



BILLIONAIRE
Bosses
book three

Pregnant with
**BOSS'S
BABY**

MILEY MAINE

PREGNANT WITH BOSS'S BABY

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Special Invite from Miley

BLURB



**One minute, I'm about to lose my job.
Then the next minute, I'm falling for my boss.**

In my defense, I didn't know that Jace was the new owner of the company that I worked for.

He was just a hot billionaire that I met in a coffee shop.

One that I wanted to explore a relationship with.

I wanted to flaunt him.

To make other women jealous.

But of course, life works in mysterious ways.

The flaunting went down the drain when he became my top secret at the office.

Handing him my V-card was the beginning of an end.

It led to something that I wasn't ready for.

Pregnancy.

Sleeping with the boss was scandalous enough.

But expecting his baby?

That was a whole new level of crazy I'd never experienced before.

CHAPTER ONE



Faith

I crane my head over the shoulder of the man in front of me, frustrated. I stood close to the front so that I didn't have to worry about this, and then this behemoth plants himself right there! I'm about to tap him on the shoulder and curtly ask him to move, but before I can, Randall Miller clears his throat and steps forward.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming to the meeting," he says.

His voice is reedy and grating. I'm abruptly reminded why I avoid any meetings with this man if I can. I have to deal with enough during the day as his PA; I don't have to put up with it afterward, too.

"Now, there have been some rumors going around regarding the sale of Amity Greens," Miller says. He clears his throat as a stir goes through his crowd of employees. "I am unsure where the rumor originated, but I've called you all here today to tell you that it's true. At the end of this week, I will be stepping down as your CEO, and a new owner will be arriving."

This time the stir is much louder. I don't even blink. As Miller's PA, I've been aware of this information for some time. Even if Miller didn't tell me himself, I'm smart enough to read the documents he had me copy and figure out what was going on.

"Not just that," Miller continues, raising his voice to be heard over everyone else. "Today is the final meeting, during which I will sign over the company. The new owner will be absorbing Amity Greens into his own business. We've been taken over by the billion-dollar company, Finest Pantry."

This time, I gasp along with everyone else. *That's* a surprise, and I'm not sure how Miller managed to keep that one a secret. Finest Pantry is the biggest supermarket business in the country.

The owner, who from all reports is quite young, took over a business that was already doing well five years ago and skyrocketed the newly named Finest Pantry into the big leagues.

That company is one of the reasons Amity Greens has been doing so poorly. No one wants to come to *our* dinky shops when there's a massive supermarket

up the road with everything they might need.

I glance at Miller. Of course, there are plenty of *other* reasons why Amity Greens is currently in the red. Most of them start with our current CEO, who doesn't have an ounce of business sense anywhere in his body. The company has been a disaster waiting to happen for years.

Still... the news that an existing company has taken us over is very concerning. As Miller's current PA, I wasn't concerned at all for my job before this news. It would be easy to continue on as the PA to the new owner... that is, if the new owner doesn't already have his own PA and horde of staff to call on.

With such an expensive company, there's no way the new owner doesn't have his own PA or two, and that suddenly puts *my* job under the most threat.

Well. This is definitely not what I expected to happen this morning.

I look around. I'm not the only one worried about this. I'm not the only one who might be out of a job if the new owner decides that they want to rely more on their own employees. It makes sense. Who wants to weed out who is and isn't trustworthy in a brand-new company when they have their own, already-vetted staff?

There's no way that some of us won't be fired over this.

"Calm down, calm down," Miller calls over the rising voices. "Now, I know this is a surprise, but don't think of this as a bad thing. Finest Pantry will pull Amity Greens up along it and some of you will definitely be there to see it."

Even Miller, it seems, doesn't think we'll all make the cut. He doesn't look particularly concerned by this either. Why should he be? After all, he's leaving. He has his money and doesn't have to think about all the work he's left behind for us. He was hardly a good CEO when he *was* here. The lack of interest he's displaying in our plight is annoying but unsurprising.

The meeting doesn't go on for much longer as Miller waxes poetic about what Finest Pantry will do for us, intoning dryly about how much he's going to miss us all. In his original speech, he was going to mention specific people who had done well, but I subtly suggested that he cut that out. It wouldn't look good for him to talk about employees that he's never bothered to meet. The impression he's leaving us with isn't great as such; no need to make it worse.

As soon as Miller dismisses us, I duck through the crowd and am one of the first to leave. My expression is calm, but my hand clutches my bag in a white-knuckled fist, the only thing that gives away how upset I am right now.

It doesn't surprise me that Miller sold us out to a larger company. Amity Greens has always been (or at least, was supposed to be) about small supermarkets with well-priced items and a friendly atmosphere, something that's different from big, shiny, corporate supermarkets.

Now, we're part of that scene and there's nothing we can do about it. Will the new CEO even listen to us? Or will he just fire everyone and replace us so he can do whatever he wants with the new company? Does he see Amity Greens as another company he can run differently, or does he see it as a new extension of Finest Pantry?

There are so many questions. My head is spinning from all the new information. I need coffee. I direct my feet up the street, heading toward a small coffee shop that's tucked into the corner between a bookshop and a fashion outlet.

Palmer's Bakery has always been one of my favorite places to go, even before I started working at Amity Greens. I even worked there for a time, while I was studying in college.

I stop by every morning for coffee, and occasionally even buy one of their delicious pastries. The staff is friendly, and I know everyone who works there. When Jason Green, the shop's owner, is working there, he'll sometimes even sit down for a coffee with me.

As I enter the shop, the first thing I notice is that Jason isn't around. That's a little disappointing, because I could really use an ear to listen to my woes right now. There aren't that many people here. A couple sits in the corner while a man stands at the counter, surveying the pastries.

As I approach, he looks up. I blink and almost miss a step. He is *good-looking*. He has pitch black hair that's tied into a ponytail at the nape of his neck and the brightest blue eyes I've ever seen, framed by long lashes. As he glances at me, he brushes his fringe aside. He's dressed in smart-casual clothes, jeans with a button-down shirt. The look suits him.

"Sorry," he says, standing aside. His voice is deep and sends a thrill down my spine. "I'm still looking. You can go first."

Good-looking *and* a gentleman?

"Thanks," I say, stepping forward and moving toward the counter, smiling at the girl standing there. She's one of the two new employees, so I don't know her that well yet.

"Can I help you?" she asks pleasantly.

"Just a cappuccino," I tell her. "Large with two sugars, please."

"I'll get that for you now," the girl says, pressing a few buttons on her machine.

I hand over a few bills and accept the change before stepping aside again. I glance at the guy looking over the pastries. He's still frowning at the window, trying to figure out what he wants. The intense concentration on his face over the baked goods is both amusing and endearing, driving me to lean forward.

"If you're having trouble, I recommend the jam croissant," I advise.

Startled, he blinks and looks up, obviously not having expected me to say anything more. Then, he grins. The expression transforms his face, making him even hotter. I swear, I melt a little. This man is incredibly attractive in every way.

"Thanks," he says. "I'll trust a personal review."

The girl returns with a steaming mug of coffee. I accept it, smiling at the man once more before carrying it away carefully. I head toward my usual booth by the window, settling myself on the comfortable chair. The fragrance of the lilies on the table is soothing, and I draw in a deep breath.

I finally feel myself calming. Does it really matter what happens next? It's

really out of my hands. If I get fired, then I'll just find another job. It might be a little harder, since I doubt Miller will give me a reference given that he's so determined to cut all ties with the company, but I'll make do. I'm resourceful. I'm sure I can find a way around this.

"Now you're the one deep in thought," says an amused voice.

I look up in surprise. The attractive man has come to my booth and is smiling down at me, a jam croissant on a plate in his hand.

"Mind if I join you?" he asks.

There's no way I can say no to that smile. Nor do I want to.

"Go ahead," I say, waving to the empty seat in front of me.

The man settles into the seat I'm gesturing to and puts his plate on the table.

"Do you come here often?" he asks curiously.

"I used to work here," I say with a laugh. "A long time ago. Now I'm one of their most loyal customers."

"So, you can make a good coffee then?" he asks teasingly.

I wink at him, feeling flirtatious. "The best."

He laughs. It's a deep, smooth sound that makes my heart skip a beat. I try to remember the last time I felt this attracted to someone. I've been so busy the last few years that I haven't made much time for romance. Now that I'm facing the possibility of losing my job, I'm not really caring much about work.

"I'd love to try it," he returns with a wink.

"Well, I can't exactly make coffee for someone when I don't know their name," I hint.

He laughs again.

"My name is Jace," he says. "And yours?"

"Faith," I say with a smile.

"Faith," he repeats, rolling my name around his tongue in such a way that I feel a blush creeping up my cheeks. "That's a pretty name."

"Thanks," I say with a grin.

He opens his mouth to speak when something beeps. It takes me a moment to realize that it's his watch. He looks down at it, irritation and then resignation crossing his face.

"Duty calls, unfortunately," he sighs. He pauses and then slides a notebook out of his pocket, ripping a page out of it. He scribbles a few numbers down. "It was nice talking to you, Faith."

He just gave me his phone number. I stare at it for a moment before dragging myself out of my trance enough to rip the paper in half and scrawl my own number on it, sliding it toward him.

"Likewise," I say.

He grins at me, slipping my number into his pocket. Then he's gone, croissant in hand, whirling out the door. I'm feeling a little stunned about what just happened, but I also feel giddy. Encountering a hot guy like that hadn't been on my schedule for the day, but I'm certainly not going to complain.

I smile and slip the number in my purse. It seems today wasn't all bad, after

all.

CHAPTER TWO



Jace

I lean forward in my comfortable chair and look over the stark white documents in front of me, scanning the black letters typed neatly on them. Three people stand around me, watching intently as I look over the words.

Finally, I reach the bottom and look up. Randall Miller immediately stops fidgeting and straightens.

“This is everything?” I ask.

“Yes,” Miller says with a nod.

It’s clear how much he wants this. Ever since we first started talking about the sale of the company, Miller has made it very clear that he wants nothing more than to sell the business and be rid of it completely. Desperate, even.

It makes me feel bad for all the employees who had to put up with a CEO who couldn’t care less about his own company.

I look over the documents in front of me. Miller has presented me with everything from tax sheets of the last three years to the list of resources of the company. I did a walkthrough last week. The resources are old, and despite the obvious care the employees have put into maintaining their stations, it was depressing to see what they’ve had to put up with.

It was enough to make me wonder if I could bring this man up on charges of neglect. This company was his creation, and the employees were under his protection. Yet he abandoned them all because he couldn’t deal with running a business.

I look at the stack of employee folders. It’s smaller than I had expected it to be. I’d been furious when Miller just shrugged and told me that he didn’t replace employees that had left the company, uncaring about the extra burden that it left on others.

If I’m going to be honest, I don’t want Amity Greens. I did, when we first started talking about it. It seemed like an excellent opportunity to expand my own shopping centers and perhaps merge into the more niche market of friendly grocers.

The state of the company building, the small number of employees that I’ll

be receiving, and the absolutely appalling finances all told me that it wouldn't be a good idea to buy Amity Greens.

Even my lawyers hesitated, knowing that taking over companies has always worked good for me—but also knowing that Amity Greens needs a lot of work to be done.

Still...

I look at the employee stack again. I'm not so soft-hearted that I'd buy this company just to help those people out, but it's clear that *they*, at least, are trying. How much better will they do with a management team that actually cares and gives them goals to meet?

I want to see that happen. So, I'll put a little money into the company, see which way the wind blows, and pull out if it looks like it's not working.

"Are we still agreed on the price?" I ask.

Here, Miller hesitates. I'm paying him far less than his original asking price. Thankfully, the man doesn't have a lick of wit and it was easy to run rings around him until he accepted a price that I felt was more than fair considering the general state of things.

It isn't what he originally wanted, but he should consider himself lucky that I didn't just walk away at the start when I realized just how far in the red Amity Greens actually is.

"Yes," Miller says after a moment, nodding.

I glance up at the man standing beside me. Sebastian Hargraves looks back with a raised eyebrow. Sebastian has been my PA for three years, and sometimes I don't know how I would have gotten by without him.

I know Sebastian's thoughts on this sale. He stopped short of telling me I was being an idiot, but the implication was definitely there. He thinks buying Amity Greens is foolish, and I can certainly understand why. It's going to take a lot of work and money.

But I have the money to spend, as well as the time and drive to see another project through. I don't have to keep Amity Greens forever if it starts threatening to endanger me.

I look up at the other man with me. Peter Lockwood is surveying the documents with a frown. He, too, advised me against this move, but I'm too stubborn to want to listen to anything other than my own big ideas. It's gotten me this far.

I have a good feeling about this sale. I hope it doesn't blow up in my face.

"Good," I say.

I pick up the pen, making the other three men in the office tense. Compared to them, I'm completely relaxed. This is something I want, and I'm only seconds away from getting it.

With a flourish, I sign my name on the dotted line. At this moment, the deal has been sealed.

Amity Greens now belongs to me.

* * *

Nearly half an hour later, after seeing Peter and Miller downstairs, Sebastian enters my office while I'm looking over the paperwork.

"I didn't think you'd go through with it," he admits.

"It was a near thing," I say. "But I'm in a good mood today."

"Why?" Sebastian asks.

I smile as Faith's face swims across my mind.

Yesterday afternoon, I ran into a vision of absolute beauty at a tiny coffee shop. Her blonde hair is what caught my attention first (I've always been partial to blondes). It was cropped short in a pixie cut that framed her round face beautifully, and when she smiled, her brown eyes lit up in delight. As soon as I saw her, I knew I had to talk to her more.

Unfortunately, that plan was ruined the moment my alarm went off, reminding me that I had a meeting with a client soon. If I could, I would have stayed far longer in that booth with Faith, finding out more about her and sharing parts of myself in turn.

I don't know what it is about Faith, but the instant attraction I felt for her was both strong and incredibly disarming.

"Sir?" Sebastian asks, breaking me from my thoughts.

"Sorry," I say, blinking hard. Now isn't the time to think about Faith. "Did you ask something?"

"I asked why you were in a good mood," Sebastian says, exasperated.

"Oh," I laugh and smile at him. "I'm not sure it will go any further, so let me just have this to myself for now."

"I see," Sebastian intones.

I glance at him. Sometimes I don't understand Sebastian's sense of humor, which is usually dry and serious. I think he's being sarcastic, but it's hard to tell.

Regardless, Sebastian has always been an incredible resource ever since he joined Finest Pantry. I would even go so far as to say that he's my best friend. It's rare that I find friends who *aren't* only interested in my money and what I can provide for them financially.

"Anyway," I say with a shrug. "Maybe it doesn't seem like the smartest move, but I want to give it a go. It seems like it will be an interesting project."

"Ah," Sebastian says with the air of someone who has only just understood something. "You're bored."

I don't deny it. Sometimes it's boring sitting at the top of a billion-dollar company. I'm only thirty-two, but it sometimes feels like I've hit the ceiling. There isn't much further up I can go with Finest Pantry.

Amity Greens might mean starting at rock bottom, but that's kind of what I *want*. Making excuses about the hard workers was just a way to make my lawyer agree with my decision.

In the end, though, it does come down to some selfish desire. I want Amity

Greens because building it up will keep me busy for now.

“Well, if you were looking for a project that’s going to take you a few years, you’ve chosen the right business,” Sebastian says with a sigh.

He was not impressed during the walkthrough last week. Like me, he feels that Miller’s poor employees shouldn’t be working in those sorts of conditions, especially with the evidence of how hard they’ve been trying to keep everything afloat everywhere we looked. He once commented that he was surprised that Miller’s secretary or PA hadn’t quit long ago.

That reminds me—I want to meet Miller’s PA. I haven’t looked through the employee files yet, but Miller himself mentioned his personal assistant, and I very much want to meet the woman who has stuck through him with all this.

It means that she’s resourceful, determined and persistent; exactly the type of person I want on board while I struggle to make Amity Greens into the sort of company that will turn a profit instead of losing money.

“Remind me to look through the employee files later,” I say to Sebastian. “Before I present myself to the company.”

“We’ll be doing that tomorrow, sir,” Sebastian says, glancing down at my desk calendar. “Do you have your speech ready?”

I grimace. I don’t. I’ve been so busy with Finest Pantry, since we’re currently rushing through promotions for the upcoming Halloween, and with making deals with Miller, that I’ve barely had any time to spend on wondering what to say to my new employees.

“I wonder if I should start with ‘*you’ll all keep your jobs*,’” I say with a sigh. “That’s what they’re all going to be the most anxious about, right?”

“If I were them, yes,” Sebastian says with a nod. “One thing to remember is that your first impression is very important. These people have been putting up with Miller for a very long time. They’re going to be wary. Treat them well and I think you’ll have a functioning company in no time.”

I nod, dragging a blank piece of paper toward me. I speak in meetings and in front of my employees all of the time, but none of those speeches felt as high-stakes as this one. This meeting is going to determine whether my new employees will work for me or if I’ve spent countless dollars for no reason.

I’m really hoping they’ll work for me.

“Any suggestions?” I ask Sebastian.

“Tell them they’re not getting fired,” Sebastian says.

“Not right away,” I say. “But close.”

I think of Faith. What would I say to her right now if she was in front of me? With her ruby red lips, long lashes slowly falling over brown eyes, clothes fitting in all the right places...

All right, maybe I shouldn’t think about what I would say to Faith.

I cough and write a few more notes down. I definitely want to talk to them about the appalling management and indicate that I will be electing people from among them as first priority to help manage each division. Miller did have managers, but he ended up deciding that he didn’t need management help and

slashed the positions.

Most of the previous managers left, while only a few stuck around to help their fellow employees as much as possible in a bad situation. The only management position kept was his PA, and I have a sneaking suspicion it was because he could make her do as much of his work as she was able to.

I know how I will start my speech. These people were going to be wary, and rightfully so. I need to make sure they know that I'm not going to step into the CEO position and usurp everything they've tried so hard to achieve.

I need them to know that they can always come to me if they need help.

I grin at Sebastian and lean over the paper, scribbling out some words as I craft my strategy.

This is going to go well. I'm determined it will.

CHAPTER THREE



Faith

I'd hoped to meet Jace again at the little coffee shop today, but he isn't there. Instead, I just get a coffee and complain about my troubles to Jason, who is working today. After all, Miller and the new CEO are meeting in a few hours. The outcome of that meeting will determine the fate of Amity Greens.

Jason frowns as he listens while I lean against the counter. There are no other customers in the shop, but he's busy drying mugs from earlier groups. I don't mind too much. It's enough for me that he's willing to listen.

"Do you think you'll lose your job?" he asks.

Some of my righteous indignation fades and I slump, cupping my mug in both hands. Regardless of how furious I am about the changeover and what it might mean for me and the rest of the employees at Amity Greens, I'm also incredibly worried. I've been at this company for years, and it will be harder to get another job without a regular CEO who could vouch for me.

"I don't know," I admit. "But what will the new owner do with two PAs?"

It will depend on what the owner does with Amity Greens. If he absorbs us and just makes it another arm of Finest Pantry, then there will be no point in keeping me or any of the management staff, as he'll have his own staff who knows how the company works.

If, however, he decides to leave us as Amity Greens, and just make the two companies bridged with each company running differently, he'll need an entirely new staff, meaning most people—management or otherwise—will keep their jobs.

Except me.

After all, there's only one CEO, and one CEO doesn't really need two personal assistants. He might keep me around for a little while to make the transition, but ultimately, I'll likely lose my job.

This puts me into a hard place. Now would be a good time to get my resume together and start applying for other jobs. But with Miller gone and unlikely to give a damn about what happens to any of us, I don't have a reference for Amity Greens... which won't look great.

Therefore, my only option will be to do my best in the short time I have with the new CEO and hope he'll be interested in providing a reference for me when I leave. After that, I'll just have to put up with a short interlude without a job while I look for something else.

Something I'm definitely not looking forward to.

"You never know," Jason comments. "Chin up, Faith. If it gets bad, I'll give you a couple of shifts."

"Thanks, Jason," I say with a warm smile.

It doesn't help, though. Why did I spend all that time studying if I was just going to end up working again at a coffee shop?

* * *

I feel drained when I get home. I toe my shoes off my feet and collapse on the couch, so tired that I can't bear to be on my feet for a moment longer. The shadows are lengthening through my window as the sun begins to set.

I know I need to get up and cook myself some dinner, but I find that all of a sudden, I can't be bothered to do much. Spending the day worrying about my job has taken a lot out of me, and I don't really feel up to even the simplest tasks right now.

I wonder how my life could have gone downhill so quickly. Last week I had a secure job, even if it was under a boss I couldn't stand, and several prospects if I wished to change my career.

Now I have a company that's falling apart around my ears, no reliable reference if I want to move, and no way of knowing if I'll even have a job by the end of the week.

I think the only good thing that's happened to me this week is Jace. I smile slightly and close my eyes as I remember the man; so handsome and kind. I meant to message him, but I just haven't had the time to. Besides, with my life in such a complete wreck right now, I'm not certain if I should even think about trying to pursue any sort of relationship at this point.

With a groan, I haul myself up to my feet. Food and then bed, I decide. I don't actually want to sit here all night and think about everything that has gone wrong so far. I'd rather just dream and hope everything looks better in the morning.

* * *

When I dream, it's of Jace. Since he'd been so predominantly on my mind before I went to bed, my mind automatically skips to the handsome stranger.

He's sitting in front of me at my small dining table, a cup of coffee warming between his hands. When he smiles at me, warm butterflies erupt in my stomach. It doesn't feel strange that he's there. It feels like he belongs here.

“Are you all right, Faith?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say with a smile. “I’m good.”

And I am. All the worries that I had had earlier have faded away, as though they no longer exist. There’s only me and Jace in this tiny circle of the world that we’ve carved out for ourselves.

Slowly, I reach out with my foot and touch his ankle with my toes. He isn’t wearing socks or shoes, and the contact sends a fissure of shock through me.

He doesn’t jerk or tell me to stop. Instead, he slides his foot forward to maintain the contact, his eyes never leaving mine. The warm feeling from before starts to heat up, making my breath catch in my throat.

I’ve never had much time for relationships, not really. I’ve always ended the few relationships I’ve had before they could get too serious, needing the time to focus on my work. I hadn’t wanted to take anything further with those men who were jealous of my success and annoyed that I couldn’t focus solely on them.

But I’ve had desires. I know what I’ve wanted even in the moments when a spark has ignited in me. I could have easily pursued sexual relationships, and those that I had dated certainly made no secret that they wanted to. But I was always more interested in how serious their eyes were as opposed to how quickly they wanted to fuck me.

Now I feel that spark once more. And for the first time, I don’t want to push it away. Jace’s knees bump against mine, his close proximity taking my breath away. I want him. I want to feel his hands all over me and know that he wants me back.

Yet, for the first time, I hesitate.

Does *Jace* want me?

“You’re over-thinking things, Faith,” Jace says.

His voice is quiet and deep, the sound of it sending a shiver down my spine. I lean toward him, drawn in by an invisible line that I can’t help but follow. Jace moves his foot forward, making my toes slide over his ankle. His skin is like a furnace, and I feel sweat beading on my forehead.

“What do you want, Faith?” Jace asks.

What do I want? There are several easy answers to that question. I want to know that I have a job. I want the new CEO to do some actual good with Amity Greens. I want to be able to pay my bills next month.

But I know the answer that Jace is looking for. His eyes are heated and he’s holding his hands very still on the table, as though he’s forcing himself to stop from reaching out to touch me.

I lean forward, and he does too, so close that I can see flecks of green in his eyes. It’s difficult to breathe through my suddenly constricted chest, and my body is urging me to do *something* about the intense attraction I’m currently feeling toward Jace.

At this moment, the small contact I have with his leg doesn’t feel like it’s enough. I want more. I want to feel my skin pressed against his as we move together, his cock plunging deep within me until I’ve forgotten everything but

him and his body.

I may be a virgin, but I know enough as to what I want. And Jace, sitting quietly in front of me as he waits patiently for my answer, it is.

“You,” I breathe. “I want you. Now.”

I feel as bold as I am vulnerable right now, but I can’t bring myself to regret it, especially as a slow smile appears on Jace’s lips. He’s looking at me like I hug the moon.

I drink in his appreciation, knowing, without words, that he wants me because he knows everything about me. That’s what drew me to him. He’ll never put me down or act like I shouldn’t be working too hard. He’ll support me and be happy for me.

Just the idea of it is as much of a turn on as his touch.

“*Me?*” Jace breathes. His lashes flutter over his cheeks. “What a coincidence. Because I want you, too.”

Many men have said that. Not once, for any of them, have I felt the tingling sparks that dance across my skin at his words. I feel like I’m going to burst if he doesn’t touch me soon.

As if sensing my growing impatience, Jace reaches out and lays a hand on my arm. The light touch makes the hairs on my skin stand on end. With just that one touch, a strong current runs around us, impossible to resist.

“I want to touch you, Faith,” Jace continues. “I want you to be mine.”

There’s no way I can stop myself now. I lean in and touch my lips to his. His lips are warm and move expertly against mine as he deepens the kiss, touching his tongue to mine before pulling back. Already his eyes are dark with want.

“You taste so good,” he says. “I want to taste more.”

He dives back in and kisses me again. But this time, the kiss is fierce and full of passion as he slides his tongue into my mouth and dominates it immediately.

I angle my head back to give him better access, more than willing to follow his lead as he pushes further and further into the kiss, his tongue roughly mapping out my mouth as he sucks my tongue into his. It’s hot, and I’m already panting against him, overwhelmed with the fire swirling around us.

Finally, Jace pulls back. His lips are red and moist with saliva, and I can’t imagine that I look any better. His cheeks are flushed and it gives me a jolt to realize that *I* just did that to him. I’m not the only one who is affected by what’s happening between us now.

The realization is heady and comforting. It isn’t just me who feels it. The connection between us is so strong that it drives away all reasonable thought, leaving us just with *need*.

“Beautiful,” Jace says. “I can’t wait to fuck you.”

I want that. I want it so badly that I can barely breathe. But the kitchen table isn’t the place for that right now.

“Bedroom,” I say, lacing my fingers with his. “Let’s go to the bedroom.”

As I look up at him, I know that I definitely won’t regret bringing him into my room. If I could, I’d make him stay forever.

CHAPTER FOUR



Faith

Butterflies flutter in my stomach, and I'm not sure if it's nerves or excitement. I try to remind myself that I have no reason to be nervous. I want Jace, and he wants me. I want to feel his body and get so deeply connected that there's no way to know where I begin and he ends.

I want that so badly. I'm just not entirely sure how to get it. I've never gone beyond heavy kissing and petting... I've never wanted to. Yet, now I'm slowly pulling a man to my bedroom, which I've defended from all intruders for so long, and not really sure what to do next.

I know through all the books and movies what should happen next, and I also know what I want, but I have no experience in actually getting to that point. I'm just so embarrassed to ask.

Jace looks at me with hooded eyes, like he thinks I'm sexy and sure of what I want to do, and I don't want that look to change even if he finds out I've never done this before.

Thankfully, however, it seems I'm worrying for no reason. Jace's grip tightens slightly around my hand before I can move any further. He pulls me toward him, making me fall into his strong arms. He looks down at me, allowing me to feel his deep breaths as his chest moves.

"Are you nervous?" he asks in a low voice.

I think about lying. But his eyes pierce through me, and I can't even think about trying to trick him right now. He's so close that he can feel every hitch of my breath and the frantic beating of my heart.

"Yes," I admit.

"There's no reason to be," Jace says.

He leans down and kisses me. It's soft and intimate, unlike the earlier ones that were fierce and full of passion. I didn't realize how much I wanted the softer kiss until it happens, and I melt in Jace's arms. It makes me feel loved and safe.

"You never need to be nervous with me," Jace continues.

All of a sudden, I'm not hesitant anymore. I wrap my arms around Jace's neck, sliding my fingers through the hair I can feel there. I lean in, breathing in

deeply to savor his musky, heated scent.

What is there to be scared about? This is just about Jace and myself, and I know what I want right now. I can never afford to be nervous while I'm here in his arms.

Jace's hands go lower, sneaking down my spine until they press against the small of my back, pulling my hips toward him until my groin meets his. I can feel his cock hardening between us and his hips buck slightly toward me, seeking more pressure.

"You feel so good," he murmurs into my ear, his breath caressing my skin. "Your skin is so soft and your body is so responsive."

His hands move again, whispering over my clothes to settle in a firm grip around my hips. I arch toward him, loving the way he touches me.

"What do you want, Faith?" Jace asks.

My mind takes a moment to catch up, straining to come up with an answer that's good enough. In a flash, I know what to say.

"Fuck me," I breathe.

