme with Kathy and we’ve already gone on a public date. I ensured the story was leaked in advance to some of the right type of journalists

– the ones who like to write stories about celebrity gossip – who did a great job, turning up to take pictures and writing a whole column discussing what we were wearing and the fact that we seemed to be over our prior ‘lover’s spat’.

“I know you think the idea is crazy, but it was the only thing I could think of at the time, and let’s face it, it’s working. Here, look at this.”

I show her the live charts for the company stock, and we both see the numbers ticking up, rising like Lazarus. I grin. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she? Twenty percent up from our lowest point. She’s been on a steady rise since the first thing this morning.”

I watch her eyes move, contemplating between sticking to her annoyance or being happy that something is finally working on our share price, and not quite knowing how to pull off both at once. Finally, she lets out a deep sigh, followed by “I’ll keep the reporters off your back. Unless, of course, you want to make a public statement.”

I extend an olive branch, “Draft something and send it out. I trust your judgment.”

She nods. “Okay, thank you. Also...” She clears her throat “...I’m sorry about my little outburst. I was worried that you may have been making a great mistake.”

“Not a problem. I’m very, very happy to have loyal people like you in my corner, Paula. You are my rock, and you can be sure I won’t ever forget it.”

I watch her leave, then pick up my phone.

Kathy answers on the first ring, sounding as cranky as she had been the day after I had dropped her off after our not-too-subtle first public date. “What?”

I shut my eyes, wincing at her tone, “Did you get the flowers? I thought they’d help you feel better.”

I hear the sound of her gagging over the phone and immediately sit up. "Is it really that bad?"

"Garth, I'm feeling sick. Smells are getting to me much more than they usually do, so no, your flowers aren't helping at all."

I grin. "So, this is what it's like to have a fiancée, eh? I guess I'll just have to stand your mental whipping and caustic remarks until your PMS goes away."

"Don't say that." I can picture her perfect little nose scrunching up in disgust. "I've been known to get overly defensive when someone calls it that."

"I can come over and we can play hooky together."

"I look disgusting, Garth. You don't want to see me."

"Sweety, I'll always want to see you. Even if you had chicken pox and you're contagious."

I realize even as I say it that I mean every word. I want to see her just as much when she is ill, when her nose is runny with the flu, when she's feeling cranky and mean, as when she's running on full power and operating at her best.

Something so amazing about her makes me want to spend time with her no matter what she looks or acts like. It's a new feeling for me to simply crave the company of a woman. I am happy just simply to laugh with her and be there together.

"Be careful," she says. "I may fall in love with you."

I wink at her, even though she cannot see me, "Baby, you won't be the first."

"Fuck you."

I grin. "I'll grab takeout on my way home from work. I know you like Chinese."

I picked up that information from seeing her order takeout. The bright joy on her face when the order arrived, even though it was an hour late, told me how much she loved it. My brain filed away the information and now whips it out.

“I think I’m going to cry,” she says “Bring it over.”

I know she means it as a joke, but the mention of her crying takes me back to seeing my mother curled up beside my dad when he had passed out drunk on the floor. I was supposed to be in bed, but the walls were so thin I could hear him from outside in the street. She would put her hand in her mouth and bite hard so that her sobs would not be heard. Sometimes she even choked on her spit.

“I don’t want you crying, Kathy. Not for any reason. Not ever.”

She pauses for a second, picking up the seriousness in my tone of voice. Wondering what brought this on, no doubt. “Are you...ok?”

I hang up before the situation gets more personal than it has to. I remind myself this is just a publicity stunt. In a few months, it will be over, and I will have to respect her wishes and let her go. This isn’t a movie, this is real life. The cowboy will not be riding off into the sunset, and I cannot keep my Kitty Kat forever.

When the call clicks off, I see another call coming in. It’s that asshole, Zion Aguielo again.

I pick up. “Missing me already?”

“Did you get my gift?” he asks, ignoring my question.

I lean back against my chair. I hadn’t received any messages in the mail of late, but I *had* gotten a conveniently leaked video that painted me in a bad light. Suddenly it all makes sense.

I kind of suspected it might be Aguielo behind the YouTube video, but I was waiting on Paula’s PI to give me a definitive answer. I suppose it was fitting that Zion had called me to own up to it himself. The stupid sonofabitch couldn’t help but tell on himself.

“It’s good to hear that you’re sounding better. I take it the surgery was a success.”

“You should tread very carefully, Garth. You’ve had an amazing string of luck since you were born but all that is about to end.”

I don’t know if I would call having an angry drunk for a father and a mother trapped in forever reliving her lost modeling career as being particularly lucky.

I shake myself from my reprieve, wondering why my mind seems to reflect so much on the past of late.

I laugh, letting Aguielo know just how little concern I have for his threats. “I thought you would make the smart decision, Zion, and lie low somewhere to lick your wounds.” I say. “Although thinking about it now, I don’t know why I had such high expectations. You’ve not exactly shown yourself to be the world’s greatest strategist”

“You’re going to be very sorry that you ever underestimated me.”

“No, my friend, *you* will be sorry.”

I hang up and punch the intercom to let Paula know I need her back in my office. She instantly appears by the door with her iPad in her hand, ready for anything as always.

“I was just coming to tell you that the PI is waiting for you in reception,” she says.

“That was Aguielo on the phone. He admitted to doing it himself. Pay the PI off and tell him we no longer need his services.”

She nods, and I give her further instructions. “I already called Austin earlier. You’ll go with him to find that girl – the waitress that Aguielo previously assaulted – and bring her back with you.”

“Okay, sir.” She turns to leave, then stops, “I also sent you

an email; you need to approve the logistics for your business trip this weekend.

“Shit. I forgot about the conference.”

“I hope you told your fake girlfriend that you’re going to be unavailable for the weekend. Women don’t like those things sprung on them.”

I wag my finger at her, “You’re enjoying this way too much.”

She shrugs. “Hey, I’m not the one who has to pay someone to agree to be their girlfriend.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Mm-hmm.” She gives me a sassy ‘That’s what *you* think’ look and flounces out of the room.

I smooth my hair into place and lift my left hand to knock on the door. My right hand is holding the cartons containing the takeout I picked up from the local Chinese restaurant as promised.

Will she think it is too much? I ordered a portion of everything I thought she’d like. Oh well, I guess it will keep in the refrigerator, and considering her current mercurial mood, I want to keep her happy. I’m not sure how I’m going to attain such a lofty goal, but food seems as good a way to try as any other.

My hand returns to fiddle with my tie, and I realize I am stalling. I ring the doorbell and knock, then listen to the sound of footsteps, realizing with a certain degree of surprise that I am actually feeling nervous as the door is pulled open. Almost as nervous as the time that I closed my first business deal.

A girl about Kathy’s age but with brown hair and a big

smile appears before the door. She takes my hand and leads me inside before I can speak. "Kathy, it's your fancy man."

Kathy appears from another room, wearing a large shirt and with her hair up in a messy bun. She looks effortlessly delicious, and if we were alone, I'm certain I would attempt to break her rule and kiss her. But she's frowning at me and her friend, who still has a big smile. "He's not my fancy man."

The girl ignores Kathy and holds out her hand for a shake, "I'm Maggie. Kathy's best friend."

I open my mouth to introduce myself, but she beats me to it. "Oh, don't bother, I already know who *you* are. In fact, I've heard a *lot* about you."

"Have you?"

Kathy groans. She runs across the room to me and pulls me away from the living area. "You're embarrassing me, Maggie."

Her friend laughs in her face, watching us walk towards her room. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do. And remember, the walls are pretty thin around here."

"I'm going to kick you out soon, just you watch." Kathy yells.

"I love you too." Maggie blows her a kiss, just as Kathy shuts her bedroom door.

I chuckle, "Well that was nice." The room is small but organized, with a platform bed set under a window.

I sit on it first, and Kathy sits beside me. Her shirt is long enough to cover her sensational thighs but I can't resist trying to take a peek.

The AC/DC logo and the overall fit convince me it's a man's shirt. I try to tamp down the quick, angry surge of jealousy in me, wondering which of her previous boyfriends gave her that shirt, but I don't succeed.

“Nice shirt,” I say.

She looks down at it as if seeing it for the first time, “Oh, thanks. It’s actually my dad’s.”

“Oh.” I hope my tone doesn’t reveal the relief that courses through me.

After that, Kathy works fast, retrieving the top take-out box from one of my bags, and opening it up to see what’s inside. I join her, sensing that she wants to eat more than anything else. After the first few bites I’m treated to a few moans of delight. Things become harder for me. In every sense. Watching her eat is like watching soft porn.

She catches me staring one too many times and cleans her lips with a paper towel, “Is there something on my face?”

I seek a subject change. “Do I have to worry about a seven-foot-tall, overprotective father with a swinging baseball bat, coming to protect his daughter’s honor?”

She freezes for a second and then bursts into laughter, so loud the ramen we are slurping passes through the wrong channel, and it becomes a coughing fit.

I spot a bottle of water on her dresser. I rise and retrieve it for her. When I return to her side, I hand the water and pat her back until she calms down.

“I take it that that wasn’t the right question to ask.”

Her eyes are still watery, and she pauses to wipe them before resuming her meal. “I never knew my dad. This shirt is the only thing he forgot to pack when my mom told him she was pregnant with me, and that was apparently only because it was in the wash at the time.”

Her eyes avert away from me, and I’m sorry now that I had raised the topic. I don’t say anything else until she finishes eating, resting back on the bed with a satisfied sigh. Then I gather our empty cartoons into a pile and reach down to pull her legs onto my lap so I can massage her feet – some-

thing it appears she has decided to allow me to do. Oh well, it might not be the contact I'd ideally like to be having, but it's better than nothing. "I bet your mom feels tremendously proud of you. You've turned out to be a very beautiful and skilled woman."

"She's dead, but that's very nice of you to say so."

I reach for her hand and squeeze it. Well done Garth, you've put your foot in it twice now within the same number of minutes.

"How about your parents?" She asks me. "I did some digging, so I know that they are alive, but you might as well be an orphan, for all the information I can find out about them."

"I may as well be."

She draws closer, "What do you mean?"

I bop her on the nose. "Well don't you know Kitty Kat that money isn't everything?"

She frowns when I use her nickname but does not correct me.

We talk about everything, from movies to music, and we find some shared tastes. I take off my suit and tie so I can be more comfortable. When I reach for my belt buckle, I see her body tense.