The air between us is still, full of tension as our bodies ache for one another. I look up into Jace's eyes, and can feel the heat radiating through them. It suddenly feels like a heater has been turned on in the room. My heart starts to beat faster again, and I draw in deep breaths that hitch in my throat.

"Yes," he says, dipping his head down to press kisses along my jaw, his light stubble scratching my skin. "I'm going to fuck you hard."

My stomach clenches and my arms tighten around him. This is all I want.

Then, abruptly, I pull away and catch his hand, tugging him toward me as I lead him through the door of my bedroom. There's no room for nerves or doubt any longer. I want Jace in my room, in my life, and right now inside my body. I won't hesitate any longer.

I kick aside some clothes as I drag him in, Jace willingly following my lead. He somehow looks like he belongs to my room, moving around pieces of furniture and things on the floor with casual ease, as though he's been here before.

Part of me wants to stop and see what he thinks of my books and ornaments collection, but I'm too impatient. I've made my decision, and I want this to happen now. I want to feel the cock that I see straining in Jace's boxers pounding into me until I can't do anything other than ride it.

My knees hit the bed and I pause. The delay is all it takes for Jace to spring into action, stepping forward and taking charge as he pushes me down gently, making me overbalance so I fall back onto the mattress.

He slides in between my legs, pushing my knees apart. I look up at him as he braces his hands on either side of my head, looming over me.

This feels so right. Yet, there are too many clothes. All of a sudden, I'm almost choking on the heat and my clothes feel restricting. I wriggle on the bed, trying to loosen my blouse.

"Let me help you there," Jace says.

His hands find my buttons and he plucks them open, pulling my blouse free to reveal my white lacy bra beneath. I feel a breath of air on my bare stomach and shiver, goosebumps rising everywhere.

I look up at Jace. How does he seem so unaffected and smooth? I can feel how much he wants this by the thick hard cock in his pants, but he is far more composed than I am.

“Perfect,” Jace breathes, trailing his fingers over my stomach. I shiver again, my back arching up off the bed. “So perfect. I can’t wait to feel the way your body clenches around me.”

“Then take those clothes off,” I say in a low voice. “So we can see how it feels.”

He grins and tugs at my jeans, sliding down the zipper before peeling the clinging material off my legs, taking my panties with them. As he does so, I sit up and fumble with the clasp of my bra. My fingers slip on the metal before tugging it free and allowing the material to fall sideways and off the bed.

I look up at Jace. I’m completely naked now, and I love the hungry, admiring look in his eyes. It makes me feel sexy and wanted.

“You have too many clothes on,” I tell him.

“Don’t be so impatient,” he says with a wink.

He strips his shirt over his head, revealing smooth abs and hardened muscles that I just want to run my hands over. His chest flexes as he moves, throwing the shirt to the side and pushing down his jeans.

His cock strains against the green silk of his boxers, a damp patch on the material, and it jerks as he finally removes them, springing free and standing proudly tall and thick.

I have a few seconds to look at his cock, eyeing its length and fullness, before Jace steps in toward me. I drop back down to the bed.

“I’ve been looking forward to this,” he says, his hands settling around my hips. “I can’t wait to fuck you, finally.”

I look up, catching his eyes.

“Fuck me now,” I command.

There’s nothing more to be said. Jace grins and lines up against me, the tip of his cock rubbing teasingly against my entrance for a moment before he slips it in, waiting for a moment so I can adjust to the unfamiliar sensation.

It feels so perfect and natural, making me throw my head back with a gasp as he inches into me, thrusting shallowly until he’s fully seated within me.

In the back of my mind, it occurs to me that it probably shouldn’t be this easy my first time, but I can’t bring myself to care, not really. Jace is inside me, and that’s all that matters. I reach up and grip his shoulders, needing to anchor myself in some way.

“Move,” I groan.

I don’t need to tell him twice. Jace pulls out and then slams back into me. My world narrows down to the sound of slapping skin and the way his cock slides in and out of me, and inferno burning around me.

I grip him tightly, needing to feel something before I'm lost, my stomach clenching and my body jerking with each thrust. I know I won't last long, my body is already tensing, and...

* * *

My eyes fly open, Jace's name forcing itself from my lips, my back arching off the bed as my heart beats a million miles a minute.

I pant, staring unseeingly up at the ceiling above me, taking a moment to try and process what is real and what just happened in my dream. Slowly, I begin to process everything into facts and imaginations.

Fact: Jace is a highly attractive man that I wanted to get to know better.

Dream: I just had sex for the first time with him.

Fact: The dream in which Jace takes my virginity was so clear and emotional that my body is actually riding on the aftershocks of my orgasm.

Fact: I would very much like it if the same thing could happen in real life.

I groan and close my eyes. I can't remember the last time my body reacted so passionately to someone else and their touch. To make matters worse, it was a dream touch. I have no idea if Jace would be like that in reality.

I don't even know if Jace would want me sexually.

I can't believe I just had such a vividly explicit dream about a man who is pretty much a stranger to me. Yes, we exchanged numbers. Yes, he was handsome. Yes, he was willing to listen to my plight.

But he's still a stranger, and I feel odd like I've violated his trust or something ridiculous like that. After all, I can't exactly control my dreams. I wish I could.

I shake my head and glance at the clock. It's three in the morning. Far too early to be up right now, even if it is a workday.

I need to put Jace out of my mind for now. I sigh quickly to myself and bury my face in the pillow. Obviously, I need to get out some more if I'm dreaming so explicitly about total strangers.

But no matter how hard I try to put it out of my mind, the images dance clearly across my vision, driving me crazy with the memory of the scents, touches, and sounds of the two of us having sex. I had been uncertain to start with, but then all those nerves drained away because I was with Jace.

Would that happen in real life? I can't help but wonder this as I roll over onto my back and stare up at the ceiling.

I've never made it a secret to my prospective partners that I'm a virgin and that I'm not going to jump into bed at the first available opportunity. Yet I meet Jace for the first time, and now I want to have sex with him?

My mind is just going around in circles. It's still dark outside, and I'm too tired to really think about this any further. I groan and curl up around my pillow.

One thing is for sure: I'm not going to be able to look Jace in the eye the next

time I see him.

CHAPTER FIVE



Jace

The phone rings for the fourth time this morning and I close my eyes briefly before snatching the receiver off the hook.

“Jace Sanders speaking,” I say as evenly as I can.

“Mr. Sanders, my name is Carol Williams,” a cool, female voice says from the other end. “I’m calling regarding the shift in management for Amity Greens.”

You and the rest of the world, I think uncharitably.

“Ma’am, thank you for calling, but management has only just changed...” I start.

“The change of management should have included a statement of intentions,” Carol interrupts, a faint note of incredulity in her voice.

“It did,” I say, reminding myself to be amiable. “However, I have yet to speak to the employees of Amity Greens due to some unexpected delays in my work this morning.”

My tone is pointed; Carol is one of the unexpected delays in my morning work. How does anyone expect me to get anything done if they’re constantly interrupting me? I do, of course, understand that everyone wants to know what’s going to happen next, but I need some time to think about what I’m going to do and to get all the paperwork out of the way before I start making the announcements.

“I see,” Carol says. She sounds unimpressed. “Please let us know as soon as you have made your announcements. After all, many other companies are riding on the decision you make.”

I know that. That fact is exactly what I’m sitting here agonizing over.

“I will keep you informed,” I say curtly, unable to suppress my irritation. “Have a good day.”

I hang up the phone and huff in frustration. Movement in the corner of the room makes me look over. At his own desk, Sebastian quickly wipes an amused smile off his face.

“Something funny?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"I find it hilarious that the world wants to know your decision, yet refuses to give you the time to make it," Sebastian says dryly.

"I don't think it's that funny," I sigh.

I look down at the pile of papers on my desk. There are so many here to go through and sign that it doesn't feel like I'll ever get through it all. Meanwhile, I have an entire company of people waiting on tenterhooks to meet me and hear what I've decided.

"You've already made your decision," Sebastian points out, almost like he's read my mind. "Why second guess yourself now?"

I groan and lean back in my chair.

"Mark said something about it," I grumble.

"Mark is only thinking about the money," Sebastian says without missing a beat. "Something I remember *you* saying you didn't care about right now."

He was right. When I first declared my intentions for Amity Greens, I did so with the full awareness that it wouldn't be as profitable as others would probably like. It would make more sense to enfold Amity Greens into Finest Pantry and completely combine them.

However, I've found that I don't want to do that. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of expanding into a new market. Finest Pantry is full of high market goods, expensive foods, and snooty customers. Amity Greens has a more local base, with loyal patrons that do their daily or weekly shops there, and a lot more goodwill.

I don't *want* to expand Amity Greens. I bought it because I liked the idea of it, an idea that the previous CEO apparently didn't know how to handle very well.

Of course, when I told Mark Baker, my lawyer, about my plans, he was horrified. He declared that it was a horrible idea and that I would be better off just combining the two companies into one. It was enough to make me doubt that I was doing the right thing.

"Amity Greens is not going to make a large amount of money... yet," Sebastian reminds me. "But you'll still be turning a profit. And you don't *need* any more money."

Well... Sebastian isn't wrong about that, either. As one of the country's richest men and as the owner of a very lucrative chain of grocery stores, I don't really have to worry about a steady cash flow.

"So?" Sebastian asks.

I let out a snort. There's no way I would get away with giving another answer, now.

"I'll keep Amity Greens and Finest Pantry separate," I say with a nod.

Sebastian nods at me. Hiring him a few years ago was one of the best things I ever did. My PA is efficient, capable, and knowledgeable. After so long working together, he's also become my closest friend, one of the few people in this world who doesn't just like me for my money. I don't think I would have gotten as far as I have without Sebastian.

“What do we do about the employees?” Sebastian asks, nodding at a smaller pile near my laptop.

“I’ll keep them on for now,” I say decisively. “They know Amity Greens better than I do, and there aren’t that many of them left. I’m impressed that they managed to keep the company afloat while their CEO was off trying to sell it from underneath them.”

“Yeah,” Sebastian says, picking up the small pile and flicking through the folders.

“I’ll hire others to help them,” I continue. “But Amity Greens will function as a separate limb of Finest Pantry. I’ll need all hands on deck if I’m going to run both companies simultaneously. I’ll likely need you to run things here, at times, while I’m over there.”

“That makes sense,” Sebastian comments. “You should probably consider hiring a PA for Amity Greens, as well. That way you have me at Finest Pantry and someone else at Amity Greens. Someone capable who can look after the company while you’re over here.”

“What about Miller’s PA?” I ask curiously. “Even Miller talked well about her when we first met.”

“I have her file here,” Sebastian says, extracting a folder. “She’s worked there for three years now and she’s been involved in the running of most of the company during that time. She’s highly capable, and the other employees have good things to say about her. Considering she didn’t run off and tried her best to keep things going despite everything against her, I think it might be worth giving her a shot.”

“Sounds good,” I say with a nod, gesturing for the file.

I open the folder once Sebastian gives it to me. Then I pause as I see the photo on the first page.

I *know* that face.

It has been very hard to get Faith’s smile out of my head the last few days. I keep meaning to text her, but I simply haven’t had the time. It’s frustrating because I do want to meet up with her. She was smart, witty, and beautiful.

And now she’s under my employment.

Faith Kelly, age twenty-nine. She started working for Miller three years ago, and the reports of her capability are glowing. From what her file says, she’s amazing with computers, good with people, and her customer service skills were likely all that kept their few clients returning. She’s the reason there’s even still an Amity Greens franchise left for me to purchase.

I feel awed. I knew when I met Faith that she was great, but seeing this is a whole different level. She’s absolutely amazing. I need to get to know this woman better.

“Sir?” Sebastian asks, jolting me from my thoughts. “Is everything okay?”

“Remember me telling you about Faith?” I ask slowly.

“Yes?” Sebastian says, sounding confused. Then his eyes widened. “No way.”

“Yeah,” I say, holding up the file. “This is her.”

Sebastian takes the file and flicks it open. He whistles.

“She’s gorgeous,” he says.

I glance at the photo again. With her blonde hair cut short in a pixie cut that feathers around her face and large brown eyes, Faith is beautiful. It actually excites me to think that I’m actually going to get to see this woman every day now that she’s working for me. I’ll have plenty of time to court her and start a relationship with her.

“Jace.”

I look up, caught by the unusual seriousness in Sebastian’s voice.

“She’s your employee now,” Sebastian cautions. “Please keep that in mind.”

“I wouldn’t do anything that could hurt her or me,” I huff, insulted that he might think otherwise.

“No, but I’m reminding you of what people will think if you start to date her, especially after you’ve decided to retain her,” Sebastian says. He rolls his eyes. “At least think about *her*. People will say she only has her job because she’s sleeping with you.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” I say confidently.

Sebastian rolls his eyes at me, but I don’t care about his pessimism. How can it be wrong to like someone and want to date them? I met Faith *before* she came under my employment. She might be my employee now, but that definitely shouldn’t stop us from seeing one another.

Though, I do understand what Sebastian is saying. Not to mention he’s likely a little confused, because I don’t normally do this. While I haven’t been celibate, I haven’t really chased relationships either simply because I’ve had so much else to consider.

But the way Faith had looked at me... most women only see my money and become infatuated with my wealth. Faith had looked at me like an ordinary, attractive person. Someone that she wanted to get to know a little better.

Will she still look at me like that when she finds out who I am, or will she find herself unable to see anything other than how rich I am like the others? I don’t know, and I’m a little nervous to find out.

Find out...I will, and very soon, because I will be meeting her at Amity Greens in only half an hour. I glance at my watch.

“We have to go soon,” I say to Sebastian. “We can speak about this later.”

After, I don’t add, I find out just what sort of person Faith is.

* * *

I can almost feel the tension in the room that I’m hovering outside. I can hear hushed murmurs, and there’s an element of suspicion and fear running through everyone. They’re all scared about meeting me and about what I will say. They’re afraid that they’ll lose their jobs.

It's understandable, but I know what these people have gone through. I read it all in the company reports that I received after I bought the business. I would've never fired a single one of them, even if I had ended up merging Amity Greens with Finest Pantry.

As far as I'm concerned, these people are fine, dedicated employees that I'm grateful to now have on my payroll. Miller had no idea what he was giving up when he cast these people aside.

"Are you ready?" Sebastian asks. "It sounds like it's going to be hard to win these guys over."

"Understandably so," I point out. "Miller wasn't the greatest CEO and they don't know I won't be as bad."

"Though, your reputation does speak for itself," Sebastian says wryly.

I grin at him. He isn't wrong.

I draw in a deep breath and straighten my shoulders. It's time to go in.

I open the door and all sound dies as I enter, all faces turning toward me. I lift my head and walk forward. It's time to put to rest all the rumors and concerns.

The employees step aside as I move through them, opening a path to the front of the room. There aren't that many of them in the room, but I can feel the weight of their eyes on me.

When I turn, Faith is the first person I see. She's standing at the very front of the room, and her mouth is slightly open as she gazes at me in shock. My resolve strengthens. I know what I'm doing and what I want right now.

And, like with everything else in my life, I will do everything in my power to achieve those goals.

CHAPTER SIX



Faith

Shit. While waiting for the new CEO to enter the room, the last person I expected to see is Jace, especially with the explicit dream I'd had last night still *very* fresh in my mind. I blink hard, half of me convinced that I'm still dreaming somehow.

But no, it really is Jace moving through the room and turning to face everyone, his face stern and his shoulders straight. He looks both the same and different from how I saw him last, and it occurs to me that this is him as the new boss of Amity Greens.

Instead of the casual clothing I last saw him in, he's now wearing a suit, his pants pressed to perfection and his tie knotted exactly straight. He's looking around at everyone, eyeing us with consideration, and it gives me a jolt because that expression isn't the smile I remember.

I don't really want to believe it. I *liked* Jace; my dream had certainly told me that. I could envision running into him at the coffee shop again, or exchanging numbers with him, or even going on a date with him.

Now, all of that is shot to pieces. Jace is my boss. And there's no way I can pursue a relationship with him.

"Hello," Jace says. His voice is strong and travels over all of us. If we had been talking, it would have made us quiet in an instant. "My name is Jace Sanders. Recently, I bought out Amity Greens from Randall Miller."

His lips curl very slightly as he says the name of our old boss. It seems that Jace has the same opinion of Miller as the rest of us do. A tiny flicker of hope starts within me. If Jace is unimpressed with how poorly Miller ran the company, then surely he'll set out to do better.

Though I'm still not sure what that will say about my job. I guess I'm about to find out.

"First, I would like to announce the decisions I have made regarding Amity Greens," Jace says, the air so still I could've heard a pin drop. "Amity Greens is a very different chain of stores to Finest Pantry, and this is what drew me to this

company to begin with. Upon finding out how poorly it was run, it seemed like my best option was to merge this company with mine.”

He gives us a small smile that relaxes his face. “However, I’ve decided to keep Amity Greens as is. The fact that Amity Greens still *exists* is a credit to the work all of you have put into it over the years, and that’s impressive. As such, I would like to build Amity Greens as a separate franchise, one that is connected to Finest Pantry, but that has its own clientele and produce.”

Whispers run through the small crowd. I stare at Jace, speechless. In my wildest dreams, I didn’t expect this. I know how to crunch numbers. I know that this decision won’t be as profitable for him as it would be to simply merge and get rid of Amity Greens altogether. From a monetary standpoint, this decision doesn’t make any sense.

Yet, this is the decision that has been made. Respect blooms within me. It seems Jace isn’t just a pretty billionaire boy out to make a quick buck.

A hand shoots up beside me. It’s Allison Powers, our marketing manager. Or, rather, the only marketing staff we have left.

“Yes?” Jace says, nodding to her, unsurprised at the sudden question.

“What will that mean for us?” she asks, voice hard. She’s protected her position and this company for two years. She wouldn’t give them up without a fight.

Jace grins. Suddenly, he isn’t the rich boss that has bought out our company. His expression is friendly and open, and most of the employees stir upon seeing his relaxed face, calming as well despite themselves.

“There aren’t that many of you, but all of you are the entire reason this company has continued to run without losing much profit,” he says. “I plan to promote all of you to managerial positions within Amity Greens, and you will work directly under me to make this company great. From there, I will be employing other people to work under *you*. You will have an entire staff to direct and teach.”

All of us? I stare. We’re *all* staying? Then Jace looks directly at me. I straighten.

“Faith Kelly,” he says, and everyone goes quiet. They all knew that *my* position was the one in most danger, regardless of what Jace did with the company. “You were Miller’s PA. Naturally, I have my own PA, but I can’t be in two places at the same time. My own PA, Sebastian, will continue on in that role for me at Finest Pantry. You will remain in your role here, but under me, at Amity Greens. The two of you will be the next port of call when I am not present. As such, when I am not here overseeing things, you will be the one in charge, Faith.”

He smiles at me. “Your work has been astounding. You kept everyone together and made sure to run this company. I would be a fool to let your talents go.”

For a moment, I’m not sure I heard right. I still have a job? I stare at Jace as he turns to answer another question, but I’m not paying attention anymore. I’ve

been worried about what I will do from the moment I discovered that Miller was selling the company and abandoning us. There should have been no way that I would be able to keep my job. And even if I *did* still have a job at Amity Greens, I was certain that I wouldn't be a PA anymore, which would mean learning a whole different skill set very quickly.

Yet... that hasn't happened. Jace has found a way to not only keep *everyone* in their position, including me, but also to promote growth in the company. It's almost overwhelming. I don't know what I *should* say about it all. I'm half-convinced that this is actually still a dream. Things don't usually fall so perfectly into place for me.

People start moving around me and I jump, realizing that Jace has dismissed us. Flustered, I realize that I've missed the end of his announcement, and I have no idea what important things I should have listened to. I panic for a moment, looking around, wondering if I can catch one of my workmates to tell me what I just missed.

Then I swing around and Jace is standing right in front of me.

Surprised, I jerk back, heart skipping a beat at his proximity. I can't help but remember the way our limbs entwined within my dream, and the way his heated body moved against mine.

Well, fuck. I try desperately to cast the memories out of my head, but I can smell his musky cologne, and it's making my head spin.

"Jace," I say, a small wobble in my voice. "You're our new boss?"

"That's right," Jace says. He grins at me. Now that he isn't standing in front of the crowd making announcements, his shoulders are relaxed and he feels far more approachable. "Surprised? I was pretty shocked too when I saw your profile."

I stare at him. The question bubbles up to my lips before I can stop it. I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, but I need to know.

"Did you only keep me on because we were attracted to one another?" I blurt out.

Jace blinks, obviously taken back.

"What... no, not at all," he says, shaking his head and frowning at me. "Sebastian actually read your profile first and recommended that we keep you on as a PA here for Amity Greens due to your track record. I agreed with him even before I saw it was you. Rest assured, you're remaining in your position because you're good."

Despite myself, I feel flattered. His objection to my concerns feels genuine, and there's a hard look in his eyes as he tries to convince me that he didn't just keep me on because I was pretty. I'm still in this position because of my own merits.

That feels good.

"Thanks," I say, finally unwinding slightly. "So, how did you end up coming to buy Amity Greens?"

"Miller put it out for sale and I was interested," Jace says with a shrug.

“When I looked further into it, it didn’t seem worth it. But I was curious about how you *weren’t* so far in the red that it would be impossible to pull you out. That’s when I discovered that only a handful of employees were desperately trying to keep this place ticking over, led by Miller’s highly capable PA.”

He winks at me and I flush, coughing. His compliments are a little thick, but I can’t say I don’t appreciate them. It’s been too long since a boss has even said ‘good job.’

“That reminds me, I’ll likely need you for the hiring process,” Jace says to me, switching back to the boss mode. “In the next few days, you and I will be sitting down to discuss where we want to go. I would really appreciate your input. After all, you know this company and its employees far better than me, and you’ll be the one in charge during the times that I’m not here. The *only* person you’ll answer directly to is me. If you tell someone to do something while I’m absent, that will be as good as it is coming from me.” He gives me a teasing side glance. “I can trust you not to abuse this power?”

“Jace, this is a step down for me,” I say dryly. “I was basically acting as a CEO for a dying company. Being the second-in-charge is going to be a relief after that.”

He chuckles. I remind myself that it’s not a good idea to get too close to him. He’s my boss. Now that I’m keeping my position, the last thing I need is for anyone to try and tell me that I only got it because I was close to Jace.

Which I’m not. We’ve literally had one meeting before now.

“Anyway, now that the business stuff is out of the way, are you free tonight?” Jace asks.

I stare at him incredulously. Surely he isn’t asking what I am thinking?

“You wanted to go over some work?” I ask pointedly.

He doesn’t get the hint.

“I was hoping you and I could have dinner. Get to know each other a little better,” Jace says with a smile. “More personally.”

I really want that. I want that so bad it almost hurts.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I say evenly.

He seems surprised that I’m refusing. He doesn’t seem to see the logic in what I’m saying.

“Why?” he asks, confused. “I like you, and I want to see where a relationship with you could go.”

That’s probably about the most perfect thing he could say. But it doesn’t get rid of the fact that Jace is now my *boss*.

“That’s really sweet of you,” I say. “But I’m afraid to say that isn’t something I want. I’ve got a lot of work to do. I don’t have time for a relationship right now. I’m sorry if I led you on; I was in a bad place when we met.”

He seems speechless. I nod to him.

“Your ideas for the company sound wonderful,” I continue. “I look forward to working with you, Jace.”

I walk away. My stomach is clenching. All I want is to turn back and tell him that I want him, too. But I can't.

It wouldn't be right.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Jace

Of all the things I had expected when I saw Faith next, a refusal honestly wasn't one of them. Maybe I've been too spoiled by all the women who have simply fallen at my feet, wanting to get a taste of the money that I might spend on them if we were together. Yet Faith has just walked away from that, citing that she's too busy for a relationship.

But I'm not an idiot. She was definitely as attracted to me as I was to her. I remember what Sebastian said. He wanted me to be careful because of the repercussions to Faith should we start a relationship so soon. It hadn't occurred to me that Faith, too, would be aware of those repercussions.

The question is, what do I do about it now?

I slide into my car, deep in thought, and startle when a stack of paper lands on my lap.

"Where was your mind?" Sebastian asks with a raised eyebrow. "I called you twice and you didn't answer."

"Sorry," I say. "I ran into Faith after the meeting."

"All right," Sebastian says slowly. "Let's start with the meeting. How did it go?"

I grin. There was *something* that had gone right today.

"Pretty well," I say confidently. "I announced my intentions to not only keep Amity Greens as is, but also to promote them all to managerial positions. They seem happy. Now I just need to make sure I hire quality staff to help them."

"Great," Sebastian says, pleased. "Mark is going to have kittens."

"Let him," I say dismissively. "This was my decision, not his."

Sebastian grins at me.

"So, Faith?" he asks.

All at once, my cheer fades. I slump with a sigh. "She told me she was too busy to enter into a relationship."

"Ouch," Sebastian says. "Classic let down. Do you think she's just not interested, or that she's been scared off because you're now her boss?"

"I *like* to think it's because I'm her boss," I say. "Or, I hope it's the case. All I

can do now is try and convince her that it will be okay.” Sebastian glances at me and I scowl, knowing what he’s thinking. “Within reason.”

I know Faith is someone that I want. I’ve never wanted someone quite like this before. It isn’t even just that she’s beautiful. It’s that she’s smart and funny, and my opinion of her rocketed up several notches upon finding out that she single-handedly kept an entire company afloat while it was in danger of going bankrupt. She more than deserves a break and to continue working for me.

How can I let someone like her go? She’s exactly what I want. All I need to do is remind her that she’s just as attracted to me. We can deal with everything else as it comes. Right now, the most important thing is being together.

* * *

Amity Greens is where I’ll be for the next few days, so I leave Sebastian in charge at Finest Pantry, and head over to the smaller company. The air in the building is a lot better today. There’s a charge of excitement and anticipation in the air. Several of the employees even give me hesitant smiles as I pass. I’ve spent all night writing up their new positions, and I have every intention of setting the ball in motion today.

“Sir,” Faith says as I reach the office on the third floor, looking up from her desk. There’s no elevator, and the stairs squeak underfoot. One of my first orders of business will be to either renovate the place or find somewhere new. No one should work like this. “How are you this morning?”

I let the distant greeting go for now.

“Good,” I reply, setting my bag down on the cleared desk nearby. My office here is much smaller than I’m used to. “First thing in the morning, I need these passed out to all staff.”

I hand her a file of papers and she glances inside before smiling.

“Everyone will be excited,” she says.

“I hope so,” I say. “As I said to everyone yesterday, it will take a few days to get everyone settled into their new positions, so we’ll use that time to put out advertisements for staff and decide what we want to do. I would also like input on this building, if you could pass the word around. Do we renovate or do we sell it and move on?”

“I’ll ask,” Faith says with a nod. “Maybe I can get them to write their ideas down and put them in a box? They’re still a little hesitant.”

“With good reason,” I say. I wink at her. “Fantastic idea, Faith.”

She goes slightly red and coughs lightly.

“I’ll go hand these out,” she says. Then she’s gone, whirling through the door.

Once she’s gone, I clap my hands together and look over my desk. The wood is old, the chair is rickety, and the computer is outdated. Equipment upgrade definitely needs to be on my list as well.

I sigh. There's so much to do that I need to start *writing* a list.

When Faith returns, I'm balancing on the chair and scribbling in a notebook, listing everything that needs replacing—which, it turns out, is in fact all the *things*. I need to do a complete overhaul of not just the building itself, but also everything inside it. My computer isn't the only one that's outdated. I noticed everyone was using their personal laptops, which is terrible. They should be able to access company assets.

I'm starting to realize, though, why Mark thought Amity Greens was a bad idea. There's so much money that I need to put into it even before we reopen as a new, reborn, company. Updating the technology alone is going to cost me thousands, and that's not even counting all the furniture and stationery we need, along with the cost of either renovations or buying a new building...

I suddenly feel eyes on me, and I look up. Faith is staring at me.

"What?" I ask, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"Nothing," she says quickly. She grins sheepishly. "It's just a little odd seeing you at that desk in your suit."

I can imagine. Here I am in a suit that costs a few thousand dollars, crouched at an old, dusty desk. It certainly puts into perspective what the employees here have had to deal with. I can put up with the old furniture for a few days.

"We'll be replacing everything over the next few days," I tell Faith. "The furniture, the technology... everything needs to go. The kitchen and bathrooms were in an appalling state as well, but I'll leave deciding what to do with those until I know what to do with the building."

"Personally, I think selling this place and getting somewhere nicer would be better," Faith says. "It will be like a fresh start, and I feel like most of the other employees will feel the same way about it."

I nod, pleased.

"I'll start looking into it, then," I say. "If that's what everyone wants, I'll get it for them, even if I have to build it somewhere."

Well, constructing a new building is not something that I really want to do. While I *could* do it, I feel like the best thing to do would be to move everyone out of here into a new place as soon as possible.

Luckily, there are a few possibilities that Sebastian found for me yesterday.

"Great," Faith says, beaming.

I smile at her.

"Thank you," I say. "I have a feeling we're going to work very well together."

"I do have a lot of good ideas," she laughs.

"I know," I grin. "You're smart *and* beautiful, which is a good combination."

She blushes. "Stop with the flirting."

"Does it make you uncomfortable?" I ask her. "I'm sorry if it does. You're gorgeous, Faith, and your mind is amazing. Even if we never have a relationship, I want you to know that that's how I feel."

Faith shuffles her feet and doesn't answer. I slide my list toward her.

"Can you see if anything is missing from that?" I ask.

She glances at me and then sits in a chair in front of my desk, dragging the list to her. Her eyes scan the page and a look of intense concentration crosses her face. She bites her bottom lip as she reads and I'm mesmerized, watching the way her teeth tug her bottom lip slightly, her tongue slipping out briefly to wet her lips and making them glisten.

She's expressive, too. She nods when she sees something she likes, frowns when there's something she isn't sure of, and her mouth parts in a surprised 'o' when she sees an item on the list that she wasn't expecting.

At one point, amusement crosses her features, and I'm certain she's reading the comment I made about burning all the old furniture on the off chance they have termites. Not exactly professional, I know, but it's worth it to see her smile.

When she reaches the end of the list, she looks up.

"That looks good to me," she says. "If I think of anything else, I'll let you know. The only other things I can think of are the bathrooms, kitchens, and other facilities, but..."

"If we're buying another place, we don't have to worry about those yet," I say, finishing her sentence.

"Yeah." She smiles.

I'm caught by the look on her face, which lights up her expression. I feel a warmth in my stomach that travels through my whole body.

"You're beautiful," I say.

I can't help it. Everything about her is absolutely amazing. I could sit here and stare at her all day if I was able to.

When Faith blushes this time, red spreads across her cheeks and towards her neck. There's frustration in her eyes, but her body leans in slightly, caught by my sincerity and words. I can see her attraction as surely as I feel my own.

"Stop," she says, and there's a note of tiredness in her voice. "Please."

"I'm sorry," I say. It's genuine. I don't like the idea that I'm causing her stress. "I've thought you were beautiful from the moment we met. All of you."

"You really don't make this easy, do you?" Faith asks with a frustrated sigh. "Look, yes, I *am* attracted to you as well, okay? But a relationship between us *can't* happen. You have to understand that."

I see my opportunity and leap for it.

"Why?" I say, my tone challenging. I shake my head. "Give me one chance to prove that we can be good together, despite everything else. Let me take you out for dinner, just once. If you hate it and still think we can't be together, I won't bother you about this again."

I see her thinking it over. It's a good deal. One dinner with me, and then she doesn't have to deal with me trying to start a relationship with her again. If she can get through one night without admitting that we *could* be together, then she's out.

I don't plan to allow that to happen.

"One dinner?" she asks, double-checking.

“Unless we want more,” I agree.

She bites her bottom lip. It’s an endearing habit that I can’t get enough of. I have a feeling all her quirks are going to drive me crazy before long.

“When?” she asks finally.

I’m absolutely not going to let this chance pass us by, or give her a chance to second guess it.

“Tonight,” I say. “I’ll pick you up around seven and we’ll go to dinner.”

She still looks unsure, glancing at the door as if making sure no one can hear. Then, she draws in a deep breath.

“Okay,” she says. “Tonight, then.”

I want to tell her that she’s gorgeous and that she shouldn’t be worrying about what others think, that I’m going to want her no matter what happens after this, but I don’t. I can see that she’s uncomfortable and worried, so I drag my laptop toward me and open up a document.

“Can you help me run through the finances for the last year?” I ask. “I need to know what we have to spend through the company.”

Relief fills her gaze and she nods, scooting forward. I force my mind away from thoughts of tonight. For now, I need to concentrate on work.

I can focus on Faith later.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Jace

Despite my confidence when I set up this date, I feel nervous as the time approaches. I end up pacing around my study, completely ignoring all the work that I brought home with me. I need to go through all the finances and determine what I need to spend for the company.

Between Faith and I, we came up with some nice pieces of furniture that the staff will definitely appreciate, some new company computers and laptops, and some other furnishings like lamps, cutlery, and kitchen appliances. We also managed to draft an advertisement for staff, which I'm *supposed* to be finalizing now.

I just can't concentrate. The closer it gets to the time to pick up Faith, the more anxious I become. I know exactly what is riding on this date. If I can't get Faith to agree that we can be together, then that will be it. As promised, I won't bother her about it again unless she brings it up first.

Sebastian, at least, had seemed impressed.

"It's a good thing," he had said to me over the phone when I told him my dilemma. "Just sit back and see what happens. You're working with her now, anyway. Even if a relationship doesn't start now, there's no telling what the future will hold."

As I remember these words, I take a deep breath, forcing myself to calm. Sebastian was right. At this point, there's no rush. If Faith decides that she doesn't want a relationship with me right now, then that will be okay. We'll work together to make Amity Greens great, and I won't make any more passes at her. And if something grows from there, then we can bring it up again.

I don't need this dinner to know that Faith and I are compatible. I've known it since I first saw her, and everything I've learned about her since has just cemented my opinion that she embodies everything I want in a partner.

And it's *because* of this that I *will* wait for her to decide she's happy with me as well, no matter how frustrating it is.

I glance at the clock again. It's just after six. Soon, I'll need to start getting ready and then leave to pick up Faith. But, until then...

Work, I decide. I'll focus on work and settle my nerves.

* * *

By the time I walk up to Faith's door, I've managed to settle my heart rate into a normal beat. I'd thought about turning up with some flowers, but then I thought that it might be a little too much.

Faith already knows that I want her, and that I want to see where a relationship between us will go. If I try any overtly romantic gestures, she may take it as me pressuring her, and I'll end up taking several large steps *backward* with her, instead of forward.

Tonight, I had decided earlier, I need to be casual and friendly. It will just be two people who met at work deciding to go out to see if there's any spark between them. I want Faith to remember how easy it is for us to interact with one another. Then, maybe, I'll stand a chance with her.

I straighten my shirt for the thousandth time, once again thinking, with irony, how odd it is for *me* to be the one to have to chase someone. Normally I don't have to put nearly as much work to catch someone's interest.

But that just means that Faith is worth the effort.

Deciding that I look as nice as I'm going to get for now, I rap loudly on the door and straighten my shoulders, trying to portray confidence and charm. I'm unable to stop the smile that spreads over my face as Faith opens the door; just seeing her makes me feel happier.

"You're early," she comments.

I glance at my watch.

"Only by fifteen minutes," I say with a shrug. "I hope you don't mind."

"It's fine," she says with a grin, stepping aside to let me in. "I was just about to finish, anyway."

I glance at her. Her hair is straight in its pixie cut, and her makeup is sedate. She's clinched a robe tightly around her and, as I watch, she swirls around and disappears back into the bedroom.

I clear my suddenly dry throat, forcing away all thoughts of following her. That would *definitely* be the wrong move. Of that, I can be sure.

It doesn't take long for Faith to return. Likely convinced by the jeans and button-down I'm wearing, she's wearing a pretty blouse and a knee-length, flowing skirt. Neither of us is completely dressed up, but we look good just the same.

"So, I guess we're not going to some super expensive restaurant?" Faith asks as she picks up a pair of sandals with a small heel.

I glance at her, taking note of the small relief on her face.

"I thought something more laid back would be nicer," I say. "I like going to smaller places; they're friendlier. Is that okay?"

"Definitely," Faith says.

I hope that my decision not to go to a very expensive restaurant works in my favor. I'm really banking on Faith being different from all the other girls I've dated in the past.

It seems we're clear, though. Faith beams at me, the ease and intrigue in her eyes hard to miss. I've made the right decision and jumped over the first hurdle. I've shown her that, despite my enormous fortune, I'm just as human as she is.

"I parked my car out front," I say as we head to the elevator, fishing my keys out of my pocket.

"No chauffeur?" Faith teases.

"No, I prefer to travel under my own steam," I reply.

Faith glances at me and smiles. The look in her eyes is warm. It makes me feel good, like I'm doing and saying the right things. I've never had to go out of my way to woo a woman before, but I have no intention of making any missteps with Faith.

The drive to the restaurant I've chosen is quiet. Faith looks out the window, and suddenly, I don't know what to talk about. I don't want to bring up work and remind her that I'm actually her boss, but I don't know her well enough to gauge what I can and can't talk about yet.

I glance at her as I drive. Her expression, as she watches the landscape speed by, is serene. At least she doesn't look unhappy.

She's the one that breaks the silence first as we park the car, eyeing the restaurant curiously. I've brought her to a local burger joint, one that has bright lights, grinning staff, and a warm atmosphere.

As we open the doors, a burst of laughter greets our ears.

"Do you come here often?" she asks.

"As much as I can," I reply.

It's one of my favorite places to be. It isn't stuffy and formal. I can sit here and eat and read without having to worry about all the other wealthy patrons who stare and judge.

"Is it okay?" I ask her.

"It's great," she says warmly.

I wonder what's going through her mind right now. What does she think of me at this moment? Of the choices that I've made? I chose to bring her here, wanting her to see a side of me that isn't just the rich entrepreneur that has control of two businesses. I want her to see me as an ordinary man that she could, hopefully, grow to want.

I lead her to a table in the back, waving to some of the servers who grin at me in recognition. There are menus on the table and Faith picks one up and glances through it.

"It all looks delicious," she says. "I'm getting hungry just looking at this."

"Same," I say with a laugh. "Do you like burgers?"

"Love them," she grins. "It's just too expensive to eat out all the time."

I don't say that it's what *I* do. I'm a decent cook, but work often keeps me pretty busy. I frequent this restaurant for this reason, as well as the coffee shop

where I first met Faith.

“Can I take your order?” a server asks with a smile as she approaches.

After we put in our orders for food and drinks, Faith’s smile drops and she turns to me with a serious expression.

“All right, let’s put it all on the table,” she says, folding her hands. “There’s no point beating around the bush about this. I know you like me, and I like you, too. But you’re my boss. Do you know what would happen if word got around that I was dating you? People would wonder how I kept my job.”

She sighs, brow creasing. “Everyone is still scared they’re going to get fired soon, no matter what you said. We haven’t exactly had an owner that was known for keeping his word before now.”

“So I gathered,” I say with a grimace.

“It’s not illegal, but a relationship with you *is* trouble,” Faith says, frowning. “People will start saying that you’re favoring me and wonder if I’m getting special benefits. I don’t want to deal with that.”

“If that’s your only concern, we can keep it a secret,” I offer. “We don’t *have* to tell the world if we start dating. It isn’t anyone else’s business than ours, after all.”

“And how long until a magazine picks it up?” Faith counters. She looks frustrated, and I can understand her feelings. There doesn’t seem to be a good way around this at all.

“I can keep secrets from the media,” I say firmly. “Look, we’d just need to be careful, that’s all.”

Faith hesitates. There’s a thoughtful look in her eyes, which means she’s thinking about it.

It isn’t a bad option, though I can understand her hesitation. Starting a relationship and keeping it secret at the same time is a lot of pressure on both of us.

“No,” she says finally. “I don’t think it will work.”

Yet, she doesn’t stop looking thoughtful. She’s still thinking it over.

In the end, it’s the best option we have right now, and if it’s the only way we can be together, then I’m willing to give it a go.

I can only hope that I can convince her to try it as well.

CHAPTER NINE



Faith

It's ironic that I wanted so badly for this date to end in a terrible way. Normally it's the other way around. The other day, when I met Jace, I would have loved for the date to go wonderfully with the possibility of having more in the future.

But the date *did* go well, and as we leave the restaurant, I'm in two minds about it. Part of me is happy, because I do really like Jace, and in ordinary circumstances, I would have loved to come out of the date feeling like something had gone right.

The rest of me is frustrated. I'm losing all of my reasons to refuse Jace. Now that he's put the possibility of having a secret relationship on the table, it's becoming harder and harder to deny what I truthfully want.

Would a secret relationship work? The idea of it is a little thrilling. On the other hand, surely that won't make for a very strong bond. If we have to spend all our efforts on keeping our real connection a secret, when will we get the time to work on having a meaningful relationship with one another?

No, it definitely wouldn't work.

But, still, if it's the only option available to us...

I can't believe I'm even sitting here considering this. I *know* that it wouldn't work. The idea of having a relationship with my boss is not one I should even be thinking about. There's far too much on the line to want to risk it all for a man I've only just met. A very good-looking man, yes, and one who is kind and considerate and interesting...

I shut my thoughts down again. If I'm not careful, I really could just end up talking myself into it.

Jace pulls up outside my apartment building and cuts the engine. For a moment, I sit there awkwardly. Are we supposed to talk about this now?

"Thanks for coming out with me tonight," Jace says finally with a smile at me. "I really appreciate it. I hope you had a good night."

"I did," I say.

Jace beams at me and leans in. For one frantic moment, I think he's going to

kiss me properly, and I'm not sure if I'm ready to accept that. However, instead, he presses a chaste, warm kiss to my cheek and pulls back.

"I'll see you on Monday?" he asks.

He isn't going to pressure me. He isn't going to ask me to make a decision right now. He's going to drop me off and leave.

Maybe it's because I can't help but love his attitude, but the words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"Would you like to come up for some coffee?" I blurt out.

Jace looks startled. "Are you sure?"

Am I? No, I'm not. But Jace and I really should talk about this *now*. I'm sure I can control myself for an hour or so.

"Yeah," I say. "Let's go in and talk."

Jace nods with a small smile, getting out of the car at the same time as I do. As we approach the door, I rummage in my bag, trying to find my apartment keys.

"Can you put in the door code?" I say distractedly. I did pick them up, right? "Three, five, seven, two."

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I pause. Jace is pretty much still a stranger. What am I doing giving him access to my apartment building? I don't know exactly what sort of person he is!

Then again, he's worth billions, I doubt he needs to go robbing middle-class earners like me.

As the door opens, I finally pull my keys from the bottom of the bag, relieved. I've locked myself out of my own apartment more than once, and I certainly don't want Jace to witness my grumpy landlord having to come and bail me out again.

Jace follows me quietly into the elevator. I'm starting to feel nervous. I've seen where this goes in the movies. I hope he doesn't think I've invited him up for ulterior motives.

When we reach the apartment, however, he sits down at the dining table as I make my way to the kitchen, making no moves on me. I'm both relieved and a little disappointed, if I'm honest with myself.

"How do you take your coffee?" I ask.

"Two spoons, one sugar and a dash of milk," Jace says.

I make a mental note to remember that. After all, when Jace is at Amity Greens, I'll be his PA. I'm pretty sure that role includes coffee runs. Miller hated the stuff, so at least I didn't have to run around after him all the time.

I make the coffee quietly, wondering what's going through Jace's head right now. Is he trying to think of some way to convince me to change my mind?

I glance at the table. Jace is looking at it too, seemingly very deep in thought. I carry the hot mugs over to the table and carefully place Jace's in front of him.

"Thanks," Jace says. He takes a sip and smiles. "That's a good coffee."

I can't help but grin. It's a small compliment, but considering Miller never offered praise for *anything*, it feels nice to be appreciated for even such a small

job.

“So...” Jace says after a moment.

I cup my hands around my coffee and look down into the dark liquid. It swirls back at me, offering no easy answers. I sigh.

“You’re my boss,” I say simply.

Jace takes a sip of his coffee. “I know. I understand why it’s a problem.”

“But...?” I prompt when he trails off.

“I like you,” he says bluntly. “A lot. I want to be with you as much as I can. I hate that the fact that I’m your boss can have such an effect on this. I know I want you. I know I don’t care what anyone else thinks.”

“It sounds so easy when you say it like that,” I sigh.

I wish it *was* that easy. I’m not the only one who would face stigma if Jace and I began to date publicly, after all. But Jace has a billion-dollar company, and he’s just bought out another company. He can afford to not care what other people think.

I can’t.

“Look... I’m not going to lie, there’s definitely something here, between us,” I admit. “No matter how I think about it, I can’t get away from that. But interest and attraction aren’t enough to stop people from getting out of hand when they see us together.”

“Then why can’t we try keeping it a secret?” Jace asks. His voice is even, but I can hear a hint of carefully concealed frustration.

“It’s too complicated, isn’t it?” I say, tired.

I’m startled when Jace leans across the table and seizes my hands. His eyes bore into me.

“The way I feel about you is important right now,” he says quietly. “There shouldn’t be anything more complicated than that.”

How can he make it all sound so worth it? All the fuss and condemnation and suspicion if people were to find out that I was dating my boss... it all feels so far away when he speaks about his feelings. I lean toward his words like a flower to the sun. I want to hear them. I want to believe what he says.

But I also know that there would be a reality check the moment I’m not in his presence, hearing the pretty words all wrapped up neatly for me.

Jace sighs, perhaps seeing something cross my face, and leans back.

“I’m sorry,” I can’t help but say.

“Don’t be,” he says, shaking his head. He stands. “I should probably go.”

I stand too, biting my lip. This is so unfair.

“Also...” Jace looks back. “Just in case you get it into your head that this might put your job in jeopardy, don’t even think about it. You’re among my best staff. Whether we’re dating or not, that’s not going to change. I need you on my team if we want to pull Amity Greens off the ground.”

My eyes burn. Fuck, why is everything so difficult? Before I can stop myself, I reach out, needing to touch him for a moment, even if just as a farewell since he isn’t someone I can have. I press a soft kiss to his lips and he leans into me.

All at once, I know I've made a mistake. Sparks fly, sending electricity whizzing through my body and making the hairs on my arms stand on end. The feeling is so intense that I gasp against his mouth and jerk slightly back, feeling his breath on my lips.

And then, before I can even think of what I'm doing, I surge forward. He leans in to meet me, apparently with the same idea, wrapping an arm around my waist and tugging me in close, pushing me back until we hit the table.

I nudge his lips with my tongue, requesting entrance, and his mouth opens instantly, allowing me to map and explore the gums and teeth, fascinated with all the ridges as I suck on his tongue.

Part of my mind is screaming at me, asking me what the hell I think I'm doing, *especially* after I just told Jace we couldn't be in a relationship, but I ignore it. I don't care.

At this moment, the only important thing is the feeling of Jace's hands on me as they fly everywhere, sliding under my skirt and gripping my hips.

"Fuck, Faith," Jace groans.

If I'd hoped that *he* might have the presence of mind to stop this, then I was sorely mistaken. He's as far gone as I am. And why shouldn't he be? I'm giving him what he wants. As if he's going to stop us. That responsibility is on me.

But I don't want to stop.

Just once, I tell myself. I can have Jace just once. And then, afterward, I'll walk away, satisfied in this at least.

I shove all thoughts away about how stupid that is. I can think of them later. For now, I'll just content myself and hope for the best.

Jace's hands are sliding up my bare skin, wriggling underneath my shirt and straining the buttons on it. His fingertips leave fiery trails that make me shiver and groan.

I break the kiss with Jace to tilt my head back, trying to catch my breath. My heart is beating a million miles a minute, and I feel like I'm burning from the inside out.

I need Jace. I want him. I've wanted him from the start, and all the reasons why I *can't* have him are tucked away in a locked box, where I can't reach them for the time being.

"God, Jace," I gasp, jerking as he slides his blunt nails under the wire of my bra, skimming the sensitive skin of my breast. "Do that again."

"This?" Jace asks teasingly, doing it again. My body jerks; I had no idea I was so responsive there. "The way your body moves... show me again and again and again."

I groan, my eyes slipping closed almost without permission. My entire body feels like jelly, and if Jace's arms were not around me, I feel like I would fall boneless to the ground. My knees tremble with the strain of supporting my weight while my body is being helplessly ravaged with pleasure.

I want him to stop so I can catch my breath and think. At the same time, I never want this to stop. I want to feel more of him. Feel the way his fingers skim

over my arms, legs, and neck.

I need... I need...

“What do you want?” Jace murmurs into my ear.

It’s hard to articulate. I know what I want. But it’s hard to verbalize. I’ve never done this before. What am I supposed to ask for? What am I supposed to tell him?

I open my eyes. Jace is watching me, waiting for an answer. His expression gives the appearance of calm, but his eyes are burning with want.

“I don’t know,” I say, the answer coming out as a half sob. “I want you... I want this... I want...”

Jace’s fingers pause and then his touch becomes soothing rather than hard. The change is both startling and relieving, finally helping me sort my words out.

“I’ve... never done this before,” I say quietly.

Something sparks in his eyes, but it’s gone too quickly for me to see what it is. I don’t know what his reaction will be. Will he be horrified that a twenty-nine-year-old woman is still a virgin? It really isn’t his business, and if he is chased away by that, then I know for certain that he is not the one for me, but...

Then Jace pulls me in close. His hands press comfortingly against the small of my back.

“Then I’ll have to be careful,” he murmurs, and my heart leaps. “I want you. Do you want this? Honestly?”

I have to think about it for a moment. I know that this will bring complications that I may not be prepared for, especially since I was certain, right up until ten minutes ago, that I wanted to walk away and let Jace and I just have a professional relationship.

But... shit, I can’t resist him. I just can’t.

I want him. It’s going to be messy and complicated, and I have no idea what’s going to happen next. Yet...

“Yes,” I whisper. God help me. “Yes, I do.”

CHAPTER TEN



Jace

As soon as I hear those words, I move. I'm desperate to touch her; to feel her silken skin beneath my palms. I kiss her fiercely, lightly biting her lip. She staggers forward into me, wriggling at the sensations. Her movements make my cock harden until it's almost painfully stiff, and I buck forward helplessly.

There is no control here. For either of us. Right from the moment her lips first touched mine, we were both lost.

Part of me thinks I should stop this. It's obvious that she wants to walk away from this for the moment, and I respect that. But she's also the one that started this. The mixed messages are a little confusing, but at the same time, I don't really care. She's here. I'm allowed to kiss and touch her, so there's no way I'm going to stop until she says otherwise.

It doesn't seem like she's about to tell me to stop, either. It seems that Faith has abandoned all thoughts of preventing us from going further. Her actions make it clear that she wants this.

Slow down, I remind myself.

When Faith said that she was still a virgin, I was stunned for a moment. It wasn't what I expected. Inexplicably, the knowledge made a wave of lust go through me. If she's a virgin, it means that she's waited this long to have sex with someone she *really* wanted. She's chosen that special someone to be me.

And if I can hold onto her, I'll be the only one she'll ever have sex with.

That thought makes my desire rise to almost burning levels. The thought that *I'm* the one who gets to be with Faith, out of all the men who have no doubt wanted her over the years, makes lust shudder through me, and my breath catches as my grip on her tightens.

But if this is her first, I don't want it to be in the kitchen. I want to make her feel good; to be comfortable. I take a few deep breaths and close my eyes, centring myself.

"We need to go to your bedroom," I say, my voice hoarse.

Faith pants, overwhelmed by all the sensations, but manages to pull away.

Her eyelids flicker before she seems to get her thoughts in order.

"Yeah," she agrees breathlessly after a moment. "This way."

She stumbles back drunkenly, wavering on her feet, but obviously headed for a closed door. When I know for certain that we're heading in that direction, I take over, gripping her hand and tugging her into my arms, leaning in to nip her jawline lightly with my teeth as I walk backward. When my back hits the door, I fumble behind myself for the knob and push it open so that we nearly tumble over the threshold.

It would be safer, I know, to let go of her and move to the bed individually, but I can't bring myself to stop touching Faith for even a moment.

"Fuck," I breathe against her neck. "You're amazing."

My knees hit the back of the bed and I swivel us around so that I can lower Faith down onto the mattress. Not expecting the sudden movement, she gasps as her eyes fly open. Her fingers dig into my shoulders for a moment before she relaxes.

"Shit," she says with a breathy laugh. "Sorry."

"Don't be," I say.

I kiss down her neck, breathing in the light, floral scent of her perfume. Jasmine, I think? Whatever it is, it's my new favorite scent.

Faith jerks beneath me as I kiss and touch her, my fingers skimming over the buttons of her shirt before I start undoing them one by one. If I was worried she might start to get uncomfortable when her clothes began being removed, I was mistaken. She drags her arms through her shirt as soon as she's able to and sits up slightly so she can fumble with the clasp of her bra.

"You're so eager," I purr as I leave her to it and start pulling her skirt.

"I want you," she gasps. "Now."

She falls back and raises her hips while flinging her bra away. I drag her skirt down over her hips and legs, and when it falls to the floor, I pull her moist panties off as well.

When she's completely bare, I take a step back, making her whine. Maybe, if these feelings weren't quite so strong, I would take my time and tease her just a little more.

But I'm eager to show her how good sex can be for both of us. I don't think, with all the overwhelming sensations at once, she's going to last much longer. As it is, I almost feel like I'm about to burst in my eagerness to have her.

I force myself to slow down. Rushing this will only hurt Faith, and I swore I wouldn't do that to her. I take a deep, measuring breath and wait for my racing heart to stop thumping so loudly in my chest.

Then I take a step forward, gently nudging Faith's knees apart so I can slide between them, the skin-on-skin contact making a spark shoot through me that causes me to suck in a quiet breath as my entire body burns with need.

"Fuck, I need you so bad," I rasp.

I won't hurt her. I remind myself of this as I guide a trembling hand down to her entrance, stroking gently around the damp area. She groans deeply and her

legs fall apart wider as she throws her head back.

Carefully, I slide one finger into Faith, wriggling it inside and swirling around. Faith's hands grip my arms with almost bruising force, clearly looking for an anchor, as she gasps and whines, words beyond her control right now.

"I'm going to make sure you're nice and prepared for me," I say in a low voice, carefully slipping a second finger into her and scissoring them slightly.

Faith tenses slightly at this breach and breathes in deeply.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, watching her.

"Odd, it's..." My finger brushes against something in her and she gasps, her entire body jerking. "Ah!"

I grin. I've found her sweet spot, which will make things a little easier for her. I thrust my fingers shallowly into her, pressing that spot each time, her eyes fluttering closed. I pull my fingers clear completely, stepping in closer to Faith. My cock is hard and leaking, more than ready to be within her.

I lean over her and slide the palms of my hands over hers, lacing our fingers together. Her breathing has sped up a little, but her body is relaxed and waiting right now.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Y-yeah," she moans.

I slide the tip of my cock into Faith slowly and move it around a little as she unconsciously tenses at the unfamiliar intrusion. I wait until she's ready before I push in some more, just a little at a time. The process is agonizingly slow and my cock throbs painfully, but I force myself to wait. Faith is worth it.

Finally, I'm fully seated inside her. She pants beneath me, face flushed and her fingers tight around mine. I wait until she wriggles a little.

"I'm going to move now," I say.

It isn't fast or rough. It's slow, deep and long, each thrust taken with the utmost care as Faith's body gets used to the unfamiliar sensations. Faith groans at every twist and stroke.

It's much more intimate than a simple fucking and quick thrusts to get off as quickly as possible. This is different. It's special, in a lot of different ways. I want to make it a night that Faith will always remember with fondness.

It doesn't take long for Faith's orgasm to build, and she falls over the edge first with a wordless cry shuddering from her lips, her entire body clamping down hard on my cock.

I thrust twice more before I lose it, too, black crossing my vision as pleasure cascades down around me. When it starts clearing, I pull out of Faith and land on the bed beside her. After a moment, I turn around.

Trying to catch my breath, I lay flat on my back and stare up at the ceiling, wondering what to do now. I'm no stranger to the fact that what just happened *shouldn't* have happened at all. Faith didn't want a relationship with me. It's too complicated. As disappointing as that was, I was prepared to walk away for now and perhaps try again when we had worked together for a little longer.

But when she kissed me, there was absolutely no way that I could resist her.

I glance over at her. She's also staring upward, her chest heaving. Her expression is calm, and I have no idea what she's thinking about right now. Is she upset that this happened between us after she said she didn't want a relationship? Is she angry that neither of us could control ourselves for one hour while we were alone together in her apartment?

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

She glances at me and then turns her head fully toward me.

"Yeah," she says.

She shifts and winces. I was as careful as I could be, especially since she hadn't done this before, but there was always going to be some residual pain.

"Pain?" I ask with a grimace. I hadn't wanted to hurt her at all.

"A little," she admits. "But it's okay."

She stretches carefully and then rolls over onto her side so that she's facing me. Her entire body is relaxed, almost like she's molding herself to the mattress. She yawns widely.

"I'm so tired," she says through a second yawn.

"Mm." I slide down so that I'm lying beside her on my side as well.

She grins at me, her entire face lighting up, and something in me sighs with relief. Part of me had thought that she would be furious after all this. We were both consenting adults, but our loss of control could have easily caused a problem between us. Maybe Faith is just too tired and sated right now to think about it.