"Kathy?" I call and her eyes fly up to mine. "We'll only go to sleep, nothing more."

"Why would you do that when you know I won't have sex with you?"

"I'm trying to be a good boyfriend, silly."

"*Fake* boyfriend", she clarifies, but nevertheless she shifts, allowing me to join her in lying on the bed. I consider this to be a major success. I wrap my arms around her and feel something settle in my chest. Something beyond merely a

sexual feeling. Something wholesome and sweet. Could this be love?

A week later, and I'm no better. In fact, it's worse.

Thoughts of Kathy are stuck in my head. An image of her face has been permanently imprinted in my mind. All the memories of my brief time with Kathy keep playing in my memory, from our first experience together to the time I asked her to be my fiancée, or perhaps I should say my fake fiancée.

I shrug and pick up the adjustable hand grip strengthener I keep on my desk as a part of my exercise protocol. I set the strengthener to a particularly difficult setting and start squeezing, hoping the pain of the exercise will take away my thoughts of Kathy. It isn't working. I reset the device to maximum and squeeze harder. The veins stand out on my forearms. My breathing gets harsher as I start counting down from 50 to 1, the strengthener still squeezed tightly in my hand.

When next I look up, I see Paula there with her ubiquitous iPad, staring at me.

"How long have you been standing there?" I ask while the pain in my fingers slowly subsides and my breathing returns to normal.

"Long enough to have heard you sigh a million times," She answers.

"I assume you've come to share my schedule for the day. It's still early. But let's hear it."

"You look stiff." Apparently she's noticed how I turn my head up and down, left and right, twisting my neck to find a comfortable position.

"So nice of you to have noticed my discomfort."

“*The Lady’s* hotel spa is still open, and you can breeze in and out anytime you wish.”

I put down the grip strengthener as my thoughts return to Kathy.

Everything has been taking an upturn since my announcement of the sale of ‘*The Lady*’. Even if it seems as though my life revolves around work, *The Lady Hotel and Spa*, Aguielo, the press, my investment plans, and of course my most beautiful Kathy. I smile at the thought of “my” Kathy.

“Oh well.” I sigh.

“One million and one.” I hear Paula whisper before pretending to clear her throat.

I stare at her for a while until she breaks our eye contact and peeps at her watch, “You have a meeting today scheduled for 9:05 am, and it’s nearly time for that. Immediately after that, you have another meeting with the ...”

Her voice drones on, and I allow her to finish, nodding along as if I am listening, though in truth I am not. “Thank you, Paula; you may go now.” She shifts away from me as I stand up, in an attempt to dodge my hand. I sense she thinks I am aiming to mess up her bun, and it is definitely too early for her to allow that to happen. She does not want to go a whole day around the office with a messy bun.

A small victory for Paula. She smiles and leaves, bun intact.

My mind is unfocused, and I try not to think about my fiancée. It’s at this moment, I realize how much I am now using her title – fiancée – instead of her name, Kathy in my mind. Maybe, I *should* start to call her my fiancée, make it look less fake to the outside world.

My eyes scan across the desk, and looking at the pile of work before me, I yell “I need a vacation”.

On my desk is my laptop, displaying updates on the

global markets and stocks. To the laptop's left are various spiral bound notes ranging in colors, each representing different companies and investments opportunities. Pens in a variety of colors, sizes, shapes, and quality, plus markers, highlighters, and pencils are all unceremoniously shoved into a large bronze shell case that worked well as a pen tidy.

My personal diary, smartphones, and tablets are all the other side of the laptop. Next to them are a series of hard-cover white files awaiting my signatures, each representing an investment, a venture, or a contract deal. I sigh again, more deeply this time.

I make up my mind – I *will* schedule a getaway, straight away. This conference at the weekend is not really necessary. Instead of going to that I could take a few days off and relax. Something that will not only take me away from my work, but also take my mind away from *her*. What I need is some time away from New York. Somewhere out of range of all technology, so I am uncontactable by the outside world for a day or two. But I don't want to be completely alone, either. I need distractions because otherwise I will certainly think of her. Or maybe I won't. Deep down, I know that's a lie. I certainly will.

"Garth, pull yourself together, your world doesn't revolve around this girl," I tell myself. But to be honest, my world indeed revolves around her.

"Are you thinking about her again? Snap out of it and plan your vacation," I conclude. So... a "proper" weekend trip away from busy New York, and all of the pressures that come from being a businessman.

I hear a soft knock on the door; it's Paula. "Sir, I need to remind you that..."

I interrupt her. "Paula, good, I was about to call you. You're right, I need a break, so I'm cancelling the weekend

conference and instead I'm going to head off into the mountains for a day or two. I need you to contact that pilot from the last trip."

Paula's forehead creases a little. "Which trip was that again?"

"Come on, Paula. You know. The one with the boys."

"Oh, right. The one you used to use when you wanted to get away without notice?"

I smile, "That's right."

Paula remembers what I am talking about. I am glad I didn't have to tell her anything else; she knows what to do. She nods in affirmation and smiles.

"Have a great weekend, sir," she said. Once again, I realize how lucky I am to have found Paula.

I ignore the pile of documents and throw my legs onto my desk. I reach for my phone to call a couple of my old buddies, just the kind of guys anyone would need if they wanted to have a good time.

Albert picks up my call on the first ring.

"Garth, my man. What's up?" Albert greets me with all of the gusto my overwhelmed body surely needs. Of course, I don't expect anything less from someone with his level of energy.

"Albert! I'm as good as ever. Still with that last girlfriend of yours... what was her name... Susan?"

"Ah! You know me, man. You know me."

I laugh out loud. Albert has always been a flirt. He knows just what to say to charm them into his bed. He could never keep them there though for longer than a week or two. Not unlike myself, I muse. Until now of course. Now I aim to change all that.

"Hey, listen up man. Can you get Orlando onto the call? I want you both to hear what I have to say at the same time."

Orlando joins the call with just as much energy as Albert. They're like two over-enthusiastic German shepherd puppies, waiting to go outside and play.

"Hey guys. I'm gonna spend another long weekend out in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness like we used to do, and I'm inviting you guys. This weekend – can you make it?"

"Hell, yeah man."

"Yeah, sure thing, count me in too!"

The whole gang is revved up and ready to go.

CHAPTER 10

Kathy

When Garth told me about his last-minute trip, a part of me wanted to wrap my hands around him and beg him not to go, or if he had to go, then to take me with him.

I didn't realize how used to him I've gotten, how much I started enjoying spending time with him and our lengthy conversations.

A whole weekend without hearing from him? Seemed like torture.

But I was the one who insisted on boundaries for this ridiculous fake fiancée farce we are acting out, so I couldn't say. Instead, I throw myself into work, keeping busy so I don't think about him. And then on the night of his departure, I wrap myself extra tight around my pillow and wonder what he's up to. He said he'll be hunting and fishing with his old male friends from school and there will be strictly no women going, but he has a terrible reputation as a lady's man; he is like a magnet that draws every red blooded woman who looks at him into his trap.

I know our relationship is fake, and he's not obligated to

be faithful, but I also know my heart will break if I see him with another woman.

That first night he is away, the doorbell rings, and I hurry to answer it, happy to escape my thoughts. In my haste, I forget to check the peephole and I open my door to a man I have never met or seen before.

He's tall, about Garth's age, well dressed in expensive slacks and a sports jacket, and with the most unsettling white teeth I have ever seen outside of a gameshow host.

He holds out his hand to shake, and while it is a completely harmless gesture, somehow I don't feel inclined to take it.

"Hi, I'm Garth's friend, Zion. I decided to come see the woman who has completely captured his heart."

Alarm bells ring in my head. Why would Garth be talking about me to his friends, especially in that sort of language? And why would Garth's friend come alone without Garth himself?

Outwardly, however, I smile, and I pull the door wider to let him in. It would be rude to slam the door in his face, and I can't expect him to stand on my doorstep for his entire visit. All the same, I have a feeling of foreboding about this meeting. Like there's another agenda for this guy being here..

I follow him into the sitting room and offer him a small couch that's positioned strategically by the window so the soft afternoon breeze can reach it.

He looks around, and for the first time in a while, I wonder how my simple little apartment would look to a stranger who is no doubt used to more expensive tastes.

Though he is dressed semi-formally, I can tell that the simple jacket, shirt and pants are of great quality and extremely expensive.

Unlike my apartment, which he's currently eyeing with distaste.

This had been my mom's apartment, and when she passed, I was happy to step in and pay the lease. It makes me feel closer to her. There's a chipped vase and a faded painting in the corner. The paint is coming away from the walls in places, and the landlord is very frugal, refusing to pay for anything but essential repairs.

I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ears, realizing I am dressed in nothing but an oversized hoodie and shorts and suddenly feeling a little self-conscious. What does this guy really want from me? "Can I get you anything? Coffee? Juice? Water?"

His eyes make their way around the room and finally settle on me. Once again, I feel weird, as if he's reading me

I want to run and hide myself, but I force myself to perch on the arm of the other sofa and try to bring a smile to my face.

He flashes his teeth again, rising from the seat so he can join me on the large sofa. I resist the urge to recoil when he sits close. "Excuse my forwardness but you are a very beautiful woman. I can see why Garth is smitten."

"Thank you." I rise again, choosing to stand. I ponder on the reason for this visit. "Is Garth okay? Does he need anything?"

"No," he says. "As a matter of fact, I think I have seen enough. I'll take my leave now."

"Huh?"

I am too stunned to react as he stands. He strides to the door. I run to catch up with him before he can leave. "Are you serious? You're really leaving just like that?"

He grabs my hands in his, speaking with the cadence of a High Priest addressing a member of his flock.

“I think it would be best if we all meet when Garth gets back from his trip. I wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.”

The entire meeting is so weird, but there is nothing that I can do about it. Even though Garth and I know it’s pretend, everyone else believes that my announced betrothal to Garth is real (at least I hope they do), so I need to hold up my end of the bargain. Besides, there’s another \$100k waiting for me at the other end of this if I do a good enough job to convince everyone.

After my strange visitor leaves, I rest on the couch wondering what to do next.

Garth called me before he left, but I have not heard a word from him since this morning. I didn’t want to seem desperate or interrupt his vacation, so I hadn’t called, but surely the news of the visit of this weird Zion guy claiming to be his best friend warrants me putting a call into him.