But I'm okay with that at the moment. I'm exhausted and relaxed. I don't want to have to deal with anger or stress. In the end, we didn't do anything wrong. We wanted each other, and we acted on it. It's really that simple.

Except I know that, eventually, it won't be that simple. All the reasons why we can't date will come back to Faith soon, and then things will probably be even more awkward. There's no way either of us can just walk away from this now. Not after we've gotten a taste of each other's skin.

At least, I know I don't want to. If Faith walks away from me now, she'll leave me with a terrible, unfulfilled yearning that I won't know how to abate. I want to beg her to give us at least this one chance, to see whether we can work together, but I'm not quite sure what words to say. She's already decided that we can't do it once. I don't know if it's too much to hope that she might change her mind just because we slept together.

But I know I have to try. There's something about Faith that I'm helpless to pull away from. Maybe it might be easier to just stay away and hope for the best, but I don't want to. I want her.

I look at her. She's watching me, nothing in her expression giving away what she wants right now.

"I want to give us a chance," I say quietly. I look her directly in the eyes. "I want to see where this goes. I know it will be hard and stressful, but we owe it to ourselves to at least try."

Faith closes her eyes.

"A secret relationship may end up breaking us apart," she says.

My heart jumps. That isn't a no.

"Not if we don't let it," I counter. "We just have to talk to each other and voice our concerns. If the pressure gets too much, we can end it."

Not if I can help it, I silently promise. Once I have Faith in my arms, I'll do everything possible to keep her there.

Faith sighs gustily, but gives me a tiny smile.

"How do you make it all sound so easy?" she asks with a wry smile. "It's not that simple."

"Why isn't it?" I ask.

This is so much like the conversation we had at dinner, repeating the same thing over and over again. At dinner, I knew I was losing before she even opened her mouth to tell me she didn't think it would work.

Now, though, it doesn't feel that way. I can almost feel her reluctantly thinking about what I'm saying.

"I don't know," she says after a moment. Still not a complete refusal.

"Do you want to be with me?" I ask.

She grimaces slightly.

"Yes," she says. "And you want to be with me."

"Yes, I do," I say with a nod. "So why don't we start with *that* and deal with the rest as it comes along? We can't see the future. Panicking about something that might not even happen is pointless. Right now, the only real thing here is the feelings we have for each other."

She leans toward me slightly, her eyes widening a little, caught by my words.

I watch with bated breath as expressions flicker across her face. That was the last weapon I had in my repertoire. If she says no now, my only option will be to pack it in and watch for another opportunity later.

"I must be a fool..." Faith finally sighs. "All right. Let's give it a go."

My heart soars.

Before I can stop myself, I cup her lips and kiss her. That's what I wanted to hear. I won't make her regret it.

I swear it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Faith

The morning starts quietly.

Jace gets up first, stirring me to wakefulness. I watch him silently for a moment, wondering what he will do. I'm gratified when he turns around, his arm stretched out, obviously intending to shake me awake. It tells me that he had no plans to simply leave without telling me, which would have made everything very awkward.

"You're awake," Jace says, pulling his hand back.

"Just now," I say. "Do you need to go?"

"Yeah, I still have lots of work," Jace says with a grimace. "There won't be any days off for me for a long time."

Now that Jace is running two companies, one of which needs to be basically repaired from the ground up, it doesn't surprise me that he has a lot to do.

I sit up with a yawn, gathering the sheets around my naked body, and watch him as he searches for his clothes, regrettably covering his bare skin. As he fastens his belt, he glances at me.

"Do you have any plans for the day?" he asks.

"Not much," I say. "I'm meeting a friend later."

He shoots me a quick smile.

"That sounds nice," he comments. He sits on the bed to pull on his shoes and then stands again with a jaw cracking yawn. "I better head off."

"All right," I say.

I'm not sure what to say or do right now. Yes, Jace and I agreed to give a secret relationship a try, both of us very aware of the attraction that exists between us. But where do we go from here? Do I treat Jace like my boyfriend or like my boss right now? It's hard to think, too, with the way my body is aching, reminding me strongly of our activities the night before.

Jace, thankfully, solves the problem. He steps around to my side of the bed with a small, warm smile, and presses a gentle kiss to my lips. It's soft and makes my heart flutter.

"I'll talk to you soon," he promises.

Then he's gone before I can react. Stunned, I press a finger to my lips. I can still feel the tingle from the light touch of his mouth on mine.

The care and happiness in his eyes every time he looks at me makes something pleasant and warm wriggle in my stomach, but it's hard to get too excited about the latest development in my life. Despite what I feel for Jace, despite how good I know we can be together, him being my boss is a mountain I'm not entirely sure I'll be able to climb.

Frustrated, both at myself and the entire situation, I slip out of bed and find a robe. Thinking about any of this isn't getting me anywhere. I need a shower, and then I need to get out of my apartment before I drive myself crazy with my own thoughts.

* * *

"Faith!"

I turn at the sound of the voice calling my name and feel a wide smile spread across my lips at the sight of the short, frizzy-haired woman bustling her way toward me. She ducks around a crowd of shoppers with a bright red handbag swinging from her arm.

"Louise," I reply as she gets closer.

Louise beams at me and throws her arms around me. Having already expected the exuberant hug, I squeeze her back with a laugh and step back.

"Gosh, it's been too long!" Louise says loudly. "How have you been?"

"A little stressed with a lot of changes at once, but pretty good otherwise," I admit. "How was your trip to Italy?"

I haven't seen Louise in three months due to a vacation that she and her fiancé took in Italy not long after their engagement. I got regular updates from Louise on the trip and tried my best not to inundate her with my complaints about work, but it wasn't the same as getting to see her once every few days.

Italy seems to have been good for her though. Her skin is lightly golden from the sun and there's a healthy flush in her cheeks. It makes me feel a little jealous. I could use a vacation soon, too.

"It was amazing," Louise says dreamily. "One day, I will definitely take you over there."

"I'll look forward to it," I laugh. "Let's head in and grab some coffee."

Normally, Louise and I meet at my favorite coffee shop. Today, however, it's closed due to the owners having a family occasion, and we were forced to come to the nearby mall. It's a lot busier than the little coffee shop we normally prefer, but we find a table in the corner after ordering our drinks.

"So," Louise says as she settles in. "Tell me about Jace."

Startled, I try to remember when I told Louise about Jace. It dawns on me that I sent Louise a message when I met Jace the first time, telling her about the sale of the company and meeting a hot stranger who gave me his number while I

was getting coffee. I have yet to tell her the other things I've discovered since.

"Right," I cough. "Jace."

"Have you seen him again?" Louise asks eagerly.

Abruptly, an image of his naked body hovering over mine forces itself into my mind, and I flush. Louise watches the red spreading across my cheeks and grins wickedly.

"No way!" she exclaims, delighted. "Seriously?"

"Well... he took me out to dinner last night, and then one thing led to another..." I say, running a hand through my hair.

"And you'll see him again?" Louise asks. "It's not just a one-night stand?"

"Yes... I will," I say with a sigh.

Louise pauses and eyes me. No doubt her excitement has dulled enough for her to realize that something isn't quite right about all this.

"Faith?" Louise asks. "Is everything okay?"

"Not really," I say. I shouldn't be so gloomy. Jace and I are giving our relationship a go, Louise is back from vacation, and I still have my job. There's no reason to be unhappy. "Remember I told you that Miller decided to sell Amity Greens?"

"No," Louise says, hushed, paling. "You lost your job?"

Of course, that's the worst thing she could think of. I can't blame her; I thought I was going to lose my job, too.

"Actually, I got a small promotion," I tell her. "When the new owner is away at his other company, I'll be the one in-charge of Amity Greens."

"Okay..." Louise says, looking thoroughly confused. "What's the problem, then?"

"The *problem* is that *Jace* is the new owner," I reply. "My new boss."

I watch as she stares at me, still puzzled. Then, slowly, comprehension dawns. Shock hits her first, followed by understanding.

"Well," she says bluntly. "That's shit."

"Tell me about it," I groan. "To make matters worse, Jace really wants a relationship with me despite that. He took me to dinner last night to try and show me that we could still manage it. He thinks a secret relationship is the way to go..."

"Hold up," Louise says abruptly.

I pause and stare at her, unsure why she's looking at me so incredulously. She opens her mouth to say something but, before she can, a server approaches with our drinks. We accept them with murmured thanks and Louise waits until she's gone before fixing a hard look on me.

"Are you telling me you slept with him *after* you found out he was your boss?" she asks.

I flinch. It sounds so much worse when she says it.

"It sort of just... happened," I say lamely.

"Right," Louise says, rolling her eyes. "So, what are you so upset about? He obviously doesn't care, and you obviously want him. What's the problem?"

“The problem is what people will think about it,” I say with a huff. “Look, I was Miller’s PA, right? Yet, somehow, I’ve managed to keep my job and moreover got kinda promoted as well. Ideally, Jace doesn’t need *two* personal assistants, but he’s kept me on anyway. When I asked him, he said it was because I was good that he kept me, not because he thought I was attractive, but I’m still not sure how much of that to believe...”

I shake my head. I’m getting off-topic.

“If it comes out that I’m dating Jace, everyone will wonder if the only reason I kept my job and got promoted was because I fucked him,” I say bluntly. “I don’t want that sort of stigma. I’m *good* at what I do. I don’t want people wondering if I’m just an idiot who got lucky.”

“It seems to me that you’re caring too much about what other people think,” Louise says with a shrug. “As far as I’m concerned, if you like Jace, then go for it, and fuck everyone else. They don’t know your life. If they want to spread nasty rumors, let them. You know the truth.”

“But it could end up affecting my future,” I sigh. “What if I decide to leave Amity Greens and other companies hear the rumors, coloring their opinion of me?”

“Faith, you didn’t leave Amity Greens when it was sinking so fast in the red that you almost didn’t get paid some weeks,” Louise says with a deadpan. “I don’t think there’s *anything* that can make you leave that company now.”

She isn’t wrong. I stuck with Amity Greens through all the shit Miller threw at us, determined to keep the company running.

I glance at Louise. I know she’s burning to ask me why I put up with so much for a failing company, but I still don’t have an answer for her. Yet seeing how hard my other colleagues, who wouldn’t have had the same opportunities as I would if they were forced to leave their jobs, struggling so hard... there’s no way I could have abandoned them.

If I had left, Amity Greens would have fallen, and all my work friends, who had little prospects and no other job to jump to, would have suffered.

As I think about those friends, though, it occurs to me abruptly that *they* wouldn’t ascribe to any nasty rumors about me. They, more than anyone, knew how hard I worked and what I sacrificed for this company. They know that I’ve more than earned my position just as they’ve earned theirs.

So, do random naysayers really matter, in the end? Why should I care about the opinions of stupid strangers? Louise isn’t wrong; I do want Jace. He’s nice, clever and good-looking, and he wants me in return. I do want to see where a relationship with him goes. In fact, he’s the type of man that I can see myself together with for a long time.

“You’re right,” I say after a long moment. “About it all. I just can’t help but worry about it. It isn’t just my reputation on the line, either.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Louise says, taking a sip of her coffee. “But Jace has decided to put it all on the line anyway because he wants to be with you. Don’t you owe it to him to do the same, if you really do want him? It isn’t fair to him

to half-ass it because you want to dither about being unsure if you want to risk your reputation.”

Louise’s words are harsh, but they’re just what I need to hear right now, I realize. If I want to have a relationship with Jace, then what am I hesitating for? Yes, he’s my boss.

But before he was my boss, he was just a man that I liked and could see myself being with him for life.

Right then and there, I make a decision.

I’ll leave the status quo as it is right now. We’ll keep our relationship a secret while we both try to figure out what we want and whether or not this is going to work, away from the prying eyes of the media and everyone around us.

Then, if it turns out this is really what I want, we can discuss moving forward.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Jace

Three days later, I'm still happier than ever.

It isn't perfect, I know. Faith doesn't want to fully commit to a relationship right now, especially while we're keeping it a secret. She wants us to get to know each other better before we consider taking that step. I like that idea as well.

Later, when I thought it through more deeply, I realized what a good idea it was to be sure about one another first. Me, because I don't know whether Faith *will* end up being like the other gold diggers who have tried to catch my attention in the past, and Faith because she wants to know if a relationship with me will be worth the harassment that will come her way if it goes public.

As such, our relationship, right now, is casual. Quick kisses when we can get away with it during times where there are no prying eyes, messages every now and then to check in, and an understanding between us that is just as strong as the bond of attraction that first connected us.

It's definitely not all that I want. I want to date Faith publicly and tell the entire world that I found an extraordinary, brilliant woman to care for. I want to bring her the flowers, take her to nice restaurants, and kiss her whenever I want.

But I can't do that right now. It isn't enough, but it's okay for now while we work things out. After all, for a while there, I didn't think I would even get *this* much. Her worry over what other people will think is both understandable and incredibly frustrating. Yet, there's no way around it at this stage, not until the day our feelings for one another are stronger than the fear, or we break up with no one else the wiser.

I know what outcome I'm rooting for.

My office door opens and I look up as Faith steps inside, carrying a small stack of papers. She dumps it all on her desk in the corner.

"Anything interesting?" I ask, eyeing the papers wearily. They'll all find their way to me, eventually.

"Just this one," Faith says, taking a few sheets off the top. "I think it has to do with the new building you've been looking into."

I sit up straight and take the papers. I'd started negotiations for this building before I fully took over Amity Greens, well aware that this company needed a new, larger area to work within.

"It's the result of the inspection I had done on the place," I explain when Faith looks at me curiously. "Looks like it's mostly in good condition."

"Yeah?" Faith asks, rounding the desk to look over my shoulder. I catch a whiff of her floral perfume and force myself to be still. "Any major problems?"

"It looks like there's a leak in the roof and some water damage," I say, looking through the document. "One of the walls is also structurally unsound due to a shoddy repair job, and the water system needs to be replaced. Everything else is minor, but can be fixed quickly."

"Those three things are pretty big fixes, though," Faith says with a frown. "Is it worth it?"

"I think so," I say with a nod. "I now have ammo to go back to the owners and make a counter offer because of the damages that I'm going to have to fix. If the owners accept the offer, then we can begin proceedings to the settlement."

"What if they don't agree?" Faith asks.

"Then one of the two things happen," I reply with a grin. "I demand that they make the repairs themselves and lay out the costs, which will cost them far more than what they'll lose with my offer, or they decide to reject my offer and I walk away, leaving them with little hope of selling a building that has already been on the market for months due to its need for a very specific buyer."

It takes Faith a moment to understand what I'm actually saying. Her eyes widened.

"One way or another, they'll have no choice but to accept your offer," she breathes. "It will just take a bit longer."

"Exactly," I say with a nod. "That's just how business is played. I didn't get to where I am now by backing down because of blustering fools."

Faith giggles.

"Well, here's hoping we'll have a new building soon," she says, stepping away. "There's not much we can do until we have a larger space."

"I know," I assure her. "I'm certainly not going to recruit until we have somewhere to put everyone."

"Speaking of recruitment, everyone has settled into the management roles for their new department," Faith says, steering the conversation away. "Having one person in each department isn't new, because that's how we've worked for ages, but everyone struggled a little with the assignment."

"I can imagine it was a little different," I admit. "How did it go?"

"Everyone is done," Faith says with a warm smile, picking up a manila folder. "And they're all very excited."

I take the folder with a grin, glad to hear it. I asked each of my new management staff to come up with a job description for each department.

Since we'll be needing a lot of new staff in many diverse roles, it will mean doing an advertisement for each department. After all, the finance department

will have different responsibilities from the marketing division.

Wanting to know what my new employees thought, I tasked them with the responsibility of coming up with a rough description of their individual jobs. It seems they've all managed to rise to the occasion.

"Thanks for organizing that," I say to Faith. "How is everyone doing so far?"

"They aren't as worried anymore about getting fired," Faith says dryly. "They're mostly concerned with what direction you'll take the company. We've been working on our own with subpar management for so long that it's going to feel weird to have someone tell us what to do."

"Then take this back to them," I say, leaning forward with a serious expression, making Faith blink. "I have no intention of micro-managing this company. The fact that you all pulled through under Miller's direction is enough to tell me that every person still here doesn't need me to be watching over their shoulders. What I want is direction from *you*."

I wave a hand around, gesturing to the entire building. "Where do all of you foresee this company going? What plans have you all discussed and even outlined? What are the ways to implement them? I want to know. I want everyone's input. You all know Amity Greens far better than I do, and I don't want to step on anyone's toes."

Faith stares at me. There's a stunned look on her face that slowly transforms to shimmery gratitude.

Before I can react or ask her if she's okay, she swoops toward me and presses a hard kiss to my lips. It's brief, but I can still feel the pressure of the touch long after she pulls away.

"What was that for?" I ask, puzzled.

"I felt like it," Faith says with a coy smile. "I'll leave these descriptions here and go tell the others what you said. I'll try and get everyone to write up some notes that we can go through later and make into a succinct business plan."

"Great," I say, pleased. "Thanks, Faith."

"Thank you," Faith returns.

Then she's gone, disappearing through the door.

I can't help the silly smile that slowly spreads across my face. If that's Faith's reaction when I say something like that, then I'll make sure to continue paying extreme consideration to the old employees' feelings.

Not, I remind myself, that I was intending on doing anything less even without Faith added to the mix.

I pick up Faith's folder and flick through it. Each employee has jotted down some notes about what they think of their job. What catches my attention, however, are the first pages. Someone has meticulously written up a summary of each description for easy perusal.

Faith... it had to be Faith. She's so used to managing everyone that she likely just did it on autopilot. It definitely makes my life a lot easier, at this moment, but I'll have to sit and talk to her about it.

As much as she probably wants to help the others (and, I suspect, helping

them is the only reason she's still with Amity Greens), she needs to allow them to stand on their own two feet if they're to succeed at the management roles I've given them. I'll also talk to the rest of the employees about not relying on Faith so much.

It's going to be scary for all of them, I know. A lot is change for them in a short space of time, and that's going to be very hard to handle. But I've been watching these people for some time now. The employees at this company and their work ethic are entirely the reason why I decided to buy Amity Greens to start with. With a little bit of hard work, I know we can all achieve our best.

However, I can't say that I'm really looking forward to telling Faith that she *can't* mother hen the other employees anymore.

I sigh. The circumstances in which Faith became obsessively protective over her work friends were definitely not great. It would undoubtedly be hard for her to adjust to her new role without that.

But I know she can do it.

I've only known Faith for less than a week now. It doesn't seem that long, not really, but I can't imagine life without Faith in it anymore. She's intelligent, beautiful, loving, and just amazing.

With enough time, she's the woman I know I could fall in love with: the one I'll want to with, forever. It feels too soon to say that, and I'm certainly not going to vocalize that thought to Faith when she's still sticking to a casual relationship, but I know it's true. With Faith, regardless of what happens between us, I'm definitely in for the long haul.

It's just hard to believe, sometimes, that things have just fallen into place so perfectly. For Finest Pantry, I had to scrimp and save, and there were times when I didn't think I would succeed. When it took off, I was the one most surprised. After all my struggles to get to that point, I deserved the success, but it was almost impossible to believe that I had actually managed it.

Yet Amity Greens has just fallen into my lap. I got it at a good price because Miller wanted to be rid of it. I've gotten amazing employees out of the deal, and a tiny supermarket with a host of loyal shoppers which will jettison my own earnings into an entirely new field of supermarkets if I can manage this right.

On top of that, I've met the most amazing woman in the world, and she wants to be with me, too.

I lean back in my chair. Everything just feels too good to be true, if I'm honest with myself, but does that really matter? I definitely shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth! I have my successes and I have Faith, and that's all that I should be focusing on right now.

The world, it seems, is finally rewarding me for how hard it was to amass my fortune and start my business in the beginning, back when no one believed in me and I was so close to being homeless. I should just sit back, relax, and enjoy life for once.

Because right now, everything is just perfect.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Jace

When I see Faith next, wandering toward the coffee machine with her cup, an idea occurs to me. One of the things Faith stressed about was not getting enough time to have an actual relationship if we were always just focused entirely on keeping the secret, right?

So, if this is going to work, I need to prove that we can still make a relationship work, and work well, under the current circumstances. That, I decide as I get up and stride toward her, is going to be my main concern at this point.

“Hey,” I say, catching her attention.

“Hi,” she says with a smile. “Did you want a coffee?”

“Definitely,” I laugh. “Do you want to go to dinner tonight?”

Faith blinks, startled at the sudden invitation.

“Sure?” she says, then shakes her head. “Sorry, yeah, I’d love to. What brought that on?”

“I just want to spend time with you,” I say.

Faith stares at me for a moment and then she beams, her beautiful smile spreading across her face.

“Sounds good,” she says.

I smile as well and turn away. It’s good to know that everything is going right.

* * *

At six-thirty, I show up at Faith’s door. I barely knock twice before she opens it, smiling at me. I told her just to dress comfortably tonight, and she’s followed my instructions by wearing some jeans and a pullover pink blouse. The look suits her. I can’t help but run my eyes over her body for a moment, appreciating the way the clothes hugged her curves.

“Ready to go?” I ask her, dragging my eyes up.

“Yeah,” she says, grabbing her bag. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise,” I say with a wink.

After inviting Faith on the date, it left me with the problem of actually figuring out where to take her. She had enjoyed the burger place I took her to, so I don’t want to ruin the fun, casual air surrounding us by taking her somewhere fancy.

Then I hit on the perfect idea.

As we drive, I glance continuously at Faith, not wanting to miss her reaction. We don’t have to go far, and I’m treated to the way her eyes open impossibly wide as we reach a set of tall, intricate gates that we drive straight through. As we head down the long driveway, heading for a large, magnificent mansion sitting behind a fountain, Faith turns to me.

“You said to dress casually!” she says, part hysteria and accusation in her voice. “I’m not dressed for a place like this!”

“You are,” I say as I park in front of the door. “This is my home.”

Faith snaps her mouth closed, shocked. I smile at her. While I know that my home is probably a little overwhelming to her right now, and possibly even a stark reminder of the fact that I am also a billionaire who owns two companies, I know that this is the best option.

I want Faith to see where I live, and I want to give her a casual, intimate experience. What better date to have than a home-cooked meal at my place?

“Why did you bring me to your place?” Faith asks with a confused expression as she gets out of the car.

“I wanted to show you where I live,” I say. “And I wanted to cook for you.”

Faith trails after me as we enter the house, looking everywhere with wonder. It’s massive, I can see that. That said, I decorated it modestly, having never been a fan of the overdone exteriors that I’ve seen in other mansions, but the size alone is likely a shock to her.

“Do you want dinner or a tour?” I ask.

“Uh... dinner,” Faith says, looking overwhelmed.

I guide her to the kitchen. I had moved my large dining table and set up a much smaller table for the two of us, decorated simply with a blue tablecloth and floral centerpiece. On the stove, vegetables, gravy, and pork simmer, waiting for me to return.

Faith sniffs appreciatively, finally losing some of her shock.

“That smells good,” she says. “For some reason, it surprises me that you can cook.”

“When you think of rich people, you think they have people to cook for them,” I laugh. “I used to think the same. I get people to help me with housework and gardening, but I cook for myself. I enjoy cooking.”

“I don’t,” Faith says ruefully as I lead her to the table. “I’m a horrible cook.”

I laugh.

“Don’t worry, in that case I’ll just cook for both of us,” I say warmly.

I pull the chair out for her and then head to the kitchen. It doesn’t take me long to arrange the plates, and I bring them over with a bottle of wine tucked

under my arm.

I fully intend for this to be an amazing night. I want to show Faith that my riches don't matter; I can still give her a warm, intimate experience and give her the boyfriend that she wants.

From the way her expression relaxes and she grins at me, I think she's gotten the message.

"This is really nice," Faith says, picking up a forkful of food and biting into it. Her eyes widen as she quickly swallows it down. "This is amazing!"

"Yeah?" I ask, pleased. It isn't often that I cook for others. "That's good to hear."

"As if you don't know how good it is," Faith says with a laugh.

"I do," I admit. "But it's always good to hear it from others, too."

Faith laughs again, digging her fork back into the food. As I watch her, I feel warm and happy. If I could have this all the time, I would. Having Faith around, in my life and in my home, makes everything else I've done feel worth it just for the chance of meeting her.

I'll do anything possible to keep this peace that I feel right now.

* * *

As the night gets late, and Faith begins to giggle more often due to the several glasses of wine we've shared, we retreat to the living room. Faith gushes over my massive television, which is set on brackets in the wall, and sinks into my comfortable lounge couch with a moan.

"I could just stay here forever," she sighs.

I shut my mouth before I say the first words that come to mind, which are "*why don't you?*" In the spirit of keeping our relationship casual for the time being, saying something like that would only make things tense.

I mean it, though. The thought of her staying here, in my house, forever, is incredibly desirable. I sit down beside her, my arm brushes against her. Yes, I could see myself being with her forever.

The thought should be more startling than it actually is, but I'm relaxed from the wine and tipsy on the pleasure of being in Faith's company. She turns to look at me with a smile, and there's no more that I can resist her now. I lean in and kiss her.

She responds immediately, almost as though she was waiting for me to make the first move this time. Her lips move against mine and her arms wind around the back of my neck as she pulls her body closer to mine, ankles tangling with mine.

I bury my hands in her short hair, rubbing the strands through my fingertips as the kiss deepens, our tongues battling and our bodies thrumming with pleasure.

Before it goes too far, though, I pull back, my heart beating wildly and breath

catching. I can't forget that it wasn't that long ago that Faith had sex for the first time, nor can I forget how sore she was in the aftermath, despite how careful I had been.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Faith smiles and leans into me, her chest pressing against mine.

"Perfect," she purrs. "Don't stop on me now, Jace. I want to feel you again."

Her words set me on fire. I kiss her again, this time fiercely, and she writhes beneath me, making my cock harden at her touch and movements.

She pulls back from my lips and slowly kisses down to my jawline, one of her hands drifting down my chest in a gentle trail that makes me shiver. Her fingertips dance across my clothed skin until she reaches between my legs and gently cups my cock. I gasp sharply and she looks up with a mischievous grin, leaning up to move her mouth near my ear.

"I might have been a virgin, but I'm not completely inexperienced," she murmurs.

The embers that had flared to life within me suddenly blazed into a raging inferno. Faith's hand strokes me lightly and my hips buck, needing more pressure. She uses her other hand on my shoulder as a leverage to pull herself up, her grip on my cock becoming tighter.

"Fuck, yes, keep going," I groan.

"Maybe," she purrs. "But wouldn't this feel so much better without all these clothes getting in the way?"

I raise my hands immediately to the hem of my shirt, but she nudges them away.

"Let me," she says.

She removes her hand from my cock and my body relaxes slightly, despite the now throbbing heat in my pants. I pant as her hands drift to the hem and she drags it up, scraping her nails over my bare stomach as she does so. Her fingers slide up my sides as she drags my shirt up and over my head, tossing it over my shoulder.

Then she slides off the couch and moves in between my legs, pushing my knees apart. I watch her, my breath catching in my throat, as she reaches out and unzips my jeans, tugging the hem down slightly as I lift my hips. She drags my boxers down and my hard, leaking cock springs free, standing tall and desperate.

"Now who's needy?" she teases.

She drags a fingernail down my member and my hips buck up.

"Fuck!" I gasp.

"Not yet," she says.

She licks her lips and leans forward. For a moment, I'm not sure what she is going to do next. Then she opens her mouth and wraps her lips around the tip of my cock.

I stop breathing for a beat, the overwhelming sensation of her mouth on me making my heart thump. She hums around it, sending vibrations traveling all the way down as she slowly takes more of it into her mouth, sliding her tongue

around as she does. Then, she sucks and my whole world goes white.

“Fuck, that feels good,” I groan, my head falling backward, my hands burying themselves in her hair for an anchor.

She makes another sound and I groan at the sensation as she sucks again, lapping and licking all around my cock like it’s a piece of candy. I’m boneless and helpless to do anything.

But I know I don’t want it to end this way. Like before, I want to show Faith everything pleasurable about sex, and I definitely want to make sure I can touch her in return tonight. I feel my cock pulsing and I know I need to stop this before I burst.

I summon every bit of self-control I have to put my hands on Faith’s shoulders and gently push her back.

She looks up and smiles, her lips red and moist. I’m almost prepared to orgasm just at the sight.

“No more,” I say hoarsely. “I want to be in you.”

I pull her up, standing as well, and drop her down onto the couch, bracing myself over her as I kick my jeans and boxers off.

“Good,” Faith says, looking up at me, her eyes intense. “Fuck me now.”

There’s no way I can resist.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Faith

I've had boyfriends in the past, of course. Boyfriends that I did many things with, despite never crossing that final line. I know how to pleasure a man and get pleasure in return.

But sucking Jace's cock was an experience, all on its own. Having it in my mouth, knowing that it would soon be plunging into me, made something within me wriggle wildly, driving the whole thing to untold heights of anticipation and lust. I want Jace more than ever, and as I sit on the couch, his arms braced on either side of my head, all I want is for him to touch me even more.

I want him to fuck me. Last time was amazing beyond any expectation that I ever had. The feeling of being that connected to another person, or rather, to Jace, made my desire soar so far up that it was hard to breathe. For days afterward, I could still feel the way he moved in and out of me and part of me had longed for it once more.

Unfortunately, it took a few days to recover. I was more sore than I expected. And, in the days after, I started to think more about it. At the time, everything was crashing over me, and I could do little other than go along for the ride. But now I have set my expectation and I was determined to show that to Jace when I got the chance.

That chance has come tonight. We're both tipsy on wine, having warm feelings for one another. I'm sitting in his home, on a comfortable couch, after he cooked an amazing dinner for me, and I honestly don't want to leave any time soon. I can't help but feel that this is where I belong.

But for now, I'm not interested in serious thoughts like that. I just want to feel Jace and know that he's with me. I can still taste his cock on my tongue, and I lick my swollen lips as I look up at him.

"Are you just going to stand there?" I ask. "Or are you going to fuck me?"

Jace grins, his eyes dark with a deep lust that makes me shiver in need.

"First you need to get these clothes off," he says.

He reaches for the hem of my shirt and drags it over my head, musing my hair. His movements are much more jerky and rough compared to mine, and I

can't help but appreciate it. Last time, Jace treated me like some fragile glass. Tonight, I need more than that.

After the blouse is gone, I undo my pants and shimmy out of them, kicking them somewhere in the vicinity of a nearby armchair. I'm left in only my panties and bra, but Jace stops me before I reach for them.

"Let me," he says in a low voice.

I watch with bated breath as he leans forward to place his hands on the lace hem of my panties. He slides the tip of his finger under the elastic band. He isn't touching me much, but it's suddenly so very intimate.

My body tenses as his fingers crawl deeper under the material. I lean back into the couch cushions, my legs spreading to give him better access, and Jace looms over me, expression intent as he looks me over.

It makes me feel vulnerable. But, at the same time, the desire in his eyes makes me feel sexy and wanted.

"What do you want, Jace?" I ask, the words falling out of my mouth before I can stop them, unable to help repeating the question he asked me the first time we had sex.

Jace's eyes meet mine.

"You," he says simply.

Then he moves, pulling my panties down and throwing them aside so he can step between my legs. He reaches behind me, making my back arch, and deftly unclips my bra, tearing that away as well.

Then his hand is on my breast, kneading the soft skin and pinching the nipples to hardness, making me writhe under his touch and gasp as each part of me thrums with pleasure.

"Stop teasing," I moan.

"Why?" Jace asks. "This is how you teased me."

I'm starting to regret that now. This pleasurable torture is almost too much. I'm so busy focusing on the way his hand moves that I miss the way he's lining up against me. I feel the tip of his leaking cock rub against me and then, suddenly, it's sinking slowly into me, making me gasp sharply.

Fuck, this is what I was waiting for. I can feel his hot, throbbing cock within me, pulsing against my inner walls. My hips buck toward him, begging him to move in further, and he obeys without question, sinking further into me until he's fully immersed.

I want him to take me this. To plunge into me hard and fast enough that I can feel him. I still need to get used to this. Maybe later we can, after we've done this a few more times, when I'm less likely to get hurt.

For now, I'll do it Jace's way and take it slow.

Then Jace starts to move, and all thoughts of frustration over the slow pace flee in favor of my mind focusing completely and totally on his cock moving in me. The ridges of his cock drag against me, allowing me to feel every bump and inch of him.

"Fuck, shit, more, keep going," I pant as he thrusts in again.

“You feel so good around my cock,” Jace groans as he begins to pull back out.

My hands are on his shoulder, gripping tightly, and I’m half-sitting against the lounge as Jace leans over me. We’re both sweating, a blazing heat swirling around us that makes it hard to breathe.

Needing something more to occupy me, I latch my mouth around his bare shoulder, nipping at the skin and soothing it over with my tongue. Jace jerks and groans, and I moan as his cock seems to go even deeper inside me, my eyes rolling back.

“Again, do it again!” I moan.

Jace’s next thrust is harder, as though he can’t control himself anymore, and it sets the pace as he picks up a little speed. I hold on and writhe beneath him, trying clumsily to meet each of his thrusts so that I can feel him so deeply that I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to get him out. Right now, I don’t *want* him anywhere else other than inside me.

Yet, I can already feel my orgasm creeping up on me, sliding over me like small crests of the tide right before a large wave comes crashing down. I hold on as much as I can, wanting to prolong this for as long as possible, wanting to ride this pleasure forever.

Without warning, it crashes over me, and my vision blacks out as my body jerks and shakes with a cry. I feel Jace still moving, chasing his orgasm as my body clenches around him. Then he shouts out, trembling as he plunges deep into me, cock shuddering.

When it’s over, he pulls out of me. I collapse sideways onto the couch and Jace crashes down beside me, making me glad that the couch is so large. His arm is trapped beneath me, but he doesn’t seem to care about extricating it right now.

I’m not going to move it either, because the contact gives me some anchor to the real world, stopping me from floating far away with the pleasure still rushing through my body.

After a moment, however, everything calms. I can feel his skin on mine, as well as the way my heart races in my chest and my breath stutters in my lungs. I keep my eyes closed, trying to calm myself.

When I finally manage to do so, I relax and open my eyes, looking up at the ceiling and appreciating just how comfortable I am right now. I’m more than happy just to curl up here on the couch, content and sated.

My body aches, but not as badly as last time, and it’s just a reminder of the moments when I wasn’t sure where I ended and Jace began. I want to just curl up on this couch with him and stay here forever. Yet, I also know that my body won’t thank me for doing that.

I feel Jace moving beside me and I blink up at him as he runs a hand through his already mussed hair.

“Bed?” he asks with a yawn.

Another wave of tiredness crashes through me.

“Bed,” I agree.

I'd love to see the rest of his house, but I don't think I'll be paying much attention to the décor as we stumble our way to the bedroom. Perhaps tomorrow, after we've both rested and recovered.

It doesn't matter. After all, we have all the time in the world.

Jace helps me up and I lean against his shoulder for a moment, relishing the contact with his warm skin. Being near him makes me feel safe and happy. I close my eyes briefly with a smile.

We're going to be okay, I decide. I'm still not sure what the future will bring. But, for now, everything is perfect.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Faith

I whistle softly to myself as I walk up the stairs to the office, barely even caring about the creaky railing as I normally do. I'm on top of the world, and the dilapidated building around me certainly isn't going to take that away.

I just can't stop smiling. My body aches, of course, but the sensation is also a pleasant reminder of Jace and how careful he was again last night. Every time I think of the date, his house, and the way he kissed me... I beam stupidly at the wall. I can't help it.

I'm so incredibly happy.

Still whistling as I enter the office, I turn to make a beeline for my desk. My last note, however, falls flat as I pause in surprise at seeing another woman sitting in front of my desk. She looks up as I enter.

The woman is incredibly beautiful, I note first. Her straight blonde hair has been coiled into an intricate twist at the nape of her neck while her clothes look like they're worth more than my entire salary. Her bright red lipstick immediately draws my attention as do the diamonds sparkling on her ears and on her fingers.

The woman screams money, making it odd to see her in our dingy little office. I know, logically, that Jace is a billionaire, but he's never had that appearance like this woman does.

"Hello," I say, glancing from the woman to Jace who sits at his desk.

"Hello," the woman says. Her voice is haughty and, when she stands, her nose lifts ever so slightly. "You must be Faith Kelly. Jace informed me that you would be here soon. You're his PA?"

"That's right," I say with another glance at Jace. He's watching the two of us. "Sorry, I don't think I know who you are."

"Unsurprisingly," the woman says, uncaring. "My name is Corina Rochelle."

I might not always be up to date with news and gossip, but even *I* know that name after seeing it splashed across tabloids for months around the middle of last year. I turn a shocked gaze on Jace.

What the hell is one of his ex-girlfriends doing here?

“Sorry, Faith, I would have let you know, but things happened very quickly this morning,” Jace says with a small grimace. “As you might have guessed, Corina and I were together for some time.”

Two years, if the media is to be believed. Jace was supposedly seen asking a jeweler about rings toward the end. I feel numb, especially standing next to this woman who is so much more beautiful than I am. I immediately feel foolish in my business skirt and with my short hair.

“Yes... I think I heard about it,” I hear myself say, as though from very far away.

I’m not sure what I should say. Has Jace told Corina that we’re together? I can’t imagine he would have, if only for the simple reason that *I* asked for it to remain a secret. Funny how I’m suddenly regretting that decision greatly.

“I know it probably seems strange, but don’t listen to the magazines,” Jace is saying. “Corina and I parted mutually. We didn’t feel like we had anything in common anymore, so we broke up and remained friends.”

“Distant friends,” Corina says with a laugh. I’m not certain whether or not it’s just the jealousy talking, but her laughter sounds like the tinkle of bells ringing. “We mostly discuss things over email these days.”

“Which is how Corina ended up here,” Jace explains, picking up the story effortlessly. Their dialogue flows smoothly, the result of a long acquaintance. “She told me she’d fallen on some hard times, and I asked for more details. One thing led to another and... well, she’s working here now.”

I’m not sure if I just heard that right.

“Here?” I ask blankly.

“In the company,” Jace reiterates. “Not the office. Corina has some receptionist experience, so I’ve decided to hire her since Amity Greens doesn’t have an official receptionist yet. Corina will field the phone calls and take notes, which will free the rest of us up to work on the company policies.

“I see,” I say.

Except I don’t understand it. Jace is a billionaire. Surely he knows many, many people. Why the fuck couldn’t he get Corina a job with any of them rather than hiring his ex-girlfriend to work at *our* company?

I force myself to stay calm. I’m reading far too much into this. Corina and Jace broke up over a year ago, and it doesn’t sound like Jace is trying to use this as an opportunity to get back together. I also doubt (or, at least, I hope) that Jace is the kind of man to discuss a relationship with me one day, and then try to get back together with his ex the next day.

Though, it’s moments like these that remind me of just how little I know about Jace. As far as I knew, Jace and Corina went through a bitter breakup that was settled out of the eyes of the media, prompting more and more ridiculous ideas about what was happening.

When it was all over, Jace refused to offer any statements beyond confirmation of their separation, and Corina had gone underground to avoid reporters until the storm had died down. I thought I *knew* how the story went

between them.

Though, in retrospect, thinking of all the stories that were mostly rumors more than anything... I probably shouldn't have been so certain.

I straighten my shoulders. Regardless of what Corina used to be to Jace, I can't let petty jealousy get in the way. For all that she looks like a pretty makeup doll, I don't doubt Jace when he says that she's fallen on some hard times. And he's obviously introduced Corina to me in the hopes that I will take her under my wing and show her around.

"I'm sorry to hear about your circumstances," I say to Corina with a small smile. "I hope you enjoy working with us here. If you have any questions at all, please don't hesitate to ask. We're all here to help."

Corina's face softened a little.

"That's very kind of you," she says.

"When do you start?" I ask, glancing at Jace to include him in that question as well.

"We were just discussing it," Jace jumps in. "We're thinking in two days. That will give Corina time to settle into her new apartment, and us time to get her a space cleared."

"Sounds good," I say, thinking. "There's an unused office near the entrance. We could clear that out and give it to you, Corina, so that you have your own space."

"That sounds lovely," Corina says, her shoulders relaxing.

I glance at the dolled-up woman and wonder whether she's ever had a job like this before. Before I can stop it, my mouth moves again.

"The place is pretty filthy, though we'll do our best to clean up," I say to her. "It's probably a good idea not to wear such fine clothes when you start."

Corina stares at me, shocked. Almost immediately, I regret saying it. I wasn't trying to be mean, just practical, but I have the feeling that I've made a terrible mistake.

Then Jace bursts out laughing.

"I told you she'd say the same thing!" he crows.

"Yes, well..." Corina sniffs. "I'll dress appropriately."

I'm relieved. That could have gone far worse.

"Corina, do you want to head down to the break room?" Jace asks with a smile. "We can finalize everything down there. I've just got some information to give to Faith first."

"Very well," Corina says, making for the stairs.

We watch her go and then Jace turns to me, catching my hands and pressing a gentle kiss to my knuckles.

"You are amazing," he says fervently.

I blush.

"Why, what did I do?" I ask.

"I know how hard it must have been to be introduced to Corina," he says, straightening. "Let me assure you that I don't feel anything at all for her other

than friendship. I just want to help her out. She has mostly lived on her family's fortune her entire life, but her father's company recently went bankrupt. Her parents really don't care what happens to Corina, so they cut her off for the most part, leaving her only a weekly allowance, and went overseas to try and rescue the business. She's never lived alone before, and she's never worked in a real company. I know it's a lot to ask, especially with all this, but can you please keep an eye on her?"

"Yeah, I'll do my best," I say.

I'm not sure I have too much sympathy for the obviously rich woman who has found that she has to live more commonly all of a sudden, but I can definitely understand someone who has lost everything that they normally know. In all honesty, if it wasn't for Jace's kindness, that could have been me when Miller left.

"She starts in two days?" I ask. "If you send her to me as soon as she comes in, I'll take her around the company and introduce her to everyone to help her get settled in."

Jace steps toward me. There's an intense look in his eyes that makes me feel butterflies fluttering in my stomach as he leans into my personal space. I breathe in the scent of his cologne and my body angles toward him almost without permission. Unbidden, images of having sex with him last night come to my mind, and my heart starts beating faster.

Nothing is going to happen right now, of course. Not while we're still at work. But that doesn't stop my body yearning. I can't believe, sometimes, just how badly I've come to want Jace. I want his smile, his laughter, his words, his body. I can't get enough of him.

"You, Faith, are an angel," Jace says quietly.

He leans in and kisses me. It's just a soft press of his lips against mine to start with, and then his tongue flicks out and requests entrance. When I open my mouth, his tongue lazily maps out my gums and teeth, tasting and exploring before pulling away with one last nibble on my bottom lip.

"I know I can count on you," he says. "Thank you, Faith. If at any point it gets too hard, just let me know. I don't want you to be in a situation where you feel uncomfortable."

I smile warmly at him. I very much appreciate that. We both know that he's asking for an awful lot by requesting that I look after his ex-girlfriend, and I would be well within my rights to refuse just on principle alone.

But Jace has looked after me and made sure that I have a job. He's kind and loving. I definitely want to do something for him, even if it's something as uncomfortable as showing his ex-girlfriend around the company so she can work here.

"Thanks," I say warmly. "I'll grab some of the others and we'll clean out that office for her. Though, we might have to buy a new phone and computer for her."

"I'll get Sebastian to help me with it tonight," Jace says with a nod. "Those

are things we can just take with us to the new building anyway. Now, I better run if I want to get this contract with Corina drawn up.”

He kisses me quickly and then disappears, running down the stairs. I can’t help but smile as I watch him go.

I don’t know what’s going to happen next. But, as long as Jace and I are fine with everything and with each other, I don’t think it will matter too much. We’ll definitely get through everything together.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Jace

Corina shadows me for the rest of the day, always looking unsure, bewildered, and unimpressed with what she's seeing. I suppose I can't blame her; this building is definitely not fit for company habitation. But I'm working on that with a hopeful solution very soon.

"Are you heading home?" Faith asks as she clips her bag closed.

"Soon," I assure her.

Faith pauses, glancing between Corina and me. The reluctance to leave the two of us alone is obvious on her face, and I suppose I don't blame her for it.

But then she nods and picks up her bag. I can't help but feel honored. This is a show of trust from her.

"I'll see you in the morning," she says to me. Then she glances at Corina. "I'll look forward to working with you, Corina."

"Likewise," Corina says.

I watch her go, wishing that I was going with her. But I have obligations right now, and one of them happens to be to a friend who is having a hard time.

"Are you okay?" I ask Corina.

"Not really," Corina scoffs. She scowls. "Sorry, Jace, I really appreciate you getting me a job, but why *here*? Why not at your main company?"

"Because there was no room for you there," I say patiently. I've explained three times already. "I have too many receptionists as it is, and I need your skills here. Don't worry. As I told you, we'll be moving soon, so you won't have to put up with it for very long. And we could use your design talents when we do."

"Flattery won't get you anywhere," Corina huffs. Then she gives me a reluctant smile. "But it does help a little. Fine. So that girl, Faith, is going to be showing me around. Is she any good at her job, or did you just hire her because she's pretty?"

I frown at her. I know Corina is upset, both at her situation and at the world, but her tongue is always sharpest in these moments. I don't care if she turns her derision on me. I *do*, however, care if she's going to go after Faith.

"I kept her on as a PA for Amity Greens because she's good at what she

does,” I say with a sharp note in my voice. “She single-handedly kept this company afloat while Miller was doing his level best to send it into bankruptcy.”

Corina looks away. “Sorry.”

I sigh. I shouldn’t have snapped.

“Just think before you open your mouth, okay?” I say to her. “These people have worked damn hard over the years. They all deserve to be here.”

“I’ll remember that,” Corina assures me. “I am grateful that I’ll get to work with such a team of professionals. They’re all so nice, from what I can see.”

I smile. I knew the passionate, cheerful demeanour of my new employees would appeal to Corina, which is why I employed her here. All the employees at her father’s company were cold and robotic (and, in some cases, literal metal robots), so hearing laughter and jokes in the workplace was likely somewhat of a shock for her.

Though, it will likely take her a little to get used to. I saw the way she looked at everything, as though it was beneath her. Yet, as galling as that was to see, I know that she knows nothing else. For Corina, everything was always handed to her on a silver platter, and she was wanted for nothing. Even now, despite her complaints, I know her weekly allowance is more than many of my employees here. She has more than enough to live comfortably.

Yet she’s stressed that the next move her parents make is to cut her off entirely, so I can understand her reasoning. By getting a job and accumulating some more funds, she’s at least being responsible with what she has left.

To be honest, I think this will be good for her. She and I were cut from different cloths. While we’re both worth billions of dollars, I had to struggle for every penny while Corina was given anything she wanted. It was one of the main reasons she and I eventually parted ways; we were just too different.

But Corina was once dear to me, and I to her. While we haven’t really seen each other since the breakup, we did keep in contact, and I know that I want to help her out as much as I can. I personally think she’s panicking for no reason. Her parents are awful, yes, but I don’t think they’ll leave it like this forever. She’ll have access to her accounts again before long.

Still, I’ll help her, and hope that she enjoys herself here despite how different everything is.

“So, what’s new in your life?” Corina asks. “You’ve got this brand-new company, what are your plans going forward with it? Has anything else exciting happened? I need to hear good things right now.”

I want to make Corina feel better, but I’m also not the one to pass up an opportunity to talk about the things that make me happy.

“The company is amazing,” I say, beaming at her. “I know it doesn’t look like much, but the only reason it even *exists* is because of the hard work of the few employees who were left. Faith organized them all and they did their best to keep the whole thing from going bankrupt. They only had one store open toward the end, but they threw everything they had into keeping that running. It’s still thriving.”

"That sounds fascinating," Corina says.

"I want to do as much as I can for them, which is why I bought this company in the first place," I admit. "They've worked so hard. They definitely deserve to get something back for their efforts." I smile wryly. "I still don't even know *why* they did their best to keep this failing company running."

"Stubbornness and pride, perhaps?" Corina suggested.

I think of all my new employees, remembering their cared-for yet shabby clothes, their meager lunches and the way they counted pennies if they needed to take a taxi anyway. I smile slightly.

"No, probably desperation," I say, I shake my head. "Anyway, I'm looking into getting a better building than this one, as I said before. I've made the owners a counter offer with some major repairs, so I'm just waiting for them to get back to me on it. But I think, one way or another, we'll get it. Then we'll be able to move in a few weeks after everything is settled."

"Weeks?" Corina asks, aghast. "I thought we would be moving straight away!"

"I wish," I say dryly. "I started the offer process immediately I bought Amity Greens, but settlement always takes a little longer. Don't worry, I can probably get it hurried along to only take a week or two." I grimace. "Depending on how long it takes the owners to respond to my offer, anyway."

Corina doesn't look overly impressed. No doubt it wasn't the good news she wanted to hear. While buying Amity Greens and getting it back into top-notch condition is a good thing for me, the agonizingly slow process probably doesn't look great to her.

I do have something else exciting to tell though. Something that I'm just bursting to tell someone. It's hard keeping my relationship with Faith a secret when I just want to hold her and tell everyone that she's agreed to be mine.

I hesitate for a moment, though. Faith wanted this to remain a secret, but she's probably told her friends, right? I only have two genuine friends: Sebastian, who has stuck with me through thick and thin, and Corina. It's probably a sad look at my social life that my ex-girlfriend is one of the only friends I have, but that's the way it is. I don't think Faith will be upset at me sharing the news with my only friends.

"Well, moving away from the company, I do have some personal news," I say with a wide smile, making Corina blink at me. "What did you think of Faith, when you met her?"

"She seemed nice," Corina says slowly. "She was friendly and welcoming. Why?"

"Faith and I have started dating," I say.

I watch several emotions flutter across Corina's face, but I don't quite catch any of them. There's a little shock there which is clear than anything else.

"Dating?" Corina repeats.

My smile falters slightly. I honestly thought Corina would be happy for me. I haven't had a relationship since we broke up, while she's had two boyfriends

since... and complained to me about both of them. She's always pestering me to get out there a little more and start a relationship with someone.

Maybe she's just surprised at the moment.

"Yeah," I say. "We actually met before either of us realized that we would be working together, and we exchanged numbers. Then we met again here... it's been a bit of a process. It's also a secret. We want to be comfortable and know exactly what we want before we tell others."

Corina frowns. "Why are you telling me, then?"

"Friends are a different matter," I say with a laugh.

She still doesn't look happy. I don't really understand why. Admittedly, it's been months since she's told me to try and find someone else, though I blame that on her own situation which has been problematic for some time.

I think she'll get used to it, though. Once she gets over the initial surprise that I'm dating one of my employees, everything will be fine. I hope she'll even get along well with Faith. I know Faith will take care of Corina, and Corina could definitely learn a few things from my PA.

Though, that might be just a little *too* much to hope for. Despite how friendly Corina and I are, she *is* still my ex-girlfriend, and I'm asking my current girlfriend to make nice with her. I should probably just be happy that they're being nice to one another.

"How did the two of you meet?" Corina asks.

"Getting coffee, actually," I say, thinking fondly of that moment. "She was so beautiful I had to get to know her. When she found out I was her boss, she wasn't really sure; she's really worried about what everyone else thinks. But I think we're okay, now. The relationship is still a secret, but I don't think it'll stay casual for long."

I already feel so deeply for Faith. It's almost scary how quickly my feelings have developed for her. There's no doubt in my mind that I can and will fall in love with Faith before long. I know that she's the one I will spend the rest of my life with just like I know the sun will rise in the morning. I'm happy to wait patiently for her to catch up, but I know there will be no one else for me.

"She's amazing," I say softly, not even sure if I'm still talking to Corina. "I want to give her everything this world has to offer."

"That's wonderful," Corina says.

I smile at her. She still doesn't sound happy, but that's okay. For her, this is very sudden.

"Just be careful," Corina adds. "You haven't known this woman for very long. There could be parts of her personality that aren't as pleasant as you're imagining."

It's hard to consider that, but I do understand. I'm well aware of the need to be cautious until we get to know each other better.

"I'll be careful," I assure Corina.

But my gut tells me that I don't need to be careful around Faith. I know that this is real.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Faith

“Faith?”

I jump and look up, blinking. Somehow, I’m not expecting to see Corina standing in front of my desk. On impulse, I look toward Jace’s desk, which is stupid since I know he’s at Finest Pantry today. He’s been away and I’ve been trying to get things organized here.

I’m going to be truthful, I honestly forgot Corina was starting today. I spent the last couple of days talking myself out of jealousy. After all, she and Jace broke up for a reason and *I’m* with Jace now.

With Corina standing in front of me, though, it’s hard not to feel envious and inadequate. Her clothes are better suited to the workplace today with her neat pencil skirt and silk blouse, but it’s still clear that she comes from money no matter how understated her dress and makeup is.

I cough. Corina is dazzling, I’ll give her that, but I also need to remember that she’s going through a tough time.

“Corina, it’s good to see you,” I say as warmly as I can manage, standing and holding out my hand. She shakes it limply before snatching her hand back. “Are you excited to start?”

“In a way,” Corina says.

I can’t imagine a woman who has been given everything she ever wanted would even work a hard day in her entire life. Jace had said that she had some receptionist skills, but I have a feeling that she would have mostly been working at her father’s company where she could take all the breaks she wanted and barely have to work at all.

I shake the uncharitable thought away. I don’t know Corina. It’s fair for me to assume that she isn’t a hard worker.

“How about I take you down to your temporary office?” I suggest. “We’ve cleaned it out as much as we could for you.”

Which is a bit of an understatement. When I told the other employees about Corina coming to work for us, no one was particularly happy to have a spoiled princess working nearby. In an effort to make her feel comfortable and therefore,

hopefully, do her job properly, we tackled the office with gusto to make it as nice as we could. I personally think we did a very good job.

"That sounds good," Corina says. "Thank you."

We head downstairs. I can hear the other employees working nearby, but we don't meet anyone on our way to the office. I'll have to introduce Corina to them at some point, but, in order to give her a chance to settle in nicely, we should probably give her a few moments to herself.

The office that we set up for Corina does look quite nice. Jace bought the materials that I asked him to get, and we set it up so that the small room looks quaint and warm. Long blue drapes cover the windows, the desk is firm and made of light wood, and Jace helped us pick some pictures of flowers to hang on the walls for now, covering some of the larger cracks. The computer is also the most up to date system in the building and will be the only one we have bought until we move.

"Wow," Corina says. "You guys have done a good job."

I glance at her. She isn't smiling, but I probably should have expected that. She definitely doesn't want to be here. I chalk it up to both her silver-spoon upbringing, which makes her turn her nose up at the poor building, and the fact that she just doesn't want to work in general.

I remind myself, again, not to jump to conclusions. Everyone here works hard, and I'm sure she will be an asset in time.

"Do I stay here?" Corina asks.

"You don't have to," I say with a smile, swiping the new phone of the receiver. "This cordless phone has a pretty large range, so you can just carry it with you. If you take it somewhere, just take a small notebook and pen with you so you can jot down any messages. There is stationery for you in the desk drawers. The computer is fully hooked up to our internet."

"I assume the internet is slow?" Corina asks dryly.

"Actually, it's one of the only things that works properly here," I return. "Jace updated the internet for us the other day so that we at least had enough internet speed to do our jobs."

Corina smiled slightly.

"That's very kind of him," she says.

"He has been kind," I agree.

Her attitude irks me, but she's likely just as conflicted about this new place as I am about her. I promised Jace I would do my best to make things easier for her, and I'll keep to that as much as I can.

Corina rounds the desk and settles into her chair. It's a very comfortable chair that I had Jace buy specifically. He'd wanted to just give her an old desk and chair, but I told him that Corina would be more likely to stay if we made sure her surroundings were nice and new.

"How long have you worked here, Faith?" Corina asks.

"A few years," I say. "I worked under the old owner who wasn't great."

"I know, Jace told me," Corina agrees. "It must be wonderful to have Jace on

board. He's an amazing businessman and he makes everything easier."

"He does, yes," I say, wondering where she's going with this.

"Is he seeing anyone at the moment?" Corina asks curiously.

I pause. Why is she asking that? It seems like an odd question to ask *me*. Aren't they friends? Or maybe, due to their past history, she doesn't feel comfortable asking Jace.

Then I wonder how to answer. If she's asking, it means that Jace hasn't told her about our relationship yet. Or maybe he doesn't intend to because I've asked for him to keep it a secret?

"I'm not sure," I say, feeling awkward.

Corina's entire expression lights up at that, and I feel a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. There can only be one reason the other woman is happy at that answer.

"That's really good," she says with a soft smile. "You know, I never quite got over losing Jace. I wasn't mature enough to be in a relationship with him at the time; I didn't know how to concede. We split mutually, but no one else was ever enough afterward."

"I see," I say, biting my lip.

"For months now, I've wanted to talk to him about getting back together," Corina confides. "I definitely think we could connect again since I have a better chance than anyone. I know him so well after two years together, and we're still very good friends even after separating."

A blank sort of horror comes over me. I'm hearing everything she's saying, and it all makes so much sense, but I don't *want* it to.

And it's hard, because the soft, loving smile on Corina's face tells me that she's very serious about this. My stomach tightens. If she makes a sincere play for Jace... what will happen to me?