I dial the number he had given me but all I get is a polite but stern woman, who tells me that she will have Garth call me as soon as possible. I can understand if he’s busy and can barely talk, but a short ‘hi’ would have been fine. I was meant to be his girlfriend, for Christ’s sake. Well... sort of.

When Sunday comes, I am sure I am going to die. I try to take my mind off the fact that Garth is supposed to return today. I decide that if he comes to see me as soon as he arrives, I’ll forgive him for not calling me back and for leaving me to deal with his weird best friend and his humorless assistant.

I’m doing all I can to keep busy. I have already scrubbed the house twice; the dishes are clean, the sheets have been changed, and there is nothing else to do but watch mindless television. I have texted Tim, and he has invited me over for a farewell drinks event with the other staff of *The Lady’s* spa

team. I accept immediately. I'll miss them, particularly Sophie, and I would love to say goodbye properly.

I spritz perfume on my little black dress that Maggie had chosen out of my wardrobe for me to wear over a silver-blue option I had also selected as an option. I go for a pair of mid calf length boots with heels that are high enough to give me the legs I want, but comfortable enough so my ankles won't suffer too badly the next day. I am just turning off the lights and the rest of the appliances when I see the headline on the news program.

Normally, I don't care much for watching news programs, finding them far too depressing, and being filled with things that make me angry, but none of which is there anything I can do to make things any better. But Maggie had been watching the channel before she left for work, and I had left it on as a mindless background – a little bit of company for my scattered thoughts. I pick up the remote to turn it off but then freeze.

I blink, not sure if I'm awake or dreaming. Not sure if I'm reading what I think I'm reading.

It can't be true. This can't be happening.

"Billionaire hotelier Garth Huxley lost in air accident."

My knees buckle, and I almost fall to the floor, just saving myself in time by reaching out for the sofa and sitting down. Quickly I unmute the volume. The announcer is going through the details, "...no known weather problems. Nevertheless, the helicopter carrying the billionaire, his two friends and a pilot disappeared a short time after take-off, believed to have crashed in the wilderness, miles from anywhere.

Rescue services are doing their best, trying to triangulate the location of the copter, but so far to no avail."

My chest gets tighter and tighter, until my vision nearly

swims. Only then do I finally draw a breath, but it still feels too short and rapid.

I cannot believe what I am hearing – this cannot be happening! Garth missing. Larger than life Garth, who walked around like the world should be grateful for having him in it?

Missing.

I want to be strong; he wouldn't want me to cry.

In fact, he would be insulted by the fact that I had thought that he could possibly be dead.

He's okay, I tell myself. This is probably just some misunderstanding. Or he's playing a prank on the world. You know how he likes his pranks.

I immediately send Tim a quick text to cancel my attendance at the farewell party, claiming last minute illness, and I sit by the TV with my hands clasped in front of me, praying to God, bargaining with Him, hoping against hope that Garth will return to me, safe and sound.

If he does make it back, I decide I will immediately tell him everything I truly feel inside. Life's too short, and something like this makes me understand how important it is to not waste a precious moment of it. These feelings have been growing, getting bigger and bigger every day, and no matter how hard I try, I cannot do anything to stop it. I will tell him that I am willing to be with him. If I get the chance, that is. Perhaps it is too late.

I watch every piece of news, awaiting an update but not getting anything except fresh reports of searches that have uncovered nothing. It takes me back to the hospital bed with my mom, praying for a miracle so cancer won't take her, but knowing in my heart of hearts that it is too late for hope. Stage 4 – they had caught it too late. I bury my head in the

pillow I have grabbed from my bed and I cry; I have lost him. I hadn't even told him how much he meant to me, and I have lost him. Why do I have such bad luck? Seems all the people I love are destined to die or suffer some form of misfortune.

CHAPTER 11

Garth

The noise of the helicopter that brought us here is rapidly fading into the distance, leaving nothing but the sounds of nature for miles around in all directions. This is true wilderness. No roads – no properly sign-posted trails even – and no mains electricity or running water, no neighbors, and best of all, no mobile phone signals!

“Here’s to three days of adventure and thrilling memories!” Albert shouts, splashing bourbon into the three tumblers he has grabbed from a cupboard and leveled out on the large and simply built, ancient oak table that takes up roughly half of the kitchen space in the old lodge. Albert has always been in love with wildlife. It’s not surprising. He comes from a long line of nature researchers and has the innate ability of a true outdoorsman to search and discover new things continuously. I love that he is so unlimited in this natural trait.

Orlando rolls up his sleeves and gently places our bags beside the wall. I watched him arrange the room as we talked. He’s dusting every corner. He’s the organized one among the three of us: the clean freak and the quietest but also the

smartest of the three of us too. His quiet, unassuming advice has set me in good stead many times in my youth.

“Remember those sandwiches Garth’s mom used to send ho to school with?”

“Those sandwiches were always so tasteless,” Albert cut in.

“Yes but they were gourmet,” I point out. “Which, for my mom, was far more important than taste.”

Orlando snorts. We were referred to as the entitled kids in school, and although Orlando was not so entitled, he was still an equal part of the gang.

“I do remember how you always brought up crazy game ideas,” says Albert. And we’d have so much fun even if we knew that we would all be in trouble when we got back home.” Orlando sighs and continues, “Always more unfortunate for me, I got blamed every time.”

“Of course you got blamed. You were the only one of us with a guilty conscience, so you would admit to what we did.”

“True.” Orlando chuckles.

Truthfully, Orlando had been more than a friend. He was and I hope still is more of a big brother and a confidant, always standing up for me whenever I’ve really needed it. I hope I am the same for him.

I take a glance at him, working hard to get us ready for the day’s activities. On the other hand, Albert is casually relaxing with his feet up on the table, refusing to help with our preparations, as usual.

Each morning, we take off in one direction or another from the cabin and hike the old hunting and logging trails. Lunch is taken with us and eaten where we happen to end up – by a stream, at the summit of a rise, or on the shore of one of the many lakes that dot the area and bring great fishing

opportunities for those who enjoy it. In the evenings we light log fires, cook dinner, laugh at our terrible jokes, play poker, drink the Kentucky Straight bourbon from the supply I had shipped in with us, and talk about the girls we had dated, the old friends we'd bumped into recently, and the others we hadn't seen since graduation all that time ago. We don't talk about our own present lives – maybe everyone is going through ups and downs like me, or maybe we all recognize it's just better to forget all of that for a day or so. Focus on the past.

By the end of our third and final day in the wilderness I'm feeling a lot more myself again. It's amazing what clean, mountain air and good friendship can do. I stand outside with a tumbler holding two generous fingers of Kentucky Straight in my hand and enjoy the evening air cool against my skin. The fresh scent of the trees and the nearby stream gushing and splashing on its way to the distant sea is like music to my ears. This is all I need, the serenity, the soothing feeling. The aura of calmness, the tingling fresh air, the feeling of oneness with nature.

Somewhere in the trees an owl calls and its partner responds.

The Absaroka-Beartooth medicine. It works every time.

I can't deny that nature is every bit as enticing and soothing as they say.

"You haven't invited us here in a long time. What is the motivation behind this adventure if I may ask?" Orlando crept up on me unnoticed, and now leans back against the veranda, watching the sky as it begins to darken.

"Work. Just work. I needed a break."

Orlando chuckles and says, “Is that all?”

“Yeah, work and work, nothing else.” I’m not exactly lying, but I’m not telling the complete truth either. Kathy *is* work in a way, but in many other ways she has become a lot more than that.

“Okay...” Orlando said skeptically. Orlando likely knows about Kathy and me from reading the papers, and he knows that there is something related to her going on in my head, but he doesn’t know I love her.

Wait.

Where did that come from?

Do I love her?

How does she feel about me?

“... I’m off to bed,” Orlando was talking as while I had my little internal crisis. “Come in soon. It’s cold outside.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

I hear him walk away and gulp down another good measure of the bourbon; it feels like liquid fire as it hits my throat, but in a good way. Cleansing. Powerful. I take another gulp and shake my body in a bid to get rid of the cold. I stand there imagining Kathy..I pretend to have a conversation with her in my head. Perhaps now that I’m buzzed, I finally let the honesty flow free from me.

“Kathy, you’ve been in my life this couple of months. You’ve been a wonderful friend and much more to me than a fake... This word is hard to pronounce; it always sounds forced even if it’s the truth.” I sigh and continue, “Fake fiancée.”

I think about my financial success, which is the part of me that the world chooses to see. I have always put business in front of everything else. It’s what makes me so successful as a businessman — but this has come at a price. At this point,

and perhaps for the first time ever, I am honest with myself about this imbalance in my life.

“Kathy, whenever I see you, my heart skips; I feel like you are the entirety of my being. I haven’t felt this way around any other person. I always envisage your arms wrapped around me, my warmth and comfort, and the care, love, and support it gives. All I can focus on is your presence; with you, I smile uncontrollably. I love you with every fiber of my being. And I am not afraid — not even for a second — to think about you.”

“I love you, Kathy, I love you. But how do I tell you?” I whisper under my breath, not realizing I had moved from an internal conversation to vocalizing my thoughts out loud.

Still, the realization no longer scares me. I smile. A satisfied smile.

I heave a sigh of relief, swallow the last of the bourbon in my glass, and rise to go inside.

“Start with an apology,” A voice from behind me says. “Women like apologies. Makes them feel they have the upper hand.”

“Oh my God!” I clutch my chest as I see Orlando leaning against the doorframe. He returned and had been there all along.

“Yeah,” he grins. “Thought maybe you might need my help. Probably need *His* help too.” He points upwards to symbolize what he means.

I shake my head at him. “Well, yes, as it happens I do plan to apologize, and guess what?”

Orlando arches his brow and raises both hands, signifying he doesn’t know the answer, cannot even guess.

“I’ll propose. I mean properly. I want her to marry me for real... I hope she feels the same way, though I doubt it.”

“Oh wow, that’s quite an achievement. Hey, come on, be positive. Finally! Somebody from the gang can still fall in

love. Maybe there's hope for us all! And don't worry about it, she'd be a fool to turn a gift to womankind such as you down, and you wouldn't love her if she was a fool." He winks, and I smile back, a genuine smile of happiness — perhaps the first I had felt for quite a while.

The next morning it's time to set off. We pack our belongings and wait for the chopper that is scheduled to be with us at ten o'clock. The helicopter duly arrives on time to the minute, and we stow our belongings and clamber in.