Do I lose? Surely I would have to. I know Jace wants me, but he was with Corina for two years. She knows him better than anyone else does. Even while designing her office, he was able to pick out the decorations that she would love. He hasn't forgotten how connected the two of them once were any more than she apparently has.

I clear my suddenly dry throat. "Do you think a relationship between the two of you will go differently this time?"

I'm genuinely curious about her thoughts on this. Their relationship has already failed once, so what makes her think it could work a second time?

"I've definitely grown," Corina says with a small smile. "With everything that's happened recently, I understand a little more about what Jace was trying to tell me. Money isn't everything, and even just the comforts and happiness of the people around you can make you feel rich."

Okay... I didn't want to hear that. There's a fear starting to develop inside me, burning like a flickering candle in my heart. If Jace heard this, what would he do? How would he react?

I don't think I'll win. It would be me, a casual, secret relationship, against

Corina, who he had a serious, public relationship with. How can I stand against that?

“It’s really wonderful to see Jace again,” Corina continues. I just want her to stop, but I keep listening to her in the sort of horrified fascination that comes with watching a train wreck. “It’s been so long since we last met, but he hasn’t changed at all. He’s still the same man I fell in love with.”

And there it is, the one word that I can’t fight against. Love. I don’t love Jace, not yet. And, Jace doesn’t love me either. But he once loved Corina, and I don’t think it will take him long to remember that.

“Is everything okay?” Corina asks, her face creasing in concern.

I wonder what my expression must look like for her to ask that. I can feel my eyes burning, but I refuse to cry. I’m jumping to conclusions again, of course. I don’t know for certain that Jace will want Corina back. Maybe he’ll remember all the reasons they broke up in the first place. Maybe he’ll place more stock in our fledgling bond than in a relationship that has already died once.

But the possibility that he’ll want Corina instead is definitely there. And it feels stronger than the possibility that he’ll want to stay with me.

“I’m fine,” I lie. “Sorry, I must have gotten something in my eye.”

I smile at Corina. It feels painful. I want to shout at her. Tell her that she can’t have Jace because *I’m* with him. But she hasn’t done anything wrong to deserve me shouting at her like that, and I do still want to keep our relationship a secret for now.

I don’t know Corina well enough to know what she would do if she found out and, if I were her, I would be very upset if the woman I had just told all my secrets to suddenly came back and said she was actually in a relationship with the man I loved.

I just need to calm down. Nothing has happened yet. I just need to wait until something changes, one way or another.

“Do you have a plan?” I ask.

I need to know what she’s planning. I don’t know whether I need to know so that I’m prepared to handle it or whether I need to know in order to try and stop her. One way or another, though, I do need to know.

“Just spend time with him,” Corina says with a shrug. “I know that I still love him. I think he might still love me too. But I won’t know for sure until we spend more time together.” She smiles softly again. “However, I don’t think I’m wrong in his feelings.”

It’s the final nail in the coffin. I feel everything I’ve hoped for fading away.

It’s stupid, I shouldn’t be this worked up about it. I haven’t known Jace for that long. And, yes, he is special to me because he’s the first man I’ve had sex with, and I’ll always remember that, but it’s foolish to hang all my hopes on that.

There will be other men out there, surely. Jace is just one man. He’s taught me what it means to be treated kindly in a relationship, and he’s taught me the pleasures of being with another person. If he decides to end the relationship, then I’ll just take those lessons and use them when I find someone else.

It's logical.

So why does it hurt so badly?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Faith

If I had expected things to end quickly between Jace and me after Corina's confession, I was definitely wrong.

Three days later, I'm on tenterhooks, just waiting for the other shoe to drop. I'm forced to watch as Corina, the office phone on her hip and a pad of paper with a pen tucked into her pocket, spends most of her time in our office when Jace is there. I sincerely regret telling her that she could move around with the phone as long as she had it with her at all times.

Jace has been here all three days. He returned the day after Corina started, saying that Finest Pantry will be fine without him for a little while.

I'm happy that he's putting so much effort into Amity Greens. I just wish he'd sent Corina over to Finest Pantry. Though, I can't stop the nasty thought that maybe he's staying over here so he can see Corina more.

Admittedly, Jace doesn't go out of his way to seek Corina out. Corina is always the one to come up here. But Jace always seems happy to see her, and he never tells her to leave even when she interrupts him in the middle of work.

It's irritating. I've long since gone from being miserable about it all to being angry. Not at Corina, she has no idea that she's stepping on my toes, but at Jace. How can he allow another woman to be all over him like that while I'm only a few feet away?

Though, maybe I need to be fair. Jace does tell Corina not to get so close a few times because he needs to concentrate, and he doesn't try to touch her himself. He also does continue working while she's there, giving her noncommittal answers more often than not.

All right, so maybe I shouldn't be angry at Jace. He's not really *trying* to encourage Corina's behavior.

But it's easy to see that he cares for her in the way that he looks at her and smiles at her. Does he look and smile at me like that? I can't really remember.

And Corina is patient. She doesn't get irritated when Jace doesn't give her his full attention. She seems happy just to sit nearby and know he's there.

I can see by watching them how their relationship once worked. It would

have been one of contentment and pure happiness.

I wonder how everything ended up going wrong between them. Both Corina and Jace said that they were far too different to stay together. But it's been over a year since they broke up, and they both would have grown as people during that time. While Corina is here, are they both remembering the calmer, happier times that they spent together?

I look back at my work. I don't want to watch them anymore.

* * *

During my lunch break, my phone message chimes. I almost don't want to look at it; I'm in a thoroughly bad mood because I left Corina in the office with Jace, talking and laughing like old friends.

Which they are, I remind myself. They *are* old friends.

After a moment, however, I look at the message, reluctant to ignore it. It's from Louise. I told her the other day that Corina had arrived, and of my worries regarding Jace. At the time, she told me I was being foolish, but I think she's become more worried over the last couple of days.

'How is it going?'

I sigh as I sit at a table.

'Not well,' I reply. 'He's in the office with Corina.'

'*Alone?*' Louise returns.

'Yeah. She wanted to have lunch with him.'

'You know, you should just tell everyone you're dating and get rid of this bitch.'

I snort and close my phone. Trust Louise to suggest that. I know she thinks I'm an idiot for keeping my relationship with Jace still a secret. She isn't wrong, though. If I told everyone I was dating Jace, then one way or another, I would get an answer.

"Hey, Faith, long time no see!"

I look up and smile. Michael, a man in his mid-forties who is now managing the finance department, sits across from me. Michael and I always worked together to keep the company afloat, and his help has been invaluable.

"How is everyone getting on?" I ask him. "Sorry I haven't been down much, but there's so much to do up in the office."

"Don't worry about us, Faith," Michael says warmly. "We're all doing very well on our own."

That should make me feel much better. Strangely, though, it doesn't. Instead, I feel an odd sense of loss, and tears burn behind my eyes. I blink them away quickly before Michael can notice.

"That's good," I manage to say. "I'm glad everyone is settling in. Soon we're going to have an entire batch of new employees to look after, too."

"I'm looking forward to it," Michael admits. "I can teach them all I've

learned and actually get some proper help around here. You were amazing, Faith... but numbers are not your strong suit.”

I smile sheepishly. While I’m not bad at math, Michael often left me in the dust with his phenomenal understanding of how numbers work together.

“So, what have you been up to?” Michael asks curiously.

“Mostly just getting advertisements organized and emailing other companies to get some support for our comeback,” I explain. “Jace has also been looking into that new building for us.”

“Any word on it?” Michael asks.

“He’s arguing about price with the owners right now,” I laugh. “There are several things wrong with the building. Jace is happy to fix them, but he’s trying to get the owners to lower the initial price because of how much it will cost.”

“Fair,” Michael says with a nod. “I hope you haven’t been stressing too much about us while you’re up there.”

“You know me, I always stress,” I tease.

“I know,” he says, and there’s a serious note in his voice that makes the joking smile fall from my face. “But you can stop worrying about us now, Faith. We’re doing okay.”

My heart clenches. I’ve been looking after these people for quite some time. This company was mine in everything but name. I’m so grateful to have Jace’s help and to be able to manage the place while he’s away, but things have inevitably changed.

It’s good to see that everyone else has found their own two feet. Michael, who was often frustrated by the poor technology, Janice who had no need to market but still worked tirelessly on ideas, Robert who was quiet and needed constant reassurance that his ideas were good...

They don’t need me anymore.

It’s a startling realization. I think, in some way, I already knew that, but it’s only just hitting me now as I talk to Michael.

It’s another change in a world that has already changed so much. I’m losing Jace, and I’ve lost the people that have been under my care for longer than I remember. I’ve taught them to be independent, and they’ve used those skills so that they don’t need me always.

Maybe it’s selfish, but I want them to reach out to me. Now, I feel adrift and unsure. What, exactly, is my role if I’m not taking care of anyone? What am I supposed to do with myself while everyone else works around me? I don’t even know what the regular role of a PA is.

“You know, maybe you should talk to Jace’s other PA, Sebastian,” Michael says, and it takes me a moment to realize that I made that last comment out loud. “He’s been doing the real job of a PA, not the semi-management thing you were forced into. He could probably help you out.”

It isn’t a bad suggestion. Sebastian would be able to lead me in the right direction so that I can do the things I’m *meant* to do, and leave the actual running of the company where it belongs; with the owner.

"Sounds like a good plan," I say to Michael with a smile. "Thank you."

"We all have to look out for each other," Michael beams back.

I smile and curl my hands around my drink. It's going to take some getting used to with all these changes, but I think we'll be okay.

* * *

I'm in a better mood when I return upstairs, and my mood is even better when I see that Corina is gone, likely back to her own office. Jace looks up as I enter and grins.

"We have the building," he says triumphantly. "They've accepted my offer and we're going to start the settlement process after the weekend."

"That's wonderful!" I say, excited. "Everyone is going to be really happy. Michael was just asking me about the building at lunch."

"Michael?" Jace asks blankly.

"Head of finance," I say.

Jace's expression clears and he nods. He hasn't quite learned everyone's names yet, but he's getting there.

"Great," he says. "I'll make the announcement this afternoon."

I smile. It's nice, despite everything else, to see things with Amity Greens moving forward. A new building is going to mean a lot to everyone. It will mean that we're actually making an effort to fix things.

"Are you interested in seeing a play at the theatre tonight?" Jace asks suddenly.

I blink, taken aback.

"Like a date?" I ask.

He gives me an incredulous look. "What else would it be?"

I'm not sure how to reply to that. He's just spent all morning with another woman, one that has made it plain that she wants something more with him... or, at least, made it plain to *me*. And now he's inviting me on a date?

It doesn't really compute at the moment. I blink several times, trying to understand.

He's been spending time with Corina... remembering how it was to be in a relationship with her... preparing to break up with me...

And inviting me on a date?

"I... sure?" I say, thoroughly confused. "What did you want to see?"

"It's a new theatre production doing a mash-up of fairy tales. I've heard it has some amazing musical numbers," Jace explains. "I'd love to see it with you."

"That sounds nice," I say.

Is he going to use this date to break up with me? But why would he take me to the theatre? Why not just a dinner? I can't work it out at all.

Though maybe I should just take this. One last date with Jace would be nice.

One last moment to have with him and remember after it's all over.

"What time?" I ask.

"Seven?" Jace suggests. He looks at me closely. "Are you okay? You look like you're about to cry."

Shit, not again. What is wrong with me today?

"Something in my eye," I lie with a grin, swiping at my eyes in irritation.

"Sorry. All right, I'll be ready for you at seven, then. Do you want me to have dinner first?"

"Dinner is included," Jace says, standing.

Before I can move, he wraps his arms in a warm, gentle hug. I really *am* going to cry if he doesn't pull back soon.

"I'm looking forward to it," he says with a soft kiss on my lips.

I smile at him.

"So am I," I say.

But it's a lie. I already know what's coming, and it isn't going to be fun for me. I'll do my best to enjoy myself until that moment.

And then, when it's all over, I'll return home to nurse my heart in solitude.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Jace

As far as I'm concerned, both Faith and me are in a great place right now. Things have been progressing very well lately with Faith and myself. She's more willing to touch or accept my touch outside of our homes, and I can see a look in her eyes that I know is being reflected in mine.

There's very little doubt in my mind: I'm falling in love with Faith. Part of me thinks that she might be falling in love with me in return.

So... why does she seem so *off* today?

I can't put my finger on what it is. When I first asked Faith to come to the theatre with me, I was excited to spend some more time with her. Lately, Corina has been around a lot, which has made it hard to see much of Faith during the workday. In response, Faith has been staying away from our office in order to prevent any slip-ups.

I'm fond of Corina, in my own way. There were a lot of reasons why our relationship didn't work out, but she's good to have as a friend. Yet, spending all this time with her is just reminding me of all the reasons why I didn't want to be with her anymore. She's very self-centered, picky, and has no verbal filter.

So, in a way, this date with Faith is also a reprieve for me, a way to say that everything is all right between us and things would hopefully go back to normal soon.

Except...

I glance over at Faith. She's looking out the window silently. Normally, the silence between us is comfortable. Tonight, however, it feels awkward.

I can't stop remembering her surprise when I asked her on this date tonight. She seemed genuinely shocked, but why? Was she surprised that I would ask her in the office, when Corina could arrive at any moment?

"Are you looking forward to the play?" I ask her.

Faith looks over at me and gives me a small smile. Her expression is oddly distant.

"Yeah," she says simply.

A week ago, she might have given me a soft smile and teasingly said, "I'm

looking forward to some nice time with you.”

I wrestle with myself for a moment. Something is obviously wrong with her, but do I have the right to press her right now?

No, I don’t think I do. The terms of our current relationship are very clear. Faith only wants casual, and I’ll follow that for now. While I feel that our relationship has deepened, I don’t know how she feels. If I push her now, I could end up losing her, and that’s something I don’t want to happen.

“Great,” I say, more for lack of anything else to say. I glance at her again, but she’s gone back to staring out the window.

I turn my attention back to the road. Hopefully, she’ll relax a little and maybe, later, tell me what’s on her mind.

* * *

The play is as good as I heard it would be, but I get little enjoyment out of it. Faith’s mood hasn’t improved at all, and she remains tense and edgy throughout the entire production. My feelings shift from mild concern to outright alarm. I can’t work out what’s wrong, and Faith isn’t saying anything at all.

“Dinner?” I ask as we leave the theatre, breaking the stiff silence between us.

“Yeah, sounds good,” Faith says, and she seems to deflate slightly before my eyes.

I make a split-second decision.

“Do you want to grab some take out and head back to my place?” I ask, and she turns startled eyes on me. “We can make some coffee and watch TV.”

Faith blinks several times. That strange confusion, the same puzzlement that had crossed her face when I asked her on the date, is in her eyes again.

“Okay,” she says hesitantly, but I’m gratified to see that her shoulders have relaxed a little.

We end up buying some burgers and fries from a large joint near my house before heading back. I sneak glances at Faith periodically. Her expression, instead of dour, is now thoughtful, and I hope that’s an improvement.

“What do you want to watch?” Faith asks as we walk through the front door.

“We can just flick through the channels until we land on something,” I say. I lean in and kiss her softly, something I’ve been aching to do all night. “Anything is good as long as we’re together.”

Faith flushes slightly at my words and smiles at me. It’s small, but it isn’t as distant as before, so I count that as a win. It means that, in some way, being with me is helping her forget what was upsetting her so badly.

I still want to know what’s going on, but now isn’t the right time to ask. Not when her eyes are softening and a tiny, genuine smile is playing on her lips. And, when I reach out to twine our fingers together, she grips my hand firmly in return.

I’ll ask later when she’s in a good mood and I don’t feel so much like I’m

trespassing. For now, we'll sit and watch television while we eat our burgers. For a night that hasn't started the best, I'm very hopeful we can make something good out of it.

* * *

I don't end up watching most of the movie that we find while flicking through all the channels on TV. We end up settling on a movie set in some sort of fantasy world, but I can't pay much attention to it.

All my focus, instead, is on how close Faith is sitting. The way her floral perfume tickles my senses and makes my every nerve vibrate with the need to be even closer.

I'm hyper-aware of how her bare arm brushes against mine, the hairs all over my body standing on end, and the way she shifts beside me, giggling at something she finds amusing or gasping when something shocking happens. Her reactions tell me that it's likely a good movie, but I'm more interested in watching the way her emotions play out across her face.

Her hand is in mine again, sitting on our legs, which are pressed close together. I start to gently rub my thumb over the back of her hand. Faith blinks, startled, and looks down at our joined hands.

I wonder if she will tell me to stop. She was in such a poor mood earlier, and I still can't get those odd expressions out of my mind. But then Faith looks up at me before turning back to the television, content to allow me to do what I want.

Well, if she's going to give me *that* sort of open invitation.

I continue rubbing my thumb on her hand for a few moments and then, when she leans forward to watch something on the screen with an eager expression, I untangle my fingers so that I can slide them slowly up her arm.

Faith instantly stiffens with a sharp intake of breath and she glances at me. I stare straight ahead at the television, pretending that my fingers aren't currently dancing over her elbow.

"Jace..." she breathes.

I glance at her.

"Yes?" I ask in affected curiosity, struggling to stop a smirk from spreading across my face.

Faith stares at me, heat in her gaze. Earlier, I hadn't felt any warmth from her. Now I can feel the fire that has sparked to life within her.

"If you keep doing that, I'm going to have to stop you," Faith says in a low voice.

My fingers pause. It's a sensuous threat that makes a shiver run down my spine. Then, I continue running my fingers up and down her arm.

"Are you?" I ask, a hint of challenge in my voice.

What will she do? I wonder as I watch her. As inexperienced in sex as she is, I've taken most of the control the last two times we've slept together. While I

know she has her own set of talents (the blow job that she gave me last time attested to that), she had previously drawn the line at sex.

I'm curious to know how she will react this time. Is she going to want me to take control again, or...?

Then Faith moves. She twists away from my touch, and I feel a pang for only a moment before she shifts onto her knees and leans over me, throwing a leg over mine so that she's straddling me on her knees, her hands on my shoulders. She looms over me.

"Yes," she says, her voice low with promise. "I will."

My heart thumps loudly in my chest.

"And what are you going to do about it?" I ask.

Faith's hold on my shoulders turn firm and she leans in, pressing her chest against mine. I can feel her soft breath against my cheek, and my cock is already starting to perk up in interest.

"I'll ride you until you can't breathe," she promises.

Sparks of heat shoot me, heading straight for my groin, and I can't help but groan out loud, my breath catching in my throat. It takes a moment for me to retain some semblance of control so that I can continue our banter.

"Yeah?" I ask, feeling breathless. My hands settling on her hips in a loose hold. "Why don't you?"

Faith grins at me, leaning in close. My tongue slips out to lick my lips, already anticipating the feel of hers on mine.

But then, surprisingly, Faith pulls back completely, slipping off my lap. I blink, confused, and ignore the sounds of horses on the television.

"What are you doing?" I ask, confused. My cock is half-hard, and my mind is whirling with thoughts of her promise.

"Patience, Jace," Faith says with a grin. "First, I thought I might put on a little... show."

For a second, I don't understand. And then Faith grips the bottom of her shirt and slowly lifts it, bit by bit, to reveal her toned stomach and slim hips. My mouth goes dry. She's giving me a strip show.

"Fuck, Faith," I exhale.

"Not yet," she says with a wink.

Part of my mind is screaming at me that *something* still isn't quite right. This isn't normal behavior for Faith, and it feels a little like she's hiding behind the desire we're both feeling. That part doesn't feel like we should be doing this until we've sorted out what, exactly, is wrong.

But that part is quickly swept away. Faith is here, she's made it clear that she wants me, so why does anything else matter right now? She's here with me, and she'll be here later, too. We can talk about it tomorrow, when we're both clear-headed and not spinning with want and need.

Faith slowly pulls her shirt over her head, leaving her in jeans and her bra, a lacy black number that is stark against her pale skin. I ache to reach out and touch, but she's standing too far away for me to do so.

I look up at her. She's reaching behind herself to unclip her bra. I can see the same, naked desire in her eyes.

Yes, I convince myself. Everything is fine for the moment. The two of us can talk about it tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Faith

I can feel Jace's eyes on me, watching my every movement. It's thrilling. I can see his desire on his face and, for a brief moment, I forget why I was upset with him and so certain he was about to break up with me.

I was lost when he brought me home and sat down with me to watch television. There's no way I could resist his soft, seductive words. I might be unsure whether Jace still wants me, but I know that I want him.

Once more, my mind tells me. I can have him just once more.

My bra falls to the ground and Jace's eyes are on my breasts. His body twitches, as though he longs to reach out and touch me, but he isn't moving, allowing me to control the flow.

Desire flows through me. I want this. I want him.

Maybe, just maybe, it's all been in my head. Maybe I can trust Jace. I want to believe that.

"Fuck, Faith, I want you so bad right now," Jace says, his voice hoarse.

"Soon," I say, hooking my thumbs in my jeans.

I wriggle them down over my hips, allowing them to slide down over my smooth legs and drop to the ground. I step out of them, feeling a raging fire in the bottom of my stomach as Jace watches me hungrily, his eyes roaming over my body.

I slip my panties down over my hips as well and stand before him, completely bare. I thought I would feel more embarrassed to have Jace, still completely dressed, watching me, but it just makes me feel hot and flushed.

"Now what?" Jace asks, and there's a hint of challenge in his voice.

I rise to the bait. I have every intention of doing things my way this time. I step toward him, his legs falling open as I do so that I can move between them. I grip his shoulders firmly and climb on top of him, straddling him once more. I can feel the strain at the front of his pants, and his hips buck up slightly. I lean in as close as I can, his clothes rubbing on my skin.

"Now you let me take control," I breathe in his ear.

I circle my hips slowly on his lap, feeling his erection as he rubs up against

me, groaning at the friction, and I bite back a moan at the sensation. I try to calm my racing heart as I reach forward and start to unbutton his shirt. I want to take my time with it, but the heat within me is telling me to move, *now*, and take what I want to chase the inevitable rush of pleasure at the end.

My fingers clumsily push his shirt back, but I don't care to push it completely off, more interested to lean in and latch my mouth around his shoulder, biting down.

Jace shouts at the unexpected move and groans as I soothe the mark over with my tongue, sucking gently on his skin. His hips are bucking uncontrollably now and I bounce slightly on his lap, teasingly not giving him exactly what he wants.

"Faith, shit, please," Jace gasps out.

His plea shoots straight through me. I'm in control now. He's given over the reins to me entirely, and I gasp against his skin at the spikes of pleasure that shoot through me at the thought. Fuck, I want this so badly.

I lift myself onto my knees and scramble with the zipper on his pants, no longer caring about teasing him. I just want him. When I get it open, Jace knocks my hands away and drags his pants and boxers down, kicking them off to somewhere else in the room. His cock springs free, standing tall and hard, leaking at the tip.

"God, I need you," he groans.

"I'm going to ride you now," I murmur, and his breath catches. "I'm going to ride you so hard you won't even think about anyone else."

The words slip out without permission, but Jace is too far gone to register them. I'll drive all thoughts of Corina out of his mind. She doesn't belong between us. I raise myself over him, feeling a spark of nerves. I've never done this before.

But I want to do this with Jace. I want to trust him. I want him to feel me, and to have him deep within me.

I rub myself on the tip of his cock and meet his eyes. He's watching me, and when he sees me looking at him, he's smiling at me. There's no expectation or regret in his eyes. He wants me just as much. I draw in a deep breath.

Slowly, I sink down onto his cock. The feeling of breaching myself on him is so unbelievable that I have to pause to gasp for breath. I can feel Jace trembling with the force of keeping himself still beneath me as he waits, his hands settling gently on my hips.

Slowly, I inch myself down, bit by bit. When I'm fully seated on him, I groan, throwing my head back as I try to get myself under control.

"Deep breaths," I hear Jace say. "Don't move until you're ready."

I gulp in lungs full of air. Slowly, the world stops spinning and I loosen my grip on Jace's shoulder, my pounding heart slowing ever so slightly. I feel Jace within me, pressed in so deep that I want him to stay there forever so that I know he'll always be mine.

I rise up, gently wriggling myself off his cock with the aid of his urging

hands, before slipping back down again. Slowly, I get used to the feeling, and my movements become more sure, thrusting down harder as his hips buck up to meet me, trying to take in even more.

The world narrows until it's just the two of us, the sound of our panting, gasping breaths, and the feel of our skin joined together. Nothing else in life matters right now.

It's all so overwhelming, and I know I'm not going to last long. My hips start to move clumsily, my breath sobbing in my throat as I bounce in his lap. My movement is restricted because of how his hands grip my thighs. My legs are trembling and my body is shaking with need.

Then Jace hits something in me and I cry out, vision going white. From there, I'm helpless, doing my best to move but otherwise trusting myself to Jace, struck with pleasure wave after wave after wave as Jace continually strikes that spot, thrusting in hard and deep with each buck of his hips.

And then a wave of pleasure crashes over me and my body tenses, clenching around Jace. I can feel him still moving for a moment and then he, too, stills. I'm washed away in crashing desire, unable to do anything than drift away with it.

When I return to reality, I'm slumped over Jace, breathing hard. I can feel his heart pounding in his chest. I clutch onto him, feeling like I need an anchor to keep me stable right now. I feel him chuckle.

"That was amazing," he says. His fingers are playing gently with strands of my hair. "I'm ready for bed. You?"

I don't want to move, but I push myself up with a tired smile.

"Bed sounds great," I say.

Sleep, I decide. I can think of everything else in the morning.

* * *

Unfortunately, I can't sleep. Even an hour after Jace and I have crawled into his bed, I lie awake. My head is spinning. I can't believe I just did that. Surely Jace was preparing to break up with me and having sex with him had only postponed that moment.

Unless I got it wrong? Everything Jace said and did tonight made it clear that he was happy to be with me. Even just picking up burgers and bringing me to his house showed me that he had realized that I wasn't in the mood to be around a lot of people after the play. It was sweet of him.

So, what now? I'm not sure. I've been so certain, for days now, that our breakup was imminent, and I'm not sure how to kick the thought away. Even lying here in bed with Jace, body angled toward mine and his arms brushing against me, I still can't get rid of the swiftly growing suspicion and uncertainty that has plagued me since Corina arrived.

It's clear that Corina and Jace used to share a connection which right now, I can't hope to match. After all, they were together for years before they broke up,

and their separation was so amiable that they remained friends afterward.

They're so close that Jace didn't even think twice before offering her a job to help her out. Admittedly, yes, we needed a receptionist, so hiring Corina was good for the company, but he hired her without a resume or an interview or even a quick meeting. He just allowed her to show up and have a look around.

To me, that says that Corina is someone Jace hasn't forgotten about. It's easy to believe that the two of them could remember exactly why they were together in the first place. Corina has made it plain that she wants Jace back.

And what does Jace want? I turn my head to look at him. In his sleep, his expression is peaceful, and there's a small smile on his face. I wonder what he's dreaming about?

If I have to be honest with myself, Jace *hasn't* shown any inclination toward Corina. But then, I'm not always around when Corina is. It's easier for me to make myself scarce than to watch her fawn over him, unaware that he's already in a relationship with someone else.

I grimace, remembering a conversation I had with Corina earlier, about an hour after Jace asked me on the date. Part of me had felt hopeful, and then Corina had come downstairs, looking satisfied.

"Jace is amazing," she had said to me with a sigh. "I could just spend all day with him. He told me about this restaurant he loves that he hasn't been able to go to recently... I think he might want to take me there."

Her words had made ugly thoughts rise in my head. Is Jace being faithful to me? I don't want to think he's that type of a person... But, then, how would I know? I've only known him for a few weeks, and the casual relationship we struck up hasn't exactly allowed for any deep conversations.

Have I done this? I kept Jace at arm's length even after we got together. Recently, there's been a small voice in my head that whispers that things could easily get very serious between the two of us, but I find that I don't mind that anymore.

But I didn't say that to Jace. Has he started looking elsewhere? Has Corina come along at a time when he was starting to remember what it would be like to be with someone that he could be with publicly?

I squeeze my eyes shut and shift carefully away from Jace, suddenly feeling claustrophobic. I'm being foolish, I tell myself. I have no idea what is going through Jace's mind, and I can't jump to conclusions. Corina's claims could easily be the optimistic words of someone who still loves Jace and wants him in return. It doesn't mean his so-called affection for her is real.

Right?

I slip out of bed and stretch, immediately feeling better as I run a hand through my hair. I'm tired, but I can't settle my thoughts enough to sleep right now. Frustrated, I gaze around the room, half-hoping to see something that I could distract myself with.

Instead, my eyes land on some framed pictures on his dresser.

I pause. Jace hasn't shown me these pictures. But they're on display, so

would it really be snooping to have a look when they're so clearly there?

I glance back at Jace. He's still soundly asleep. Slowly, I get up, freezing when Jace murmurs in his sleep, and then relax when he settles. I walk across the room, burning with curiosity. Jace doesn't talk about his friends or family much, and I really want to know more about him. I just haven't been sure if I could ask.

There are three pictures on the dresser. The first is of Jace and another man standing in front of a tall, glossy building. There's the end of a sign behind them in fancy writing, and it takes me a moment to realize that it's likely the building for Jace's other company, Finest Pantry. Is the other man Sebastian?

The other two photos, however, make my heart drop. One is of Jace with a group of people, laughter clear on his face. He's sitting next to Corina at a dining table, grinning at the camera, with an older man on his other side. There's no doubt that this is a picture of Jace with Corina and her family.

The other one is even worse. It's just Jace and Corina. They're sitting on the beach, smiling at the camera with flushed cheeks. They both look so happy. Has Jace ever looked that happy with me?

My eyes burn with tears. This, here, is the proof I was looking for that Jace has not forgotten Corina. He still has pictures of her in his bedroom, pictures that show a time when he was so much happier. He loves her, I can see that in this picture.

I can't stay here anymore.

A tiny voice in the back of my mind protests. I should talk to Jace before I jump to conclusions like this. But I can't bear to ask him questions I don't want to know the answers to.

Somehow, along the way, my heart got involved, and I'm terrified that Jace is about to break it. I thought I was ready for it earlier.

Now I know I'm not. If it hurts this much just *thinking* of him telling me he's in love with another woman, then it will be ten times worse to actually hear the words out of his mouth.

I'm not going to stick around for that. I gather up my clothes and dash for the bathroom. I need to get out of here. Jace doesn't want me. He wants Corina.

I should've never allowed a relationship between us in the first place.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Jace

I wake slowly with a wide yawn and a contented smile. I had pleasant dreams, and part of me didn't want to be pulled away from them, while the rest of me is more than happy to wake up to the reality of Faith being with me.

I look over to the other side of the bed with a lazy smile that drops as soon as I see that I'm alone. I sit up quickly, stunned.

"Faith?" I call.

Is she in the bathroom? I scramble out of bed. My heart is clenching. I *knew* there was something wrong last night, I *knew* it. Why didn't I follow up on it? Why did I trust her when she said everything was all right?

The bathroom is clear, but the shower floor is wet and a fluffy towel is damp. That means she came in here at some point to have a quick shower. I return to my room and scan the floor. The clothes she was wearing last night are gone.

I know I shouldn't panic. She could easily be down in the kitchen getting breakfast or relaxing in the living room.

But there had been something wrong with her last night. The look in her eyes had been expectant and frustrated. She had been short and confused every time I touched or kissed her. She leaned away from me when I tried to get close. She only let down her guard when we had sex, and I fell asleep with her snuggling into my arms, where she belongs.

And now she's gone. I race through the house, uncaring that I'm only in the boxers that I hastily dragged on as I left my room. There are far too many rooms, and I grow more and more frustrated as I reach every other room to find it empty.

I walk into the kitchen last. When I enter it to find that Faith is still missing, I stop, my heart racing. Then, slowly, I drop into a chair at the table and run a shaky hand through my hair.

She's gone. And I don't understand why.

I head back up to my room and snatch my phone off the desk. I had half a hope that she might have sent me a message to explain her absence, but there's nothing there. I open my messages and send her one instead.

‘Are you okay?’

I wait, but there’s no answer. I sit on my bed. I’m tired and frustrated and upset... and so confused.

Maybe I just need to give her some time. I nod to myself and put the phone down. It’s Saturday, and she’ll be back at work on Monday. I can talk to her then and get to the bottom of this.

* * *

Faith doesn’t reply all weekend, and I send her a few more messages that she also ignores. On Monday, I rush to work, hoping to catch her in person and ask her what’s going on.

Except Faith, who is always there before me, isn’t in the office. Instead, Corina is sitting in a chair, and she looks up with a smile when I enter.

“Is Faith here?” I ask in greeting.

Corina’s smile drops slightly.

“No, I haven’t seen her, why?” she asks.

I don’t answer as I head to my desk. Is Faith sick? That might explain her behavior, but I don’t know why she wouldn’t just tell me if that’s the case. I log onto my laptop and open my emails.

There are a few emails waiting for me, but there’s only one that catches my immediate attention. It’s from Faith.

My breath catches. Why is Faith sending me an email titled ‘Resignation’?

It feels like none of this is real. I’m barely aware of Corina coming up behind me as I click open the email, reading over the words that are written there.

‘To Jace Sanders,

Due to some personal issues that I must sort out, I am writing to tender my resignation. This is my official two weeks’ notice. I will also be using some of my leave for two weeks, to give me time to settle and figure out where I want to go.

I am truly grateful for the opportunities that you have given me, and the chance to continue working at Amity Greens. I wish you and everyone else all the best in the future.

Yours,

Faith Kelly.’

It’s written so professionally and distantly. I stare at the email in shock, trying to figure out what’s happening.

“Resigned?” Corina asks over my shoulder, sounding shocked. “Why?”

“I have no idea,” I say numbly.

Is this what she was so upset about on Friday? I remember thinking she seemed off when I asked her to the theatre, as well. But when we fell asleep, I honestly thought everything would be better again, right up until the moment when I looked over to find her missing.

"I don't understand," I admit.

"I'm so sorry, Jace," Corina says sadly. "When you told me about Faith, I knew how much she meant to you. I'm sorry to see things end like this for you."

I frown at her.

"She just resigned, we haven't broken up," I point.

"She just resigned without even telling you," Corina returns, shrugging. "That's not the mark of a good girlfriend. I knew she wasn't right for you."

"Wait... what?" I ask, confused.

"Faith isn't the one you're meant to be with, Jace," Corina says consolingly, leaning on my desk. "I knew it when we first met. She's so different from you. You're from completely two separate worlds."

"And what worlds would those be?" I ask sharply. "The one where I'm a billionaire and she has an average fortune?"

"Exactly," Corina says. "I know it's hard, Jace, but Faith can't keep up with you. You'll be rubbing elbows with the best of the best, spending money without a care and not worrying about your future, and she'll never entirely understand that. It will eventually cause problems between you."

I stare at Corina.

"Why are you here?" I ask her.

She leans back, surprised at the question. But it's legitimate, and I suddenly need to know. Corina has been hanging around *a lot* lately. I didn't really mind her presence, because she was still doing her job, and she *is* one of my friends. And when she isn't spending time with me, she attaches herself to Faith, which I had thought was nice.

Yet now Faith has resigned and Corina is standing here, telling me that we were never right for one another.

"I just wanted to spend time with you," Corina says. "We've barely seen one another since we broke up, and you're one of my only friends. On top of that, a lot has been happening lately, and it's nice to have a familiar face around."

"And Faith?" I ask slowly. "You've been around her a lot, too."

"You told me to go to Faith if I ever have any problems," Corina points out. "It's hard being here, and Faith has been helping me out as much as she can. She's a lovely person."

"Yet you say she isn't right for me," I counter. "Something isn't right here."

Corina's forehead creases in briefly before she smiles regretfully.

"Because you're too different and I don't want you to get hurt," she says. "And I don't want Faith to get hurt when you realize that she isn't the one you need."

I honestly can't tell if Corina is just being stupidly protective or if there's something more to what she's saying. My gut clenches. I'm no closer to solving the mystery of why Faith has disappeared on me, but I know that everything was fine before Corina arrived.

"Thanks, Corina," I say. "Look, I have a lot of work to do, and I'm going to have to work double-time without Faith here."

"I can help you," Corina says eagerly.

"No, you don't have the experience for what I need," I say, shaking my head. Also, I need a moment alone, but I don't say that to her. "You go back to doing your job, I'll let you know if I need anything."

"...All right," Corina says reluctantly.

"And Corina?" I say before she turns away. "Don't come up here for lunch today, please. I'll be working straight through."

There's definite frustration on her face as she gives me a sharp nod and disappears. I wait until I can't hear her clacking heels anymore, and then I dive for the phone, quickly looking up Faith's number on my mobile. Maybe Faith will be more likely to answer if I call from the work phone.

But it seems like that won't be the case. The phone rings and rings while I tap my fingers impatiently on the desk, wishing that Faith would just pick up already. But it rings out and goes to voicemail.

"Hi, you've reached Faith Kelly," Faith's cheerful recording says, and it makes my heart clench as I remember how hard her eyes were on Friday. "I'm not available at the moment, so please leave your name and number so I can get back to you."

For a moment, I debate leaving a message. But I have no idea what I'd say, so I end up hanging up before the beep. Then I groan and lean back in my chair.

What the hell is going on?

Slowly, I go through my options, but it doesn't seem like there are many. I've sent her messages that she's completely ignored. If I try sending her an email, it will likely meet the same fate. She's now ignored my phone calls, and I doubt I'll have any better luck if I call her from my personal mobile. She won't be into work due to her two week holiday before her full resignation, which means I won't even get to see her before she leaves.

If she leaves. I have no intention of filing her resignation right now, not until I figure out what's happening here. I'll hold onto it until she can give me a proper reason.

And if it has anything to do with me and our relationship... then that won't be good enough. If she wants to break up with me, fine. But this company needs her. I'll go back to a professional relationship with her if I have to. It will be painful, but I'll do it if that's what she needs.

I close my eyes. How could things have happened like this? I thought everything was going well. Every day, I fell a little more in love with Faith. I don't want to lose her. The thought that I'll never get to hold her in my arms again absolutely terrifies me. What am I supposed to do now? Is there any way that I can convince her to stay with me?

My phone rings again. I snatch it up, hoping it was from Faith, but the message is from Sebastian.

'Can you tell Faith to call me? She left me a message asking for some help the other day. Tell her I'll be glad to provide any support she needs, and I'm sorry it took so long to get back to her.'

I stare at the message. Faith asked Sebastian for help? What with? Another message comes in quickly after.

‘Hopefully, I will be able to tell her what her actual responsibilities as a PA are so she doesn’t work herself into the ground trying to manage everyone.’

My breath catches. Faith went to Sebastian to ask for help on being an actual PA, not the mother-hen manager that she had become. That meant she had every intention, a few days ago, of staying.

That means something changed recently.

I don’t know what it is, but I’m going to find out. I stand and tuck my phone into my pocket. Faith is ignoring my messages and calls?

Fine, I’ll go see her myself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Faith

When I wake up on Sunday morning, I feel sick as I roll over in my bed, my arm wrapped around my stomach as I desperately hope to push the nausea away before it can rise any further.

Unfortunately, it's futile. I throw myself sideways in a desperate bid to make it to the bathroom, but the movement makes my stomach lurch. The best I can do is vomit over the side of the bed and onto the wooden floorboards.

I hear running feet, the sound thumping through my brain, when the door is thrown open. I hiss as light hits my sensitive eyes and I shut them tightly.

"Faith!" I hear Louise exclaim in horror.

I open my eyes slightly to look at Louise. Late on Friday night, after I'd had a quick shower and fled Jace's home, I came straight to Louise, barely even aware I was doing so. I roused her from bed sometime after midnight, and she took me in without a word, not questioning me until the next morning.

Yesterday, I was heartsick. I didn't want to think about Jace or Corina. I wanted to just soothe my wounds in peace so I could get back to my normal routine. Unfortunately, the day passed in a haze of misery as I ignored repeated efforts from Jace to contact me and, in a fit of anger, drafted and sent a letter of resignation. I didn't want to see him again.

Of course, I regretted it, but I'm not going to take it back. I can find a job elsewhere. I'll get back on my feet, feed Jace some poor excuse about wanting to try something new so I can get a reference from him, and then disappear.

My job is the last thing on my mind right now. What did I eat last night? Do I have food poisoning? I feel bloated and sick, and all my muscles are hurting.

"What happened?" Louise says, stepping around the mess to lay a hand on my forehead. "You're all clammy. You weren't sick last night."

"Just woke up," I groan.

"All right, I'll clean this up and then we'll see how we go," Louise says. "Go sit in the lounge room, and I'll get a bucket."

"I'll help," I protest weakly.

"I don't think so. You'll probably just throw up again," Louise says bluntly.

She helps me into the living room and dumps a large white bucket next to me before disappearing back into the spare room. I feel bad; I didn't mean to make her clean up after me.

However, it seems that it isn't over yet. My stomach lurches again and I heave into the bucket twice more before Louise returns, a worried look on her face. There isn't anything left in my stomach by then, but I still feel too nauseous to even move.

"Right, we're going to go to the hospital," Louise announces.

"I'm just throwing up," I groan. "It doesn't need the hospital."

"You've just thrown up three times in half an hour," Louise says. "We're going to the hospital."

I'm too weak to allow her to do anything other than bundle me into the car, bucket and all. I barely remember the drive to the hospital and, before long, Louise is dragging me out again. I blink and she's directing me to sit in a chair before pinching my wallet so she can go speak to the lady at the desk.

I close my eyes, My head is spinning, my stomach is sore and I just want to sleep. Suddenly, a hand lands on my shoulder.

"Sleep looks good, it's going to take some time," Louise says softly. "A nurse will be with us as soon as she can."

"Thanks," I mutter.

Then my eyes close and I know no more.

* * *

I don't know how long I sleep in that uncomfortably plastic chair, but it doesn't feel long enough when Louise shakes me awake again, telling me that a nurse is ready to see me.

I follow her, zombie-like, into the examination room and sit down, only half-listening as Louise explains the problem. The nurse, who has a kind smile, flutters around, checking my pulse, blood pressure, and temperature.

"I'm just going to take some blood tests," she explains. "Then we'll get her into a bed. She doesn't look well."

"No," Louise says, and I can hear the worry in her voice.

Honestly, though, I feel a little better than I did when I woke up. I haven't vomited again, so I count that as a definite plus.

Still, I follow obediently as the nurse leads me to a bed after she's taken some blood. I relax my body on the stiff white sheets, grateful just to be able to lie down. I yawn widely.

"I feel a little better," I tell Louise, wanting to take that worried look off her face.

"Yeah, that's good, but I want to know what happened in the first place," she says with a nod. "Just in case it happens again."

That's nice. I feel bad that she's worrying, but it's nice to be cared for right

now. I yawn and my eyes slip closed. I'm asleep again before I know it.

* * *

When Louise wakes me again, a doctor is standing beside my bed with a chart in his hands. There are fewer people around, making me wonder how many hours I slept for. The doctor smiles kindly at me.

"Hello, Faith," he says. "My name is Doctor Booth. How are you feeling?"

"Tired," I admit, pulling myself into a sitting position. "My muscles hurt a little, but not as much as this morning. The nausea seems to be gone."

"I see," the doctor says with a nod. "That's not surprising."

I glance at Louise. She doesn't look worried anymore, which is good. She exchanges a curious look with me.

"Was it just a stomach bug or food poisoning?" I ask.

"Much more than that, it seems," the doctor says. He smiles at me. "Congratulations, it looks like you might be pregnant."

I stare at him. Surely I didn't hear that right.

"Sorry?" I ask blankly.

"Of course, we still need to do another draw after forty-eight hours," Doctor Booth continues. "Right now, we've detected a change in your hCG levels and, to be certain, we need to compare it to another blood test in two days. But with your symptoms and the rise of hCG past normal levels, it's very likely that you might be pregnant."

Pregnant...

Pregnant?

"If you'd like to be absolutely sure, I can schedule you in for the other draw in two days," the doctor says with a smile at me. "Otherwise, you can just do a home pregnancy test in a week or so."

"How... how long?" I ask, my voice brittle.

"Your hCG levels are reminiscent of a woman who is about two weeks along," Doctor Booth muses. "But it's hard to tell until we do the second blood test. Would you like me to schedule you in?"

"Yes," I say immediately. I need to be sure. This could all just be a huge mistake. "I would."

"All right, if you just come in around eleven o'clock on Tuesday morning, we'll get that sorted out for you," Doctor Booth says with a nod, making a note on his clipboard. "I'll be here, so just ask for me. For now, you're okay to go. You'll be more comfortable at home."

"Thank you," I say numbly.

Louise helps me off the bed. She looks about as shocked as I feel right now. How is it possible that I'm pregnant?

No, that's a stupid question, of course it's possible. I've had sex with Jace three times now, and I don't even remember if we used protection in our zest to

touch each other. It's probably more likely than not that I'm pregnant.

But I can't be pregnant, not now. I've just quit my job. I'm about to disappear from my boyfriend, the father of my possible child. Said father is possibly cheating on me with his ex-girlfriend.

Though, I try and remind myself that I don't know this for sure, as Louise told me over and over again. A deep connection, the way they look at each other, and photos on the mantle doesn't necessarily mean cheating. It just increases the likelihood.

I imagine what Corina would say if she found out I was pregnant with Jace's child. A hysterical laugh bubbles up in my throat and I force it down, not wanting Louise to look any more worried than she already was. Corina's reactions would possibly be the only good thing about this whole situation. In a way, I'd be literally saying, "I won." After all, there's no way her connection with Jace can beat me giving him a child?

Not that I want to win, especially if Jace *is* cheating on me.

I grimace. My thoughts are spinning hysterically in circles right now. I don't know what's real and what isn't. I don't know what to trust. Apparently, even my own body has utterly betrayed me.

"Faith?" Louise asks. "Are you okay?"

I look up at her tiredly as we head out of the hospital.

"Am I supposed to be?" I ask rhetorically.

There's no possible way for me to be okay right now.

"It's going to be okay," Louise says.

"I don't want to do the second test," I admit. "I don't want to know for sure."

"Maybe your hCG levels are just naturally high?" Louise suggests.

It would be nice, but I can't give in to false hope like that. For the doctor to have made the suggestion, he was probably pretty sure. I need to know for sure that this is real and not some sort of mistake.

If it *is* real... then I have an awful lot I need to consider.

"You're going to be okay," Louise says again, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "If nothing else, I'll help you in whatever way I can, all right?" She pauses. "Are you going to tell Jace if the tests come back positive?"

"One thing at a time?" I beg Louise. "Let me just process this first. Let me figure out whether or not this is actually happening before I have to face that question."

I don't want to think about Jace. I definitely don't want to think about what will happen if it turns out that I *am* carrying his baby. It would certainly make it harder for me to walk away from him quietly.

"Why did this have to happen right now?" I groan.

"Because when it rains, it pours," Louise says soberly. "Come on, let's go get some chocolate ice cream and eat it while watching sappy movies. You can stay with me as long as you need to."

"Thanks, Louise," I say.

I'm really grateful that she's here. I have no idea what I would do if I ended

up having *no* support through any of this. Having somewhere to go and someone to help me through this, especially if it turns out that I am pregnant, means the world to me right at this moment.

“Oh, by the way... I sent in my resignation last night,” I say to Louise.

Louise sighs gustily.

“We’ll talk about that in a few days,” she says, rolling her eyes. “For now, let’s just get home and ignore the rest of the world.”

“Sounds perfect,” I say.

I can ignore the world for the next two days, I decide. Just until I get the next test done and the world decides to come crashing around my ears again.

Because, as much as I don’t want to, I already know what the result will be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Jace

I pass by the coffee shop that Faith and I met in and look away. I try to call Faith again, this time leaving a message.

“Hi, Faith, we need to talk,” I say as I power walk down the street. “I know you sent in your resignation today, but not showing up...” I take a deep breath. This isn’t the way I want to go. “Sorry. Please just pick up the phone. I don’t know what happened. I just need to see you.”

I hang up the phone. I don’t even know if Faith will listen to the message. It doesn’t matter. I’m on my way to her apartment. I’ll see her in a moment.

I am literally too frustrated. It’s Monday morning, and Faith should be at work. But she isn’t, so I have to chase her down.

Except I’m not chasing her for work. I’m chasing her to see if she still wants me anymore in her life.

I just don’t understand what has changed. The only thing I can think of is that she got completely the wrong idea regarding my employment of Corina. When I first spoke to her about it, she seemed determined to do what she could.

Did she think about it more later and realize she didn’t like Corina being around? Did she see the way Corina was always in my office, needing attention? Did she think something more was going on between us?

I really should have been more sensitive to Faith. Corina is my friend, yes, and she’s in need, but I should have sat down with the two of them and outlined just what my relationship with each of them was.

I should have reassured Faith that, despite my history with her, Corina and I are just friends, and all I wanted was to help her out during a time of need.

Now, Faith has disappeared, likely with the wrong idea. She was already unsure about our relationship and her status of being the girlfriend of her boss. Having Corina around likely just made it so much worse.

I reach Faith’s apartment block and look up. It’s one of those that requires a key code to get in. Did Faith tell me the code? I try to remember the first time Faith invited me to her apartment. She was trying to find her keys in her bag and asked me to punch in the number. Three, five, seven, two.

I put the numbers in and the light turns green. I'm through the door faster than I can blink. One hurdle down. Now I just have to get Faith to open the door.

I make it to the third floor in record time, taking the stairs two at a time because I'm too impatient to wait for the elevator. By the time I reach Faith's door, I'm breathless, but adrenaline is pumping through my veins. I'm here. Faith *has* to hear me out.

I rap on her door and wait, fidgeting on the spot. Obviously, Faith and I need to work more on our communication if something like this can happen. When no one comes to the door, I knock again, louder.

There's no way Faith knows it's me. I should be at work. Surely she isn't going to just ignore someone at the door? I listen closely for any sound that could indicate that Faith has approached the door to look through the keyhole, but the apartment is utterly silent.

Frowning, I step back. That's when I see it, half of a flyer stuck under her door. From what I can read, upside down, one of her neighbors is having a party, and they're kindly letting everyone else know in case it gets rowdy.

My heart sinks. If this is still under the door, it means someone put it here while Faith was away, and she has yet to pick it up. She's not here.

Where the fuck could she be then?

I draw in a deep breath. If Faith isn't home today, I'll just try again tomorrow. I'll keep trying until Faith answers me so we can at least talk this out like rational adults. Besides, she needs a reference from me if she wants a new job, right? At some point, she's going to *have* to talk to me.

Unfortunately, it means that I've been defeated today. I run a hand through my hair and turn away, disappointed. The problem must be far worse than I thought if Faith isn't even home for me to find her. Has she gone to a friend's house? I remember her telling me about her best friend, Louise.

Suddenly, my phone rings. I don't feel like answering it, but it could be work-related, so I pick it up.

"Jace Sanders, speaking," I say.

"Sir?" It's Sebastian, and my shoulders slump. "You didn't reply to my message and I haven't heard from Faith either."

"Sorry," I say gloomily. "I was just trying to find Faith, too. I'm at her apartment."

"Her apartment?" Sebastian asks, confused. "Has something happened?"

"I have no idea," I admit. "We went on a date on Friday night. When I woke up the next morning, she was gone, and I haven't been able to get hold of her. When I looked through my emails this morning, she'd sent me a resignation letter."

"What the hell did you do?" Sebastian asks incredulously.

I glare at the wall, hurt that Sebastian would automatically assume this was my fault.

"Nothing!" I snap. Then I slump. "Though she might have gotten the wrong idea when I hired Corina."

“Ah.” Sebastian is silent for a moment. “Did you tell Faith that you and Corina are only friends?”

“Yes,” I say defensively.

“Did you tell Corina that you are dating Faith?” Sebastian continues.

“I did,” I say.

“Then, did you tell Faith that Corina knew and that you are absolutely not interested in getting back together with Corina?”

I open my mouth to reply, think about it, and then snap it close. I close my eyes.

“No,” I sigh.

“There lies the problem, then,” Sebastian snorts. “You have some explaining to do when you catch up to Faith, it seems. Though she’s not innocent in this either. She should have spoken to you regarding her concerns.”

I wince, feeling chastised.

“Yeah,” I say gloomily.

“Your relationship with Faith is still very new,” Sebastian says, his voice softening. “I’m sure the two of you will work things out between you.”

“Thanks, Sebastian,” I say genuinely.

“And a word of advice,” Sebastian says before I can hang up. “If Faith has the wrong idea... maybe you should ask Corina about it.”

He hangs up before I can reply. I stare at the phone, shocked. Ask Corina? Dread starts to roll in the pit of my stomach.

Now, more than ever, I know that something isn’t right.

* * *

When I get back to Amity Greens, I’m in two minds. Should I ask Corina as Sebastian says? But that implies that Corina has something to do with this, and I’m loath to believe it. Corina is my friend, one of the only two true friends that I have.

Isn’t she?

Or am I just being stupid?

Maybe she *does* have something to do with this... but I heard what she said earlier. She didn’t think my relationship with Faith would end in anything other than tears. She definitely shouldn’t be getting involved, but her interference could be well-meaning.

Despite how hard I try to convince myself of this, I still can’t stop my gut clenching as I stop by Corina’s new office, hesitating outside the door. I take in a deep breath and rap smartly on the wood.

“Come in!” Corina calls.

I open the door. I haven’t actually visited this room myself. Faith and the others definitely did a good job of decorating it. Corina looks up from her computer, the sour look on her face transforming the instant she sees it’s me.

“Jace!” she says, standing hurriedly. “Is everything all right? I saw you leave the building.”

“I had to go check on Faith,” I say, watching her closely.

I didn’t imagine the way her expression twitched momentarily into something unpleasant at the sound of Faith’s name.

“Did you find her?” Corina asks after a moment.

“No, she wasn’t home,” I say. “I’ll try and catch her tomorrow.”

“I don’t know why you’re trying so hard,” Corina says with a note of irritation. “Faith has made it clear where she stands, hasn’t she?”

“Maybe,” I say. “But Faith hasn’t given me the chance to talk to her properly and put everything on the table. I won’t give up until I get that. Hopefully, when we talk to one another, we can figure out what actually happened and where we both stand.”

“What actually happened?” Corina repeats.

“Yes,” I say slowly. “For example, maybe Faith heard something that scared her.”

Corina goes very still, wiping all expression off her face. I feel sick. At that moment, I know exactly why Sebastian told me to talk to Corina. How is it possible that my PA knows my ex-girlfriend better than I do?

“What did you say to her, Corina?” I ask.

“How dare you!” Corina yells. “What makes you think I have anything to do with this?”

“All you’ve done since you found out Faith left is tell me how Faith was never right for me, and that I should just give up on her,” I say. “And when I first told you about Faith, you tried to sow doubt then, too. But it didn’t work. I wanted Faith too much. So you went for Faith next, didn’t you? Why?”

Corina grits her teeth.

“All I’ve ever done is look out for your best interests,” she snaps.

“Try the other one,” I shoot back. “You’ve always been self-absorbed. You’ve never done anything unless it benefits you in some way. I always knew that about you, but I was friends with you anyway. What I don’t get is how breaking Faith and me helps you at...?”

I trail off, staring, as the answer hits me square in the face. Corina’s face pales as comprehension washes over my expression.

“You... want a relationship with me?” I ask.

It sounds ridiculous to say the words out loud. But Corina looks away with a scowl, and I know I’m right. Corina has tried to get between us because she wanted to be with me.

When Corina and I were together, I always knew about this aspect of her personality. She didn’t care whose toes she trod on to get what she wanted in the end. Eventually, it was just one of her traits that I found I couldn’t live with any longer.

And now she’s done it all over again. She’s hurt Faith to try and get me back. She didn’t care that I was happy with Faith. She only cared that *she* got what she

wanted.

“Why?” I ask numbly.

“I still love you,” Corina says.

I stare at her. I don’t know this woman. Or, maybe I do. She’s the same selfish, lying woman that I broke up with over a year ago. The woman that spent as much of my money as she could, and then complained when I set a limit, one of the reasons *she* wanted to break up.

She hasn’t changed a bit.

Does she still love me? I don’t actually know. Towards the end of our relationship, I often thought that she loved my money far more than she loved me, and part of me still believes that. Maybe she just loves the way things used to be, and with her parents leaving her nothing but a weekly stipend, she’s searched out the next best cash cow. I don’t know.

I don’t care.

“Leave,” I say in a low voice.

“What?” Corina asks, shocked.

“Get out of my company,” I say. “I’ll help you get another job if you want, but I don’t want you at Amity Greens anymore.”

“You’re *firing* me?” Corina asks incredulously. “But I love you!”

“I don’t care.” Harsh, but true. “Love isn’t just going after what you want at the expense of everyone else. You didn’t care at all that I was already happy.” I open the door behind me. “Leave now. If you want a reference, I’ll provide you with one.”

Corina stares at me. Her shock slowly transforms into a fury that converts her beautiful face into something feral. She snatches up her coat and bag and stalks out of the room, brushing past me with her head held high.

As I watch her go, I wonder how long it will take her to bite the bullet and ask me for help. Then I sigh. It seems that I’ve royally messed up in more ways than one. Now, more than ever, I need to talk to Faith.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Faith

“**M**aybe this feels a little weird, since I’ve already done it, but congratulations,” Doctor Booth says with a wide smile. “You’re pregnant!”