The view on the journey back is just as breathtaking as the view on the way out had been, with nothing but wilderness for hundreds of thousands of acres in every direction. Some with ancient logging roads hacked through during the middle of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but much of it remains unexplored to this day. But all I can think about is Kathy. However, now rather than trying to stop myself from thinking about her, I give in to the obsession completely.

I am positively looking forward to seeing her again and excited to tell her how I really feel. I want to tell her how much I love her. I want her to know my true feelings for her. She deserves to know that she is "the one" I have been searching for all this while without even knowing it, and I know that I have found a rare gem. Most importantly, she's the one I want to spend the rest of my life with...

The sound of an alarm beeping on the helicopter screen interrupts my thoughts, then all hell breaks loose. Another, much louder alarm fills the cabin and at the same moment we start slowly spinning around, as if the tail is being dragged in a circle through the air, rotating about its axis.

This isn't right.

"Emergency!" the pilot calls through the headset intercom.

"What is it?"

"We've developed a mechanical fault and we've lost tail rotor authority. We cannot stop the spin and we need to perform an emergency landing right here and now! Strap in tight. With luck we should be okay, I'm landing her now. Good luck everyone."

The chopper starts rotating faster, the emergency beeping becomes loud and insistent. It's accompanied by the sound of the engine's roaring as our pilot fights the controls to keep as much maneuverability of the machine as he can.

It plummets downwards in a spiral.

We're losing height rapidly and there is a new, higher-pitched timbre to the sound of the engines as the ground rushes up to meet us.

"Okay everyone, this is it in five... four... three... *brace for impact!*" All sorts of alarms are going off now. We are being buffeted from side to side by all sorts of air currents as we drop to just a few yards above the ground. I grab a hold of the door frame. My muscles are tense, my breath coming fast and shallow. I catch a glimpse of the others, all seemingly frozen, expressionless, as the pilot wrestles with his steering column. Green plants and hard, brown earth are rushing by the windows in a blurred streak, too fast to see details. It's awfully close. Any second now...

"Here it comes...!" someone yells.

There is a huge, bone-shaking bump that jolts us all backwards, then a screeching sound as the metal body of the chopper touches down again and scrapes momentarily against the ground. Then we're up again, until a second bump and now the engines are screaming even louder than before.

We're jolting along the ground, battered and flung from right to left as we strike the hard rocky surface again and again.

Ahead are trees; very big, very solid trees, and they're getting rapidly closer. They're filling up the entirety of the front windscreen. If we don't slow down beforehand then it's going to be one hell of a hard stop. The scraping sound increases and I close my eyes, bracing my muscles for this final impact, the line of trees looming large now in the window in front of me...

Then... silence.

I don't know how much time passes before I open my eyes. I allow my breathing to slowly return to normal first, and then allow my eyes to open, adjusting to the chaos I see. The helicopter is turned on its side and has come to a stop barely three feet from the nearest tree. My God — talk about luck.

"Is everyone okay?" the pilot asks after a few minutes.

I answer in the affirmative

"I think so." Albert sounds shaken, as indeed are we all.

"I'm basically good, but I think my left arm is broken." Orlando has a smile on his face, but it's obvious that he is in pain.

"Okay well — at least we're down. Well done, pilot, I believe your rapid responses might just have saved our lives. Is the radio working?" I ask.

"Thank you, sir, and unfortunately no, the radio's completely dead," the pilot answers. We all try our cell phones, but in something over three million acres of wilderness there are few spots where reception is guaranteed. The chances of accidentally coming down in one of those spots was exceptionally unlikely. It was one of the benefits of

coming out here – or at least it *had been* a benefit. Not so much now we need rescuing.

It had all happened so fast. From the moment the rear rotor blade fault had first been detected until the moment we crash-landed against the side of the forest only minutes — seconds even — had gone by. No time to send a distress message. No time to radio for help. Damn!

We fix up Orlando's arm as best we can with a makeshift splint to make sure his bones knit back in the right place, and we rig up a sling so he can rest its weight around his neck. We also find some painkillers in the emergency medical pack that the helicopter was carrying, and with these the color returns to Orlando's face. That at least is a relief. He will manage until we find civilization.

The four of us stand there beside the damaged craft, deciding what to do now. Quite obviously the helicopter will not be going anywhere. What's worse, tucked in against the side of the forest as we are, we're not at all visible from the sky to those who will hopefully come looking for us. That being the case, we need a plan of our own.

Personally, I always prefer taking some kind of positive action over just sitting around and waiting for things to happen. Hope is not my favorite emotion. I like to *make* things happen.

"Let's try and walk a few miles. We might see someone. I have a compass."

CHAPTER 12

Kathy

I pick up the remote from the floor beside me and press the volume button with my wet hands. Tears are still streaming down my cheeks in a constant flow. I can't believe I could cry this much for anyone, especially Garth.

"So, when did you last see your son, Garth Huxley, and do you have any idea as to why he decided to embark on this trip at this point?" the newscaster asks Garth's mother.

"I don't know," she says, her voice sounding weak and fragile, though she is elegantly dressed in a pale green, expensive looking chiffon two piece that emphasizes her slender form, and her hair is expensively coiffured. "My son rarely goes anywhere except for business trips..."

I shift my attention from the TV as I think back over the last few weeks. *He is just a fake boyfriend. I shouldn't care for him this much.*

What if he's dead?

Devastation strikes, as the thought comes unbidden for the thousandth time.

No, he can't be. I don't want to think negative thoughts right now. I want my mind to be filled with positive thoughts,

but I can't help but think about Garth, lying crumpled in the wreckage of his helicopter, somewhere out there in the wilderness. The image makes me cry harder.

I haven't told him how much I love him yet.

I want to deny it, but it's pointless. No matter how much I tried not to, I did indeed fall in love with Garth. I remember all the moments we have shared over the past few weeks — some good, some bad, some frankly amazing. Although this relationship started as a fake arrangement to suit his business needs, I have grown to love and cherish every minute I have spent with him.

"Garth, I love you," I whisper. "I love you."

Please, God, bring Garth back to me, I pray. And I'll stop being a senseless girl, and this time, I'll tell Garth how I feel. I'll tell him how much I love him and how much I want to be with him. I'll tell him my feelings are true, and I want him and him alone. Nothing more.

"...whose name is Kathy Jones."

"Huh?" Hearing my name on the TV catches my attention and brings me out of my reverie.

"Kathy has been identified as the mystery girl that the billionaire hotelier Garth Huxley has been seen spending so much time with of late, and whom he so recently announced his engagement to," the presenter continues.

"I don't understand," I whisper. "Why are they talking about me?"

"In an unexpected twist to this story, this 'mystery girl' turns out to be none other than an ex-employee of Huxley's, whom we can exclusively reveal tonight he has only been *pretending* to be affianced to. In fact we have exclusively learned through an informed source who tells us they have known Garth Huxley for decades, that he has actually paid her \$200,000 to pretend to be his fiancée — half in advance,

and half to be paid at the end once the ruse had ended. Our investigative reporter has talked to members of Huxley's admin team and actually seen firsthand the record of the transfer of money from Huxley's business into her account, which confirms our source's story. So it seems that Huxley and Jones have been parading around town, *pretending* to be engaged and getting married. But why?"

"With us in the studio today is Zion Aguielo," the newscaster continues, as the camera pans out to include the person sitting opposite the presenter. I rub my eyes to be sure of what I am seeing on the screen.

Right there, as bold as brass, is the man who visited me, Zion Aguielo, sitting as calm and relaxed as you could imagine, right there in the TV studio, a smirk of satisfaction hovering on his lips.

"Mr. Aguielo is a well-known expert in the hotel trade, and indeed is heir to his father's own hotel chain here in New York and he has known Garth Huxley since childhood. Mr. Aguielo, please tell us how you came across this striking information, and why you think Garth Huxley has paid an employee to pretend to be engaged to him."

"Well Keith, I never believed the marriage announcement when it was made. Partly because it was so very usefully timed to stop all these recent stories about Garth's womanizing and fighting in nightclubs. They were affecting his business deal with Bicorp from going ahead. But also because frankly Garth is a well-known womanizer. I've known him since school and he's not the kind to settle down. Trust me, he has often been seen with not one or two but several girls."

I listen with growing fear and apprehension. Everything is out in the open now — even the payment. I had gotten a bad feeling about that man when he had visited me, and it turns

out I had been more right about him than I could possibly have guessed.

Aguielo continues: “My investigator tracked this employee down – turns out she’s just a common employee – a Miss Kathy Jones, a masseuse at one of Huxley’s hotels. So, I took a trip to her home to see if the rumors about the false engagement are true. And yes, the woman Garth has announced as his fiancée is indeed this ex-employee — in fact I even remember seeing her before at his hotel. Not only that, but she is living in a cheap, rented apartment in downtown Brooklyn and she is quite obviously hired to keep her mouth shut and go along with the scam. It appears she needs the money because she was one of the few members of staff in the hotel Garth was selling that would be made redundant from the sale, so she was out of a job, and no doubt this cash was the perfect enticement to get her agreement to pretend to be engaged to him.”

I gasp in indignation and betrayal. I also curse my own stupidity for letting this guy into my home. He’s certainly no friend of Garth’s, he’s made that clear. More like an enemy in fact. A bitter, personal enemy that had come to my home, pretending he was Garth’s friend in order to deliberately spy on me. I have never felt so much hatred for a person as I feel for this jerk I am watching right now. Hatred and fear because he is also no fool. He figured out the entire scheme just like that, in no time at all. This guy is dangerous.

“Of course, we shouldn’t really blame this girl at all.” Aguielo turns to look directly into the camera, his face once more wearing that smug, complacent smile that makes me want to punch him as hard as I can. “It’s Garth I blame for using her for his own ends. Goodness only knows what else he’s promised her. And of course is it really fair to his company’s shareholders to use his company’s money in this way to

hire masseuses to be his fake fiancée? Or is it fair to trick a poor old fool like Dale Johnson from Bicorp into believing he's dealing with an upright, decent man, rather than an established philanderer who uses and abuses women just as he pleases, and then discards them when he is done with them?"

I sit there, stunned into silence, as the newscaster announces that Garth is still missing but that searchers have not yet given up hopes of finding him and his friends alive, before the program moves on to the next news story.

It's the next day, I'm brushing my teeth when I receive the buzz on my phone.

The text message I have been waiting and hoping for is finally here.

"Finally." My friend who works at the TV station that had aired the original broadcast – the one that had featured Garth's mother – came through for me. The address for Garth's mother is sitting in my inbox.

I quickly get dressed, pack a few things in case I need to stay overnight at a hotel, then immediately set off to the local Hertz car rental branch. Within 45 minutes I am in the driving seat of a relatively new Ford Focus compact hatchback, heading away from my Brooklyn apartment, over the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, up the I-95 towards Newark Airport and then finally heading west along the I-78, on my way to Garth's parents' home in Short Hills, New Jersey.

It should be a short drive of perhaps an hour, depending upon traffic. Plenty of time for me to think through what I want to say.

An hour and ten minutes later, I am pulling up in the gravel driveway of an expensive looking, beautifully main-

tained mansion, built perhaps twenty or so years ago in the Georgian style, and set back a little way from the road in its own acre or so of mature gardens. Ducks swim on an ornamental lake, and the wind rustles the leaves of the oak, maple, and chestnut trees that had no doubt been planted at the time the house had originally been built to help form a screen of privacy from the road. Just a few minutes' drive from where I had been living the last few years in my rented apartment in Brooklyn — but my goodness, what a world of difference!

Feeling slightly intimidated by the opulence of my surroundings, I walk up the stone steps to the front door and ring the bell. From somewhere deep inside the house, I can just make out a deep, sonorous chime. I wait patiently for a few minutes and I'm just about to ring again when the door opens.

"Yes?" A middle-aged housekeeper peers warily out at me. She looks me up and down suspiciously, as if deciding whether or not I am to be trusted.

"Hi," I say a little nervously. "I'm here to see Mrs. Huxley, Garth's mother."

"Sorry, she's not seeing any more reporters. We made this clear to you all yesterday. Please leave." The woman starts to shut the door on me, annoyance flashing across her face.

"No, no!" I cry hastily. "I'm not from the media, I promise."

"Well then, who are you? Mrs. Huxley doesn't want to meet strangers right now, she has enough on her plate to deal with already, thank you." Again, she began to close the door.

"I'm not a stranger."

"Then who are you? *I've* never seen you before."

This was it. The moment of truth. I look her straight in the eyes and say, "Please tell Mrs. Huxley that my name is Kathy Jones, and I'm her son Garth's fiancée."

There is a pause. The woman's eyes widen, then narrow again suspiciously. "Oh really?" she responds in a slow, deliberate, and not-too-friendly voice. Then she sighs. "Okay, you'd better come in before another reporter shows up."

She opens the door wide and gestures for me to come in. I step into the hall, my purse in hand, and follow the woman down the hall to the end, where she knocks briefly and lightly on an oak-paneled door, then enters, beckoning me to follow.

The room we enter is large, light, and airy, tastefully decorated, and furnished in a slightly old-fashioned, floral style. French windows look out onto an immaculate lawn and a rose garden that displays blooms of delicate pastel yellow, fiery orange, and deep, velvety red. I immediately recognize Mrs. Huxley from the TV. She is sitting on a sofa, looking up from some kind of fine needlework she had been occupied with before we interrupted her.

"This young woman says she's Garth's fiancée," my companion states, nodding her head towards me.

Mrs. Huxley looks startled for a moment, then her lips compress a little, almost as if in anger, but the look is soon gone, to be replaced by a neutral expression that is no doubt well-rehearsed and ready for use whenever diplomacy might call for it.

"I see," she says, looking me up and down as if assessing my value at an auction. "Well then, you'd better sit yourself down over there." She gestures towards a comfortable-looking chair that matches her sofa and is ideally positioned for conversation. "Juanita, would you be a darling please and bring tea for two? Thank you, my dear."

The woman who I now know is called Juanita nods and leaves the room, closing the door silently behind her. In a basket by Mrs. Huxley's feet, a little white dog yawns and

stretches its front legs, then turns over and falls back into a deep sleep.

“This is Mr. Chips. He’s a good boy, but he’s getting old now. As am I. Indeed, I am certainly feeling my age today.” The lines on her face and the pale, tightness of her skin gave evidence that Mrs. Huxley is indeed suffering, just as I am, from the news that Garth is missing.

When she looks straight at me, I see that whilst her minimal make-up is immaculate, her eyes are a little red and swollen, and her wrist trembles as she reaches out to shake hands. I take her hand gently on my own, then I put down my overnight bag and sit back in the armchair she indicated.

For a moment we observe each other in silence. Perhaps she’s lost in her own thoughts, or perhaps like me, she is simply wondering what to say. The door opens once more and Juanita bustles back in with a tea tray laden with cups, saucers, milk, sugar, and a beautiful, highly polished silver teapot, which she sets down at the table next to her mistress.

“Thank you, Juanita. I’ll call if I need you.”

Juanita nods once more, then leaves without saying anything or looking in my direction. Mrs. Huxley pours two cups, and hands me one before settling back against the sofa with the other. Mr. Chips takes the opportunity to jump up into her lap now she is no longer doing her needlework. Her spare hand reaches absentmindedly to stroke his neck and ears as he nestles down in comfort.

She looks at me expectantly. It’s time for me to tell my story.

“Look, I’m really sorry, I know you must be going through a very difficult time,” I begin. “But I saw you on the TV and there’s no one else I know who I can turn to. I just *have* to find out if you know anything more than what they are saying on the television, about...” I break into a sob, tears

swelling in my eyes. "About Garth being missing." I manage to finish the sentence, but just having to say the words makes me want to throw up in fear.

Mrs. Huxley looks penetratingly at me once again, and once more I feel I am being assessed, weighed up, judged. Finally she seems to make up her mind. She smiles, and this time the smile seems genuine, not just a part of her public face.

"Well, my dear, maybe I shouldn't, but I believe you are telling the truth. I am usually a pretty good judge of character. Of course, I've known my boy Garth all his life, and I could tell straight away he had met someone special. Mothers can tell, you know."

I allow myself to relax just a little. Maybe this was not going to be so bad after all.

"So why don't you drink your tea and tell me the whole story, and then we can decide what to do afterwards, hmm?" she says, her expression softer now.

"Yes, I'd like to, thank you." I say gratefully.

I pick up the cup and take a sip of tea, barely tasting it.

"My meeting with Garth was just a coincidence," I start. "It was at work and just a boss-and-employee relationship. I worked at the spa of *The Lady*, and then we met and... well..." I blush and look away, deciding perhaps now isn't the time to go into too many of the details of our first meeting. "A few days later, I found out I lost my job at the hotel. The video of us outside arguing... that was when I had gone to confront him about losing my job. Nothing more."

She nods for me to continue, so I take a deep breath and a quick sip of the tea and I carry on. "The whole story on the TV was not how it really is, or at least not the entire story. Although it's true our engagement was just a ruse at first to help Garth's business deal go through, I didn't just go out

with him because of that. I agreed to help him partly because I already had feelings for him, feelings that terrified me. Amidst all this, Garth really *is* the man I want. He is the one I love and want to be with, and I have never been more certain of anything in my life.” I blurt everything out now, the words tumbling out of me. It’s a relief though, unburdening me of all the emotions I had been keeping pent up inside of me for the past few weeks. “We may have started off on the wrong foot, but I do want to be with Garth. The real Garth.” What am I saying? *Have* we been in a relationship? *Does* he feel that way about me? How sure am I about my own feelings, let alone Garth’s?

But I can’t stop now.

“A *real* relationship, ma’am. That’s what I want. But if he doesn’t want that...it’s fine. I’ll settle for him being okay, for him coming back.” My voice cracks on the final word, as the depression nearly drowns me again.

“I understand, Kathy,” Garth’s mother says gently. She reaches out and pats my hand with her own. “And I’m sure he wants that too.” She tries to force a smile onto her lips. “I have seen how he has acted the past few weeks, and I know that my son has finally found love, though he’s such a fool he probably didn’t even realize it himself at first.” Her soothing words, calm and subtle, assure me that it is all going to be fine.

I believe her. She is his mother, and mothers know about their sons, just as she says. I may not understand all that she has been going through, but I understand that we both love Garth and we both need him to return home safely.

“You know, Garth has never really experienced a lot of love in his life.” She wipes a tear from her eyes. “I always loved him of course, and I did all I could to give him a normal, loving childhood, but it was never enough. Garth also

needed the love of his father. But he didn't get it, at least not at that time. Garth worshipped his father when he was a young boy, but Garth's father lived for his work, and only his work. He was always coming home late, and then later on he'd come home late *and* drunk. Staggering all around, reeking of alcohol. I think it was all the business meetings and the pressure of decision making. And unfortunately, the alcohol made him angry, I don't know why. Sometimes, he would scold Garth for just a mild mistake. Other times, his anger would fall on me. There was never any rhyme or reason to it. No way to tell what he'd be like that evening when he finally came home. We just had to wait and find out." I could tell she was in pain now. Her voice was trembling as she relived her memories.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"But not anymore though; Garth's father is much better now. I don't know what happened, but he's changed — softened over the years. Even took himself to therapy to work out his issues and begged me to stay with him when I finally had enough. I never thought I would ever forgive him for what he did to my son, but..." She shrugs. "He's truly remorseful, and has been for years. Right now, the news of Garth going missing has struck him so deeply that he has locked himself in his room and refuses to see or talk to anyone until Garth is found, one way or the other."

"I am so sorry." This was all I can think to say. I hug her and pat her hand.

"Garth has refused to enter into any meaningful relationship because he doesn't want to end up like his father."

"That's ridiculous. How can he even think like that?"

"You're right, Garth is not like his father at all in that way. Ever since he was a boy, he has treated me with the greatest

of love and care, more than a queen would get.” She sighs wistfully.

“He has given me so much respect and love. More than what I could possibly have wished for,” I say. “And that video is not of him harassing a girl, but of him *saving* her from the unwanted attentions of some other man.” I recalled Garth telling me this much, though he refused to go into any more details.

There is another silence, but a more friendly one this time. She continues stroking her dog, a thoughtful look on her face. Eventually she stands up, sending Mr Chips tumbling back into his basket from where he looks up at her a little reproachfully.

“I see you have packed an overnight bag.” She glances down to the bag at my feet and then back up to me. “That’s very sensible of you. The press will be at your doorstep by now, I am sure. I don’t know if you’ve already made any plans, but if not, I think you should stay here for a few nights, Kathy,” she says. “We’ve plenty of space, and I could do with the company. If you like I can get some of the family albums out and tell you all about Garth’s childhood. That way you can keep yourself hidden away from these unpleasant reporters and also have the same direct access to news from the search team as I have.”

“Thank you. I would like that very much.”

“Come with me, then. Let’s find you a guest room.”

CHAPTER 13

Garth

“We’ve been walking for a long time. I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m tired. Very tired.” Albert pants heavily.

“We are all tired, but we need to keep moving. That is how it is. We have no option.” I search their faces and still notice some hesitation. “Would you like to stay here then?”

“No, I wouldn’t. I need to go home.” The pilot is first to respond.

“That’s right. I want to go home too.” I’m sure my mother will be worried about me, as well as Paula... and Kathy. Oh, my Kathy. This is all my fault for booking this stupid trip in the first place. I’m sorry to be making them worry like this.

“I hear a helicopter,” Albert yells.

Sure enough, the welcome, steady drone of a helicopter reaches my own ears, and gets louder as it draws nearer to our location.

I run towards Albert, and we shout together, “Hey, hey, hey over here!”

We shout out again, waving our hands. We have nearly nothing with which to send a signal.

But we do have one item... a lighter, and there are trees all around us.

Do we have enough time? It was still daylight; no one would see a burning fire in the daytime.

But would they perhaps see smoke instead?

The four of us work fast. Albert, the pilot and I collect firewood and bring it to Orlando who, with his one good arm, is building a bonfire as fast as he can. He rips open his pack and uses a spare t-shirt as kindling. With trembling fingers, he flicks the lighter and a flame appears, then sputters immediately out in the fresh breeze. Turning his back to act as a windshield, he tries again. This time the flame stays long enough to catch the polyester-cotton mix t-shirt alight. Quickly, we stack small pieces of kindling around it, then larger pieces. The helicopter is very close now. We have maybe another minute or two at most before it will be over us and heading away from us. We *must* be quick or we will lose our chance.

There are real flames now. Big enough to count. Good for the night, but for daytime not much smoke.

“Quick — grab some greener stuff, anything that will create more smoke,” shouts Orlando. As swiftly as we can manage it, we add fresh wood and green leaves that have not been on the ground long and have consequently not completely dried out. This curtails the flames somewhat, but the plume of smoke is now much greater. But will it be enough?

The helicopter sounds almost directly overhead, and then

I see it, over to the west slightly and heading not towards us but away. The engine noise begins to diminish as it slowly ambles further away.

We stare at each other despondently. That's it then. What do we do now?

"Wait — it's turning!" the pilot shouts. And he's right. The helicopter arches around in a lazy loop — they must have seen us after all. Thank goodness! Within a minute or two it's hovering directly above us. We see the faces of the rescue team. They point east, then they rise up again and they are off, but only for a moment or two before they again head for the ground, but this time they must have landed, because the engine noise shuts off, just leaving the whoosh of the rotors spinning.

"Come on — they must have found a spot where they could land safely!" I shout. Triumphant, we push through to the east and within minutes we reach a clearing where the helicopter has landed, and the rescue team is waiting for us.

On reaching home, my mind is filled with the thoughts of two people who are dear to me — Kathy and my mother. Both women have had to go through a lot already. I know they must both be worried. So... which one first? I decide it should be my mother first, because the minute I see Kathy I'm going to forget about everything and everyone else.

I'm just going to hold her and declare my love to her, and I'll want to hold her forever.

I also decide it's better to go see my mom and surprise her in person than to call her. She hates phones, and I know she'll want to see me for real anyway, and of course she'll have a thousand questions. I grab the car keys and head down to the

underground parking lot, and very soon I am on my way to my parents' house.

I pull up my Mercedes next to a rental Ford Focus that I do not recognize.

That's strange. Who could possibly be visiting my parents?

I walk up to the door, and without knocking, I let myself in with my latch key and head to the kitchen and breakfast room where my mother tends to be hanging out at this time in the morning.

"Hi, Mother, it's me!" I call as I open the door and stride down the hall into the living room. My mother who's resting on her favorite chair, instantly stands with a gasp. Her hand flies to her chest, and her eyes widen.

"Garth?" Her face is pale like she's just seen a ghost and her hand trembles as she takes a step toward me. "Are you really here?"

"Yes mom, I –" But then I notice there's someone with her.

My gaze immediately goes to the other person. And now it's my turn to not believe what I am seeing. "...Kathy?"

I'mshocked to see her. What on Earth is she doing here? How did she get here? How does she even *know* the place?

Suddenly a wave washes over me and I want her in my arms as never before. She's staring at me, startled, almost fearful. A deer caught in the headlights. She clearly can't believe her eyes either.

"Am I dreaming?" she murmurs.

"No," my mom responds. "I see him too."

I immediately go and give my mother a hug, drawing her closer.

Then I turn to Kathy.

"Hey, beautiful, did you miss me?" I say as her mouth

opens in surprise and she moves her arms slowly towards me, reaching out tentatively, as if she doesn't yet believe the evidence of her own eyes, isn't yet sure I am really there. An apparition. A ghost perhaps.

"Are you crying? You don't need to cry. I am back and I am safe. And I want you to know that I love you." Kathy's eyes widen further, then she is running towards me with love in her eyes; her lips moist, her eyes swollen. She flings herself into my arms, almost knocking me back a step or two, as I hold her tight, stroking her hair and breathing in the jasmine scent of her perfume.

I kiss her gently, and then she pulls away. A slap lands hard on my cheek. I rub the spot.

"Ouch, babe."

"You sure do know how to show your love," she says. "Where have you been? Do you have *any idea* what you have been putting your mother and me through?"

I hold up my hands and begin to say "I'm sorry", but then she flings herself back into my arms, and suddenly we are kissing properly, as if for the first time. She is breaking her own rule, and I don't know if she knew it already, but I love it. I want her; I had *always* wanted her. But I need to stop. Is she acting on impulse? I don't want to take advantage of her emotions. I pull her away, looking searchingly in her eyes. "Are you sure, Kathy?"

"Yes, I *am* sure. And I love you too, Garth." She pulls me further into the room, and I grab her by the waist. We kiss passionately once more.

"Erm..." My mother clears her throat discreetly, to remind us of her presence. Oops.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mom. We got carried away." I turn to her and hug her tightly again and whisper, "I missed you, Mom."

"I missed you too, my boy," she whispers back.

"I'll go and give the good news to your father Garth. He hasn't left his room since you went missing, and you have been the only thing he has thought about from morning to night. He needs to know. So, you can have a few minutes to yourselves to talk to each other alone." She smiles.

"*But*," she continues, "I *am* coming back after that, and I expect a full account of where you have been and what's been happening — and I do mean a *full* account!"

Later that day after we had more time together for explanations, there's an equally emotional re-uniting with my father, and a promise on both sides to put our differences down. Mom is right, Father isn't getting any younger, it's time to start rebuilding our relationship after all these years. If she can forgive him for what he did, then I guess I can try to do so too.

Of course, mom is delighted by my decision, and she holds Kathy's hand while I talk to my dad. I can see she is already growing to love Kathy. In fact the two of them are seemingly getting along like a house on fire.

I call to check in on my friends, and after ensuring they're all home safe, I retire to the living room with Kathy and mom. The women are doing most of the talking. I am content just to be home.

I'm not exactly listening to what Kath is saying. I'm taking in all her features, realizing yet again how much I love her.

"Hey, Kath, during these times while I was away, I had a deep thought about what we share. You know how this whole relationship thing goes. I may not be an expert, but I'll do my

best for you, Kathy, because I love you. I loved you then, and I love you now very much."

I want to get on my knees and ask her to be my wife... for real this time. My thoughts and emotions swirl in my head. I want to tell her what I feel, but I'm too afraid. I don't want to pressure her right now with all the roller coaster of emotions of the day. But I knew I'd tell her, even if not today.

"Are you here, Garth?" Kathy interrupts my train of thought.

"Of course, I am. I was just... thinking."

"Okay..." There's hesitation in her demeanor, but she continues, nonetheless.

"Well, please listen, because I think this might be important. Your 'friend' Zion Aguielo came by my apartment whilst you were away. At least he *said* he was your friend."

This instantly sets my senses off. I jerk bolt upright in my seat. What was Aguielo doing sniffing around Kathy, much less at her apartment? Aguielo should know well not to cross this line.

"Look, a lot has been happening. He somehow found out about me being your fake fiancée, and the scandal hit the news. Everyone now knows about it." She says all this in one go and then stops to breathe. "There have been more than just reports of you going missing on television. Zion Aguielo has been interviewed, and he really put the boot into you. Called you a philanderer, and as good as accused you of fraud over the sale of *The Lady*."

"*What?*"

My attention now fully back in the room, I interrogate my mother and Kathy, learning everything about Aguielo's wretched interview and all that had transpired. By the end of their tale, I'm furious. Mostly I'm furious with myself for having let any of this happen in the first place, but I'm just as

furious with Zion Aguielo for trying to take advantage of me through my family.

He will pay for this, and he will pay dearly. I will make sure he lives to regret ever having met me.

I need a plan, and I need it fast, before my share price slips any lower, and before old man Johnson can back out of the deal we made.

There has to be a way.

And then I laugh.

Of course, it's that simple. Aguielo's only hold on me is his knowledge that my engagement announcement is false — a fraud to calm the markets and enable my sale of *The Lady* to go through unhindered. So if that is the only issue... the remedy is obvious.

"What's the date today? The 25th, right?" I ask.

The two women look at me blankly.

"Right." I nod and bounce to my feet. "Get dressed up. Kathy, I am sure Mom has something you can borrow. It may not be your style of choice, but you'll look great. Mom, see if you can persuade Father to come too. Tell him I need him to be there, it's important and it will mean a lot to me. You've got ten minutes — fifteen at the most. Ladies, we are going out to Club 36, because tonight if I remember correctly, they happen to be holding another charity event!" Kathy and my mother look at me like I've gone crazy, but I hustle them up to Mother's dressing room before going to my own room to take a quick shower and don one of the suits that I keep hanging in the wardrobe for emergencies.

We are going to cook Aguielo's goose for good! I think to myself as I get dressed. This should be fun!

CHAPTER 14

Garth

A few hours later, I stand at a podium in a tastefully decorated room, surveying about a hundred of New York's most important people. They're all awaiting my speech, all stunned into silence by my unexpected appearance.

"I'd like to thank the Coen family for putting on this marvelous charity event," I start. "And for agreeing at the last minute to give me the opportunity to stand here and present this speech to you all. As we all know, this *is* a charity event, so I have donated a *very* large sum for the privilege and pleasure of addressing you in person here tonight."

There is polite laughter and discrete applause. I knew that this event would be the talk of the town, and I knew both Dale Johnson and Zion Aguielo will be here, just as they had been at the last such event, the one that had kicked everything off. It's the perfect venue for me to exact my revenge.

"You all know me and you all know what my old 'friend', Zion Aguielo, told the world about me on television recently. The scandal of a video that apparently shows me abusing a helpless young woman, which led to a downturn in my

company's share price. Then the threat of losing my deal with Bicorp, which had me taking a fake fiancée to act out the role of my betrothed until the deal was completed. The release of a second video showed me arguing and fighting with the very person I was supposed to be betrothed to and in love with. My private life became public, and my public life became even more public. And all because of a silly 'mistake'."

I stare at the crowd, noting their clear interest. "'What mistake?' you might ask. The mistake of stepping in to prevent a young woman from being harassed and molested by an older man. A wealthier man. A man who should know better. And it all happened right here at Club 36, at an event just like this one, just a few weeks ago. My so-called friend over there, yes, that one." I said, pointing directly at Aguielo. "Assaulted a young waitress. He sexually harassed and molested her, yet nobody was going to raise a finger to do anything because of Aguielo's privileged position as a wealthy patron of the charity, rather than the lowly waitress that was his chosen victim. I had to step in myself, which I was happy to do, because I hate the sight of men taking things by force, and I hate it when violence becomes an answer, especially when aimed at an innocent young girl who was just trying to do her job."

I take a deep breath, looking out at the sea of faces. All good so far. They are with me, they are listening. Prepared to give me a chance. There's not a sound in the whole room as I continue my story.

"So," I continue. "I helped this young lady get away from the hands and sight of Zion Aguielo. The video you saw in fact was a clip from a longer recording, and the longer recording clearly shows what really happened. If you don't believe me, I have had a copy of the real security footage of

that day put onto some USB drives which you can find at the back of this hall.”

I spot Paula at the back of the room and give her a wink. She’s a genius for being able to get all that sort of thing arranged at short notice, but of course I never doubted her.

“They’re free; grab a copy and feel free to distribute them as you see fit. It’s time for the truth to become known. You’ll see the despicable acts of Zion Aguielo as he tries to force a young woman to go home with him, and then you’ll see me rescuing this young lady from him.” At this point I nod towards the young waitress who I made sure would be here, and who I talked to before and got her agreement to participate in this showdown with Aguielo. She smiles nervously, but nods in assertion. I continue my story.

“What previously *looked* like me manhandling her roughly was simply me getting her away from Aguielo, for which she was very grateful.” Out of the corner of my eye I see Aguielo starting to boil with rage. *He looks like he might like to kill me, but that’s not possible, not at this point.*

“Am I right, miss?” I ask the young lady, who has been standing by, ready to come up to the microphone on my command.

The crowd turns to watch her as she walks quickly, avoiding gazes until she reaches me. I hand her the microphone and she speaks.

“Yes, sir. That is completely true.”

Instantly, murmurs from the guests engulf the air.

“I was there.”

“I was there too.”

Various members of staff and guests raise their hands and nod in affirmation as to the statement I just made.

I raise my hand for silence. The room goes quiet. I have more to tell them.

“So that’s the first matter. Now let’s turn to the other issue, and perhaps the more important one. Yes, Kathy and I pretended to be in a fake relationship to clear the air on the scandal caused from that night and from the release of a second recording. This one was a personal argument between myself and Kathy that is now fully resolved as a misunderstanding.” I catch Dale Johnson’s eye now, holding it in a firm gaze, knowing if I look away at this point, he will not believe what I need him to be certain of. His expression is neutral, no way of knowing what he feels about it all. I know he is a rigidly upright and Christian man. I hope he will forgive me for the lie if I come completely clean now. Well... we will see.

I carry on with my speech. “But that was a foolish idea, as I have now realized. It was no way to do business with Bicorp, and it was no way to deal with my troubles with Aguielo. But as it turns out, it has become the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I am *very* glad we did it. Why? Because over the course of our fake engagement I have come to realize that there is more to Kathy than I could possibly have known.” I turn to face her now at the other side of the stage. She reminds me of the most beautiful and delicate orchid imaginable, swathed in a pastel pink, silky off the shoulder dress that she has borrowed from my mother, who of course as an ex-model has hundreds of designer dresses in her extensive wardrobes. “Kathy is a wonderful, amazing woman with a beautiful soul and doesn’t deserve all the pain she has been receiving from me and from her association with me.”

I step down from the podium and walk directly to Kathy. I gaze steadily at her and say, “Kathy, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed you into this fake relationship, and I know I am a fool for ever coming up with such a ridiculous idea as that, and I’m sorry.”

“But...” I get down on one knee before her, and extract a small, leather box from my pocket. One of the waiters takes pity on me and holds the microphone for me as I fumble to open the box. Inside is a ring, a band of simple gold, but set with diamonds that are now flashing and glinting suddenly in the light from a hundred chandeliers above us and in the center one beautifully cut emerald, sparkling a deep, lush, tropical green to match the color of her eyes.

“I can’t regret our scheme, because it made me realize the true meaning of love and life. I love you Kathy. My happiness is bound up in you. You are all I want and all I need. Will you marry me... for *real* this time?”

The whole room is silent. The silence stretched out like an infinity in front of me. Everyone is leaning in, ears straining. The tension is palpable, you could cut it with a knife.

What will she say? If she says “yes” then I will be the happiest man alive. But if she says “no”...

She turns to me, surprise on her face. Then she turns away, to look at the sea of expectant faces, all watching and waiting to catch her response. Slowly, very slowly, she turns back to me, and I realize just how hard my heart is thumping. Can she hear it? Can *everyone* hear it? She frowns.

This doesn’t look good.

I’m disappointed, but I of all people know I cannot force her to love me.

But I won’t give up.

If she doesn’t say yes, then I’ll woo her some more. I’ll keep fighting, keep trying until she falls as madly in love with me as I am with her.

I nod and begin to attempt to stand up.

But as I do, I see a beautiful, slender hand in front of me, a finger held out as if in expectation of... a ring?

“Yes,” she whispers. “Yes, Garth, *of course* I will marry you.”

Relief floods me.

I slide the ring onto her finger as the entire room erupts. Applause fills the air. People are clapping and cheering as I rise to my feet and give her a passionate kiss. The first kiss of our *real* engagement, but not the last.

“We have a wedding to plan!” My mother gives me a tight hug as I step off the stage. My father is at her side, which is the first time he has been out in years, and he is looking at me in a way I hadn’t seen in so long. I hug him.

“Congratulations, son,” he whispers in my ear.

“Thank you, Father, that means a lot to me.”

Everyone comes over to congratulate us, Mother, Father and Paula (who of course has been my secret helper in masterminding and organizing this evening’s whole plan, once she’d finished scolding me for going missing and causing her so much worry). Aguielo has by this time slunk from the building. Something tells me he won’t be showing his face at any more charity events for quite some time to come, though I take no great pleasure from this. At the end of the day, he has brought it all on himself, and he must now live with the consequences of his actions.

I gaze at the sea of faces around me, feeling relaxed and happy for perhaps the first time in months. “I love you all,” I mutter to myself.

“Ahem.” Someone behind me clears their throat. It’s old man Johnson. The frown on his face has, if anything, deepened.

“Mr. Johnson.” I nod, knowing I owe him a private

conversation. I let go of Paula and step closer to him. "I know I owe you an apology. And truly I am sorry. I should never have lied to you about pretending to be engaged. It was a very foolish thing to do."

"Son," he says in his usual, deep, slow voice. "What you did was not a good thing. Marriage is a sacred institution, granted to us by God himself." He shakes his head. "But I have always held the belief that it's what's in a man's heart that is what's truly important. And I've been alive a long time and met a lot of people, and I wouldn't have gotten to where I have if I wasn't able to tell a good man from a bad one."

He puts his hand on my shoulder, as if talking in a friendly fashion to his own son. "Take that Zion Aguielo, for example," he continues. "Now I could see he was a bad'un, right from the get-go, and old Leo Aguielo knew it too. That's why he's never transferred the family business across to him. Couldn't be trusted. You, though..." He paused, looking me up and down. "You're different. Carved from a different stock so to say. I've always thought well of you, and aside from this one incident, I have seen you rise in maturity and stature over the last twenty years. You have worked hard, and you have always been more than fair in your dealings. Your father should be proud of you, and I do believe he is too. Though I know he has had his own demons to deal with." He stole a glance across the room to where my father stands, his arm protectively around my mother as she talks to some of the other guests, then he looks back to me.

"So yes son, I do forgive you. And because I don't have a son of my own to leave my wealth to, I have decided to make you and your new fiancée a wedding gift of *The Lady Hotel*. I know it was the first hotel your father owned. It should stay in the family. Now don't say no, my boy." He says this as I start to refuse such a huge and unnecessary kindness. "Think

of it as my own little indulgence, and when in another twenty years or so you hand *The Lady* Hotel down to your own son, I hope you'll think of me looking down from above, and you'll raise a glass to 'old man Johnson.'"

And with that, he shakes my hand, and turns and walks away, his stride firm, his back bolt upright as always.

Good old Mr. Johnson. I feel a wave of gratitude towards the man, and I want to chase him down to thank him properly.

But as I turn away from him, my fiancée stands there, and thoughts of Mr. Johnson vanish from my mind. Her smile is as radiant as the dawn. Kathy – my Kitty Kat – has her arms outstretched, her engagement ring glittering on her finger, and she is waiting for me.

THE END

Damaged Rockstar Daddy

THE NEW BOOK FROM DAISY SUMMERS



Six years ago he got me pregnant.

Now he's back in town and seeing his child for the first time...

The child he knows nothing about.

Scott Hamilton – my first lover and the father of my daughter
When he left town to become the world-famous Formula 1
race car champion driver he broke my heart.

Now he's back and needing to recover from his terrible car
crash injuries...

And it's down to me as his occ health nurse to give him back
his life and his career.

But if I do, will he simply walk away again?

And should I tell him that the child I am bringing up as a
single parent is really his?

THE PAST – SEVEN YEARS AGO

CHAPTER ONE:

SCOTT

This cannot be happening again.

I jolt awake with her image imprinted yet again in my mind's eye. These days it seems she's permanently on my mind. Not that I'm complaining, but it makes me crave her in moments when there's little I can do about it.

Emily. Prim, proper, and prudent Emily. She's the kind of girl that riffraff like me should never get his hands on, but she's also the girl I'm secretly dating. Hell, I wake up

daydreaming about her every damn morning. I'm twenty-one years old, from Redstone Falls, Colorado, not exactly redneck country around here, but I guess the name fits as good as or better than plenty others I've been called in my time.

My cock swells in my sweatpants. You know what sucks more than morning wood? A boner for a girl I shouldn't be dating. It's a complicated relationship. For starters, she has a strict father who has told her to hold off on dating boys until she turns twenty-one. Well, at least one of us is that age, which is me. She has just turned nineteen and we've been dating for about two years now, and if we listen to "daddy" then we still have another three years of waiting before we get to have sex, but I don't think I can hold out much longer!

That's not the main hurdle in our relationship though, because we have another problem in the form of Ethan. Ethan is Emily's older brother and my best friend, but he doesn't know the two of us are seeing each other – in fact nobody knows, and it would be better for all parties involved if it stays that way. Ethan can never find out about us under any circumstances.

Yeah, you heard it right. He doesn't know about us, and frankly, I'm not ready for him to know just yet. I don't know if I ever will be. We've been friends ever since we met, despite the fact that he is two years older than me. I'd gotten myself into some trouble with the Craig twins – a vicious pair of twin brothers from the wrong side of the tracks, with a notorious reputation for being bullies. They had cornered me down by the old railway line, and it was two against one. I'd say I'm pretty capable of holding my own in a fight, but the Craig twins were built like brick shithouses. I reckon I might have been able to handle one of them, but the two of them – it definitely wasn't going to end well! Lucky for me, Ethan happened to stumble upon us, and figured out was about to go

down immediately. With no hesitation, he waded into battle for the underdog. Of course, like all bullies, the Craigs are cowards at heart, so as soon as the odds evened up, they scampered away, leaving Ethan and me standing in a circle of gradually settling dust that had been kicked up from all the scuffling.

Ethan and I hit it off from that moment, and like it sometimes happens when two loners meet, we've been fairly inseparable ever since. I love him as a brother and I know how protective he is of his little sister. That coupled with the fact that he is two years older and thirty pounds heavier than me and that he's been the school's wrestling champion for three years running means he definitely isn't the type of guy you would want to get on the wrong side of, if you see what I mean.

Regardless, it doesn't stop me from daydreaming about Emily. I think about her all the time. Her smile, her eyes, the sound of her laugh, it's all just maddening. I think of what things would be like if we didn't have to hide our relationship. Because of the secret nature of our relationship, we can only meet occasionally and generally not for long. Our favorite place is down by the creek where there's a bend in the river and the water slows down a little so that a sandy shore has formed over the years. The area is just far enough away from town to not be too popular, but not so far as to be difficult to get to, and neither is it on the way to or from anywhere. Chances are that at the right time of day we can have that bend in the creek all to ourselves for an hour or so. Just lying in the sand together, absorbing the sunshine, holding hands, and talking about what the future might hold for us – what type of house we'll live in, what car we'll own, where we'll go on vacation – that type of thing. There, I get to hold her, and kiss her. She probably

would have let me go further, but I don't think she's ready for that just yet.

Emily's father is a fancy-ass lawyer, and I had known enough to keep my distance at first because he'd not hesitate to put me behind bars for even touching his daughter. She's a little younger than me, and though I say so myself I have a lot going for me when it comes to the ladies. Let's just say I don't need to try too hard, and I certainly don't need to make up any stories about my victories. Not that I brag about my conquests – a gentleman doesn't kiss and tell. But that doesn't mean that I didn't notice her, and after a while she started noticing me too.

Two years ago, at age seventeen, Emily left school and she started a waitressing job for some pocket money, whilst she decided what she wanted to do with her life. It was at that stage I summoned up the courage to ask her for a date, though I didn't dare tell Ethan about it. I expected her to laugh in my face, but instead she'd said yes, and we started going out in secret. We've been together ever since.

Like I said, that was about two years ago. I was far from being a virgin, and in fact I was notorious for hooking up with some of the more available ladies around town. Unfortunately, this is something Ethan was well aware of, and I am sure that this is at least partially why he warned me off his sister in no uncertain terms – something about knocking my head off my shoulders and shoving it up my ass if he ever caught me so much as smiling at her, as I recall. But ironically, all of my bad behavior changed for me the moment I started secretly dating Emily. From that moment on I was no longer a bad boy. I vowed to wait for Emily to be ready and I have been good to my word.

Of course, I haven't told anyone else about this, so I still have the same reputation as a ladies' man that I always had,

but it's no longer really true. There's only one lady for me now, and that's Emily. No other girl can come even close to my sweet and beautiful Emily Holmes. She is the only girl I really want, and she is also the girl I am lucky enough to be dating, and that's good enough for me, so despite the frustration I feel whilst waiting for Emily to be ready for "the act", I am willing to carry on being faithful to her.

I'm not saying it's easy. You cannot imagine how difficult it is, after how I'd been before we'd met. But I am serious about Emily, serious in a way I have not been before with any of the other girls I'd dated, or even slept with. They had been an enjoyable distraction for sure, but Emily is the real thing, and I aim to keep her, even if it means being patient.

I know there's no good in telling all this to Ethan. He knows my reputation, and he knows how many girls I've dated before I started seeing Emily. No way will he ever believe me about my true feelings for Emily or that I'm not the playboy I used to be. He'll see her as another notch on my bedpost, and given his previous warnings, I feel a lot safer with him not knowing.

So now you're up to date on my circumstances as they currently stand. But one way or another, I don't think this situation is going to last a great deal longer.

My phone rings, breaking the spell of my thoughts and bringing me back to Earth with a decided bump. It's my boss, probably with some work-related nonsense.

"Scott, we finally got that vintage Chevy in the shop," he says, his voice a mix of excitement and urgency.

"Great, I've been waiting for that baby." I grin, already feeling the rush of adrenaline racing through my veins at the thought of getting under that hood.

I toss the phone on my bed and head for the shower, but it runs cold almost immediately. Damn, I must've forgotten to

pay the electricity bill again. No biggie. I'll get to it later. Right now, I'm going to savor the thought of working on that vintage beauty.

I cuss under my breath as I brave the cold shower. Bills are the least of my worries right now. I had some cash saved up at one stage, but I blew it on new shock absorbers for my bike – a beat-up Yamaha YZ250 dirt bike that's seen better days but gets me around town. More importantly, it allows me to enter the local bike trials races. Ever since I was a young kid, I have pretty much lived for racing bikes. Latterly, however, I've transferred to motor cars and most weekends you'll find me down the track, taking part in as many of the local derbies and other racing events as I can get myself into.

That's one of the reasons I chose to be a car mechanic, though really, I want to race cars for a career, not service and repair them. That is my dream – to one day be a champion on the NASCAR circuit, or even in my wildest dreams, to become a Formula 1 Grand Prix driver for one of the great teams such as McLaren, Williams, Alf Romeo, Ferrari, Mercedes, or Saturn.

After I'm done cursing the chilly water, I towel off, throw on some worn-out jeans and a faded T-shirt, put on my work overalls on top, and slide into my boots. Then I make my way to the garage. No time for breakfast today; the Chevy's waiting.

I wheel the Yamaha onto the road and put on my helmet. I hear the engine roaring to life as I kick-start it, and I rev it a couple of times, feeling the power between my legs. This bike is my baby, my escape from the world. It's my second love, right after Emily.

I tear down the streets of Redstone Falls, the wind whipping my face as I weave through the early morning traffic. There's an exhilaration in this chaos that's hard to explain. It's

like I'm in control of my own little world, if only for a few minutes.

The dealership comes into view, and I skid to a stop right in front of the entrance. A few of the guys are already there, shooting the breeze and sipping coffee. They nod as I dismount and kill the engine.

"Morning, Scotty!" shouts Mark, one of the other mechanics and another of my good friends. "You're on time today – what's up with that? Have you finally learned to read your clock?"

"Got a hot date with a vintage Chevy," I reply, flashing a grin.

"Speaking of dates, are you ever gonna ask little Emily out?" Mark winks, nudging me playfully.

I chuckle, shaking my head. "Emily's out of my league, man."

As I have explained, at the inception of our relationship, we decided to keep things on the low for obvious reasons. It feels good to have our own little world where we don't have to think about her father or brother coming in between us. It's a small town anyway, and there's not much to talk about apart from who's going out with whom. Word gets about. We'd rather it didn't. So, we tell no one, not even close friends like Mark.

"Hey, you never know until you try, right? Plus, I think Ethan would vouch for you; you guys are tight."

"Give it a rest Mark. If I would have known you'd keep asking me about her, I would have laid off the alcohol and never mentioned that I thought she was pretty in the first place. And please don't mention it to Ethan or anyone else. Unless you want him to slit my throat, you know how protective he gets of his sister."

He chuckles. "My lips are sealed. You know she will be at the shop, right? That Chevy belongs to her old man."

I almost choke. I'm potentially going to meet my future father-in-law. I immediately become aware of how badly I'm dressed in my rough, torn, and oil-stained work clothes. I didn't even brush my hair this morning. Is there enough time for me to change?

Before I can think, Charlotte, our receptionist, strolls over, looking all dolled up like she's ready for a night out. She has ripped skinny jeans and a tank top so tight I can see practically everything. We had dated a few times back before I had fallen for Emily, and this made for a slightly awkward situation now, since from her perspective I wasn't seeing anyone else and so I was a viable target for her attentions.

"Morning, Scott." She is almost purring, giving me her very best, sultry smile. I scratch the back of my head, feeling a little uncomfortable.

"Morning, Charlotte."

She leans in close, whispering, "You're hardly ever around nowadays. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that there's a lady who has you hooked. Why don't we hang out tonight in the sports bar and then see where the night leads us?"

She obviously knows no better, but she's right I am hooked. Hooked by a girl who is slowly turning me into a version of myself that I didn't know existed.

"Yeah, maybe," I reply, evading more chit-chat with her by heading quickly out to the workshop area.

Charlotte's nice and all, but she's not Emily. Nobody is. This is probably something I should have thought about before sticking my tongue down Charlotte's throat all those times, although to be fair, that was in the period before I had started dating Emily; a time when I had had very different

priorities when it came to the young women of Redstone Falls..

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