It feels like a nightmare. For two days, I honestly hoped that there was some sort of mistake in all this. But now the final confirmation rings in my ears, like a fatal bell.

“How can you tell?” Louise asks curiously, shooting a quick glance at me.

“Remember how I said Faith’s hCG levels were a little high last time?” Doctor Booth asks. “They’ve risen quite a bit in twenty-four hours. That kind of rise doesn’t happen without a cause. This is the indisputable proof that she’s pregnant.”

Pregnant... I’m really, really pregnant. I feel tears begin to slip down my cheeks. I’m not ready for this.

“Hey,” Doctor Booth says, his cheer finally turning to concern. “I’m sorry... are you okay?”

“No,” I choke, taking the tissue he hands me. “I’ve just broken up with the baby’s father because he was cheating on me.”

Doctor Booth’s expression turns horrified.

“Possibly,” Louise hurries to say with a sigh. “We haven’t actually spoken to him yet, and the evidence is flimsy at best. Thanks, doctor. Leave it with us.”

“All right,” the doctor says, looking between us. Sympathy covers his features. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to come and see me.”

The kindness makes more tears spill and I choke back a sob. Everything is finally hitting me at once. I just don’t know what to do now.

“Come on,” Louise says gently, tugging lightly on my elbow. “Let’s get you home, all right?”

Louise bids Doctor Booth goodbye and leads me down to the first floor so we can get to the parking lot. Her car is thankfully parked nearby; several people have already given me sympathetic looks, as though they assume I’ve just gotten the worst news possible.

The news isn't as bad as all that, I can admit. But it certainly isn't great either.

"Anywhere you want to go?" Louise asks as she gets into the driver's seat. "Anything special you need?"

"Ice cream," I say, trying to wipe my eyes dry. "Lots of ice cream."

"We can do that," Louise says. "Next stop, supermarket. Did you want to sit in the car or come in with me?"

"Car," I say. I don't want to run into anyone else.

Louise nods and doesn't say anything else on the way to the mall. However, when she parks and turns off the engine, she turns to look at me.

"I know you probably don't want to think about it right now, but you've got the confirmation," she says. "And it's better to get everything out into the open, so think about it while I'm gone, okay? What are you going to tell Jace?"

My stomach sinks. If I'm pregnant, the baby is definitely his since I've never been with anyone else at all. Louise sighs and pats me on the shoulder before leaving me to my thoughts.

What am I supposed to do about Jace? Of course, since it's his child, I should tell him. But that would mean coming face to face with him, and I just don't want to do that right now. I cover my face with my hands. I can't keep this a secret from him, though. It wouldn't be right.

My thoughts are circling. I have no idea what I want. No, that's wrong. I wish I am not pregnant. But it seems that I can't have that.

I wish things could go back to the way they were before Corina had come. I would still be pregnant, of that I'm fairly sure, but Jace and I would be discovering the pregnancy together. Talking about what we're going to do next.

Instead, I have Louise. She's wonderful, and I love her to bits, but she has her own life to live and fiancé to concentrate on. I can't ask her to support me and my unborn child. She would probably do it in a heartbeat if I asked, but I won't.

That means it's going to be up to me to support the kid. I'm going to have to get things ready. Clothes, toys, cribs, food... I need to make sure my apartment is ready... I need to make sure I'm earning money... I need a job... fuck, I just quit my job!

The car door opens and I turn to face Louise, who freezes as she slides in behind the wheel again.

"I need a job!" I exclaim.

"You have one," Louise says.

"I quit it," I say. I run an anxious hand through my hair. "Fuck, right at the worst possible time. I'm going to need to ask Jace for a reference. Do you think he'll give me one? I'm not ready to talk to him yet."

"How did this happen?" Louise demands. "I left you here to think about whether or not you're going to tell Jace about the baby. How did we get on to jobs?"

"I..."

I falter. I've given myself my answer, haven't I? All my plans are centering around how I can look after the baby and support it on my own. Not once did I think about asking Jace for support.

It seems I've made my decision.

"No," I say after a moment. "It would be better just to cut all contact. If Corina is who he really wants, I don't want to get in the way of that."

"You should get in that bitch's way as much as possible," Louise grumbles. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," I say firmly. It's the surest I've been about anything lately. "I want Jace to be happy."

Louise glances at me. There's a sad look on her face that I don't quite understand. She reaches over and puts a comforting hand on my shoulder, squeezing it gently for a moment.

"You deserve to be happy, too," she says softly.

* * *

By the time we arrive back at Louise's apartment, I've worked myself into a flurry of hysterical anxiety. If I'm truly going to support this baby on my own, I need a job.

That means I need to type up my resume again.

And I need references. Will Miller give me a reference if I beg him, or will I have to message Jace? Neither option is very appealing right now. I scrub a hand through my hair as I stare at the blank notebook in front of me.

"What are you doing?" Louise asks from the kitchen.

"Making lists," I reply absently.

"Start with the easier list," Louise advises. "What do you need to do for the baby right now?"

I frown.

"Make appointments?" I ask. "Do some research?"

"What are you asking me for?" Louise asks dryly. "Write it down."

I hurry to jot the notes down on my paper. All at once, I feel better, like I'm actually doing something rather than just staring blankly into space.

"I need to look into what to buy before the baby comes," I say, turning to a new page and starting a new heading. "I'll need a crib, clothes..."

I bite my lip and write down everything that comes to mind. I have no idea if I need all this stuff. My own mother had passed away long ago and none of my friends were parents, so I didn't have anyone to ask.

"Don't stress too much about things like that," Louise advises. "I'll throw you a baby shower and people will buy you most of the things on that list. So wait until after that and we can buy whatever's left."

The thought relieves me. Without a job, I'm going to be in a little trouble. Having to pay for all this baby stuff would put a huge dent in my savings.

"All right, job, then," I decided, starting a third page. "I need a job. One that won't mind that I'm pregnant and will have to take maternity leave."

"You should just apply to work at a child care center," Louise says with a snort. "That way you can take your baby to work with you when you come off maternity leave."

I stare at her with wide eyes. Is that a possibility?"

"It's a joke, Faith," Louise says with a grimace. "You need qualifications to work in child care, and you don't have enough time to get them and then get a job before you go into labor."

"Oh," I say, disappointed. Still, that does bring up another issue... "What am I supposed to do with the kid when I come off maternity leave?"

"Look into a nanny or a child care center?" Louise suggests.

I slump and scribble the suggestion down. Another money waster. I hesitate and then write down two more options. Louise, looking over my shoulder, hums.

"Work from home," she reads. "And 'Get support from Jace.' Well, I definitely agree with the second option, there."

"That's only if we run into really big problems," I grumble. "I don't want to rely on him at all."

"You know, even if he wants a relationship with Corina, he's going to want to know that he has a child," Louise points out. "You don't have to be with him for him to know his kid. And the child is eventually going to wonder who his or her father is."

I know all of that, of course. The thoughts haunt me at the moment. But what else am I meant to do about it? If I don't do it like this, right now, I'm going to end up driving myself crazy.

Perhaps Louise realizes this, because she takes a step back.

"Do what you have to do," she says gently. "And I'm always here to help if you need me." She grins suddenly. "I can't wait to have a cute baby to cuddle."

Her sudden cheer startles a surprised laugh out of me. I have to admit, babies *are* cute. I'm not an idiot, though. A baby might be adorable, but it will also be *a lot* of work.

"I suppose there's one question we haven't asked in all this," Louise says after a moment. "You're keeping the baby then?"

I blink, surprised. That thought hadn't even crossed my mind. And, when I answer, it's with the firmest tone I've used all day.

"Yes," I say. "Definitely."

It's going to be hard. I still don't know if I want to accept any support from Jace, and I know Louise is hoping I eventually change my mind. On top of that, I still need a job.

But I'm keeping the baby. If nothing else, this baby is Jace's, and there's no way I can do anything other than carry it safely and love it as much as possible.

Even if I've already lost the fledgling love I was starting to develop for Jace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Jace

One week later, there has been no word from Faith, and she hasn't returned to her apartment. Not liking the way her mail is spilling out of her box, I end up taking some of it and putting it in a growing pile on my desk, ready to give to her when I finally see her again.

But when?

My work is suffering. I have so much to do with Finest Pantry and Amity Greens, yet I can barely concentrate on any of it. The settlement for the new building will be completed soon, which means I need to organize the repairs so we can move sooner rather than later, but I haven't done that either. I haven't even announced to the company that I've bought the other building yet, which I know will raise morale, especially with Faith gone.

It's hard to want to raise *their* morale, however, when *my* morale is also at an all-time low. I really thought I would get hold of Faith by now, but she's good at hiding, it seems.

I assume she's staying at a friend's place, likely the friend she spoke of, Louise. Unfortunately, there are likely thousands of women named Louise in the city. I don't know her last name, and I don't even know what she looks like.

Yesterday, I bit the bullet and tried to ask Michael, from finance, about Faith. He seemed just as worried about Faith's disappearance as I am. Unfortunately, he couldn't do much other than confirm that Faith's best friend was named Louise. He had never met her either. None of the other employees could help much more.

It's great that Faith is such a private person, but it's *really* not helping me right now!

"Damn it, Faith," I mutter, reading the same sentence for the fifth time. "Where the hell are you?"

After a week, I feel a little better about everything. I still don't approve of Corina's motivations, but the anger I felt had cooled down a little. She sent me a cold, impersonal email yesterday, asking for a reference, and I was happy to give it to her (if only so she didn't come back to me looking for a job). I have a

feeling that our friendship is well and truly over.

There's a knock at the door and I look up. To my surprise, it's Sebastian.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, confused.

"I left Robert in charge of Finest Pantry for a little while, so I could come and see how things are here," Sebastian says. He fixates the mounds of paperwork on my desk with a stern look. "It seems that I've come just in time."

I slump.

"Sorry, I'm letting things get on top of me," I say.

"That's fine," Sebastian says. "But you should have asked me for help long before now. We'll talk after. For now, we need to get back on track."

I've never appreciated Sebastian more than I do at this moment. True to his word, he doesn't ask any questions, simply works side by side with me for hours. Having him there, beside me, in the familiar routine helps me keep on task, and I'm able to push all thoughts of Faith out of my mind for now.

Before long, I look up to see that the afternoon is already starting to wane, and I stretch. We've made a huge dent in the pile, and I feel better now that I see some form of organization on my desk. I also feel guilty; I'm usually far better at keeping on track than this.

"Thanks, Sebastian," I say genuinely. "I really couldn't have done it without you."

"It's fine," Sebastian says. He leans back in his seat. "Now, what's going on?"

Everything, to be honest. I run a hand down my face tiredly.

"Did you know about Corina?" I ask.

"I suspected," Sebastian says with a shrug. "She's always been very selfish, and it was too coincidental that Faith would disappear not long after Corina arrives."

"I didn't see it," I say, grumbling.

"You were too close," Sebastian snorts. "Faith is your girlfriend and Corina was your friend."

"Hopefully, Faith still *is* my girlfriend," I say gloomily.

Sebastian picks up a rubber band and pegs it with pinpoint accuracy. It bounces off my forehead.

"Ow!" I yelp, glaring at him. "What was that for?"

"To remind you to stop being an idiot," Sebastian says with a glare. "Where is the man who fought tooth and nail to have Finest Pantry established? You've never given up on anything. You know there's another reason behind Faith leaving you. Are you just going to give up before you make things clear?"

"No," I protest. "Not at all."

"Then stop looking so dour," Sebastian says, rolling his eyes. "It doesn't suit you. You haven't lost yet. You haven't even put your piece on the board."

"That's fair enough, but I can't even *find* her," I protest. "I've considered just sending her a message to explain, but I don't think she'll read it."

"Maybe she will," Sebastian points out.

"Maybe." I hesitate. "But I want to explain in person. I want her to be able to *see* that I'm telling her the truth."

"That's fair," Sebastian says with a nod. "Have you thought about where she could be at all?"

"I'm assuming she's staying with her friend, Louise," I say thoughtfully. "She has no other family in the area, and she's always talking about Louise, so I assume they're close. But I've never met Louise and I have no idea where she lives or what she does for a living."

"Does anyone here know anything?" Sebastian suggests.

"I'm not an amateur," I say, giving a snort. "I've already asked. None of them know."

"Or they're unwilling to say it, perhaps to protect Faith's privacy," Sebastian says.

I pause. I hadn't thought of that.

"You're still a stranger who has intruded on a tight-knit group," Sebastian continues. "On top of that, your failure to step into Faith's shoes and be someone they can rely on when she's not here has likely not endeared you to them."

I wince. That's fair.

"You're right," I sigh. "Tomorrow, I'll gather them around. I'll tell them about the new building and start organizing them and myself better."

"Good," Sebastian says with a firm nod. "You'll find that you'll feel better once you do that. And when you do find Faith, you'll be able to tell her that you looked after her company while she's away."

When, not if. I smile slightly.

"You haven't forgotten it's *my* company, have you?" I ask with a laugh.

"Only in name, sir," Sebastian says with a wink.

I laugh again, suddenly feeling lighter. Sebastian is right. The best thing I can do at the moment is to keep moving forward with my plans. Then I can look Faith in the eye and tell her everything is okay, for real.

"Thanks, Sebastian, I think I needed that," I say.

"I'm always here to keep you in line," Sebastian says dryly, standing. "I'll be back tomorrow to tackle this hill, which is at least better than the mountain it was."

"Great, thank you," I say. "You go home. I'm going to stay back and organize what I'm going to present to the company tomorrow."

"Don't stay too late," Sebastian says, already heading to the door.

"I'll try," I say with a smile.

When he closes the door, I pull some paper toward me and pick up a pen, prepared to scribble some notes before tomorrow morning's meeting. Sebastian was right. It's time I pick my head up and keep Amity Greens running, only so I can tell Faith that I did it.

* * *

There's a nervous air in the room as I walk in the next morning. Sebastian has already gathered everyone for me. They're likely anxious. With how little I've been seen lately, and the next to no progress that has been made this week, this meeting had the potential to end very badly.

"Sorry to call everyone here so abruptly," I say as I head to the front of the room. "I just had some news to share with everyone, and there are plans that need to be made. Firstly, this week the settlement for our new headquarters will be finalized."

The air in the room immediately shifts from nervous to excited. I wish Faith was here to see all of this. I push the thought away. She isn't, and I need to focus on what I can do right at this moment.

"That means there are decisions to be made," I say, raising my voice to speak over the soft murmur that starts. "First, some repairs will need to be done on the building... don't worry, I'm not expecting any of you to do that." I smile at the laughter. "But we do need to take stock of everything we're bringing with us as well as everything we're getting rid of. Then we need to see what's left and make a list of everything that we need."

"A lot," someone says from the back, making everyone laugh again.

"A lot," I agree. "But, on that list, I want *everything* you can think of. We can chop and change if need be, but don't think anything is too much. I'll be getting a brand-new set of computers for each department, as well as printers, new internet cables, and sound systems. That's just the start of it. We need furniture, kitchen implements, kitchen gadgets... everything. Company phones, company cars. I need a list of the number of employees each department is looking at hiring, and we can tailor what we need to that."

"I don't assume *everyone* will be getting a company car and phone," Michael, up in the front, says dryly.

"I'm not *that* rich... for now," I joke. "We'll get two cars to start with and have them covered with our name and logo for advertisement. We'll use them whenever we need to travel for company business. However, all management staff will be receiving new phones and laptops; the junk that you're using now won't cut it."

I put up my hand to forestall the expected protests. "You're all the managers of my company. You need top of the line equipment to do your jobs. If you expect Amity Greens to progress any further, this is a necessity. No arguments."

I know they want to protest because of the expense, but getting them new equipment is the least of my worries. I want them to be able to manage a company that they can be proud of. I want Faith to return and see everything that has been achieved in her absence.

"All right, we have a few weeks to organize everything, but that's not as long as you might think," I say, clapping my hands together. "There's a lot to do. Each person will start with their own department and we'll work from there. I want individual lists from everyone. If you need any help, don't hesitate to ask me or Sebastian, that's what we're here for!"

I hope I'm not imagining the fact that the expressions on my staff seem warmer. I feel better. I'm doing something other than just sitting at my desk worrying about everything. Things are moving.

I still don't know whether Amity Greens is going to be as profitable as everyone hopes it will be, but that doesn't matter to me. It isn't losing me money, as my lawyer feared, and the people within this building are amazing, making it all worth it. They remind me of myself when I struggled to make something out of a small idea.

I want them to realize their wishes, too.

"Ready?" I ask Sebastian.

"Yes," Sebastian says with a smile.

We split up, moving toward the rest of the staff, prepared to help if need be. I will make this a place Faith can be proud of, something she will know she saved so it could one day be great.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Jace

It's when I stop actively searching for Faith that the first major clue regarding her whereabouts drops into my lap.

I'm at the coffee shop the next morning, yawning as I wait for my coffee and bun. The morning is chilly, and I've crossed my arms to keep a little warmer, only half paying attention to the people around me.

"How are you this morning?" a kind woman asks behind the counter as she puts some fresh bread in the rack. It smells heavenly.

"Tired," I say.

"You look like it," the woman says, chortling. "Say, you were with Faith the other day, weren't you?"

Immediately, I straightened up.

"You know Faith?" I ask, shocked.

"She used to work here," the woman says with a smile. "She's such a driven, independent soul. She wanted quite a bit from the world. She was so worried a while ago, telling everyone here about how stressed she was that she might lose her job when the new owner took over. We were all happy to hear that she didn't."

So, Faith is close enough to this woman to not only tell her about her worries, but also to share good news with her. I step closer, anxious to hear more.

"I'm actually looking for Faith, too," I say. "There was a misunderstanding... or, rather, someone did something horrible..."

I shake my head. My thoughts are all over the place. I didn't think about coming here to ask about Faith. "She hasn't been home all week and she's ignoring my calls."

"Oh?" the woman asks, raising an eyebrow. "What did you do to her?"

"I..." I slump. "My ex-girlfriend, who had become my very good friend, fell on hard times so I offered her a job. I told Corina I was with Faith, but she went out of her way to break us up. I don't know what Faith believes, but I need to make it right."

The woman nods slowly.

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” she says. “Do you have any idea where she might be staying?”

“I thought she might be staying with her best friend, Louise,” I say.

“Louise Stan?” the woman asks musingly. I freeze, shocked. “Yes, she would likely be there. Louise wouldn’t stand for anything less than to take care of her friend at a hard time.”

Just like that, I have Louise’s last name. I can’t believe how easy it was after an entire week of looking. My heart is racing.

Louise Stan.

With a last name, I can find her.

I can find *Faith*.

“Thank you!” I say, seizing the woman’s hands and shaking them. “I can’t tell you how much that helps!”

“Sir, your coffee,” the girl behind the counter says, putting a coffee cup and paper bag on the table.

I shake the bemused woman’s hands one more time, grab my breakfast and dash out the door. I’m no longer feeling sleepy, at all. I know Louise’s last name. That means I can narrow down her friend and figure out where, exactly, Faith is.

I burst into the office, excited beyond words, making Sebastian jump violently and spill papers everywhere.

“What?” he yelps. “What’s the rush?”

“Louise Stan!” I exclaim. “It’s Louise Stan!”

Sebastian stares at me like I’ve gone crazy.

“And that means...?” he asks.

“Faith’s friend is Louise *Stan*,” I stress. “With that, I can find out where Louise lives, and where Faith is currently staying!”

“If she’s staying with Louise,” Sebastian points out, leaning down to pick up the dropped papers with a bemused expression.

“I can figure that out later, if it happens,” I say as I grab the phone and turn my computer on. “Don’t rain on my parade right now.”

I search the number I’m looking for and dial it with excited fingers. It rings twice before it’s picked up.

“Lucas Allen Detective Agency, how can I help you?” the voice on the other end drawls.

I would not count Lucas among my few friends. He is not as close as that. However, he is a formidable ally, and he’s always been able to help me when I needed it.

Last year, I had a leak in *Finest Pantry*, and it was only through Lucas’ help that I was able to find the culprit and fire them before any significant harm was done.

“Lucas, it’s Jace,” I say. “How are you?”

“Good to hear from you, Jace,” Lucas says, sounding genuinely pleased. “Cut the small talk. What do you want?”

"It's a simple job," I assure him. "I need you to find a woman for me. Her name is Louise Stan."

"Oh?" Lucas says, sounding interested. "A jilted lover?"

"No, she's *hiding* the jilted lover," I say with a grimace. "Please, I need your help on this one, it's very important to me. Can you do it?"

"Of course," Lucas says, voice going serious. "I'll get you her address before the end of the day. Just give me some time to work."

"Thank you," I reply, relieved. "I can't tell you how much this means to me."

"Somehow, I think I can figure it out," Lucas says. "I'll call you back in a few hours."

He hangs up and I sit back in my chair, relieved. It's hard to believe that I might find Faith. She had disappeared so thoroughly on me that it forced me to realize that there's still so much I don't know about her.

But I want to know everything about her. Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with her. What she wants, how she feels... all of that is so incredibly important to me.

I can't imagine never being able to see her again. I need to get to her and clear up this misunderstanding.

And if she still decides she doesn't want me from there... well, I'll deal with that if it comes to it.

I just really hope it doesn't.

"He's going to help?" Sebastian asks.

"Yeah," I say, pleased. "He said he'll have Louise's address by the end of the day. I hope she isn't too upset that I've invaded her privacy like this."

"Deal with that after," Sebastian advises. "Now, in the meantime, we still have work to do. Let's get this finished."

"Sounds great," I say, picking up my pen.

I'm in such a good mood that even the thought of tackling the small mound of paperwork that's left won't get my spirits down. I'm going to find Faith.

And then, I'm going to explain everything.

* * *

When the phone rings again, around four o'clock, I instantly drop my pen to dive for it. I've been on tenterhooks all day, waiting for this call.

"Hello," I answer breathlessly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Jace," Lucas says. "I have your address. Do you have something to write on?"

I search rapidly to find a small book of sticky notes. I pick my pen up.

"Go ahead," I say, unable to stop the excitement.

Lucas rattles off the address. It isn't too far from here, actually, and it stuns me to think that Louise, and therefore Faith, has been within walking distance this entire time.

"Thank you, Lucas," I say wholeheartedly.

"*Don't mention it,*" Lucas says dismissively.

"Just send me your bill," I say with a smile. "I'll pay for it as soon as I receive it."

"Not this time," Lucas says. "Call this one a favor for a desperate friend."

He hangs up before I can reply. I stare at the receiver, shocked. I honestly thought that Lucas only saw our relationship as a professional one.

It seems I have more friends than I thought I did.

"You've got the address?" Sebastian asks.

"Yeah, got it," I say. I relax back in my chair. "I'll head over there when I'm done."

Sebastian stacks everything into a small pile and then, to my confusion, pulls it all toward himself.

"Looks like you're done," he says. "You can go now."

"What?" I ask, taken aback. "But there's still so much to do."

"This pile is mine," Sebastian says. "You can call it a day, you've done enough."

"I don't think it works like that," I say, still not quite understanding. "If we both do the work, we'll both be finished quicker, so let me..."

"Jace." I jump at the sound of my name said so seriously. I look into Sebastian's eyes. "Go find Faith."

All at once, it hits me what Sebastian is doing. I have Faith's location. Sebastian wants me to go and find her. Now.

I don't want to leave him with all this work, especially since it's mine, but I have the feeling he won't let me do anything else.

"Thanks," I say, standing.

"Tell her to call me when she's back at work," Sebastian says flippantly. "I have a list for her."

"I will," I say with a laugh. "Really, Sebastian, I can't thank you..."

"Go," Sebastian says with a shooing motion, rolling his eyes.

I laugh and leave the room, almost jumping down the stairs. My heart feels lighter than it has all week. To think that an offhand comment by the woman at the café would have finally clued me into Faith's location.

I think about taking a car, but it's only a ten-minute walk from here, less if I run. I look up the address on my GPS, turn, and start to move.

Thoughts race through my mind at a mile a minute. Everything that I want to say to Faith jumbles through my mind and, with it, the worries come.

After a week apart, will Faith hear me out? What happens if I get there and she isn't staying with Louise, after all? All this effort would have been for nothing.

But my excitement drowns out the concerns. She *will* be there. There's no way I'll accept anything less. She'll be there, and we'll finally be able to sort out exactly what happened between us. I'm so excited that I can hardly contain it.

I just hope everything continues to go well. I need this to go well. At least

that way I know I'll be able to say that I tried everything I could, right up until the end.

I shake the thought out of my head. Thinking about the *end* of a relationship isn't exactly productive when I'm going to find Faith so we can, hopefully, officially *start* one.

I see something out of the corner of my eye, and I slow to a stop. It's a flower shop. Exactly what I need. I don't think flowers will win Faith over, but they'll hopefully help.

I have no intention of making any more mistakes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Faith

When I sat down a week ago to start making plans, I was certain that I would get out there, find a job, and begin a new life with my pregnancy.

None of my plans, however, had included skulking around Louise's house, depressed and anxious about what is to come next for me.

Sometimes, I imagine I can feel the baby growing inside of me. I'll lay on the couch or my bed, my hand on my stomach, trying to wonder what it must look like. It's the early stages, and high school health classes have taught me that the foetus was no more than the size of a pea at this stage.

But it's growing. I might not be able to physically feel it, but I know it. Sometimes the thought makes me happy. Despite what happened between us, Jace and I have created this *life*. That's something special.

And then there are the times when I'm not so pleased about it, when I sit and simmer in fury that this could have happened. Angry at myself, at Jace, and the entire world. I didn't ask to be pregnant. How is it fair that this happens to me just after losing my virginity?

In all fairness, neither of us had been very careful, but it feels like some sort of odd, cosmic joke. I wait until I'm utterly sure that the man I'm having sex with is the one I want, and I get repaid with his baby.

Well, more fool the universe on that one. Jace isn't my forever. That's more than clear.

When my thoughts cycle around this way, I inevitably fall back into the miserable depression that has dropped a cloud over me in the last few days. I miss Jace. I don't want to, but I do.

I don't say this to Louise, because she'll use that as ammo to try and get me to talk to him, but the lack of his presence is almost like a physical ache in my gut.

I miss the way he smiled at me and seemed to care. He doesn't care, I try to remind myself, not enough, but I can't seem to convince myself that the way he looked at me was all a lie. There was that genuine interest in his eyes, once.

More than that, however, I miss the way that I was falling in love with him. It's startling to think about, because I tried not to, but it was impossible.

Did I ruin our relationship? My decision to keep the relationship both secret and casual could have been what drove the wedge between us, especially since I was actively ignoring my deepening feelings for Jace. That would try anyone's patience.

I can't ignore them now, though. I remember when Louise looked at me so sadly in the hospital parking lot when I claimed that I just wanted Jace to be happy. Now, I can see what she saw then. The fact that I said that meant that Jace's happiness is more important than my own.

How long have I been in love with him? The thought haunts me. Could I have stopped Corina from swooping in on him if I had been more honest in what I wanted?

I shake my head and roll over to hug the couch pillows. Does it really matter? Jace made his choice. I was sure to see it on the news any day.

I groan and pull myself to my feet, exhausted at the see-sawing emotions. I just want to be on solid ground again. I want everything to be normal.

It's too bad Louise isn't here. Her presence usually helps keep some of these thoughts at bay, and I try harder not to be miserable when she's around, not wanting her to worry too much about me.

However, she isn't here, and I've been left with the discomfort of my own thoughts. Louise has to live her life and do her job, and I need to move on with my life as well.

Maybe tomorrow, I decide. I'm too tired today.

I'm about to flop onto the couch when a knock comes at the door. I contemplate ignoring it, but this isn't my apartment. It could be an important message for Louise. I sigh and wander over to the door, clicking open the lock.

"Sorry, Louise isn't..." I start to say tiredly.

I trail off and freeze. The first thing I see is the huge bunch of flowers, full of vibrant, flowering blossoms of every color. The next thing I see is Jace's face behind it all, smiling at me.

I'm stuck in place. I didn't expect to see Jace today, or any time soon for that matter. I definitely didn't expect him to randomly show up at Louise's apartment. How did he even find it? As far as I know, he and Louise have never met.

"Jace?" I ask numbly.

"Hello, Faith," he says. "Can we talk?"

The question finally kicks me into gear. Anger races through me, thawing out my limbs. He dares to show up here with flowers, wanting to talk, after everything? I know I shouldn't be too angry; I can almost hear Louise in my ear, telling me that I still don't know the full truth of the matter yet.

But it doesn't matter. The resentment is welcome, because it's different from the mindless emotions, from raging fury to listless sadness, that I've been feeling lately. It travels through my veins, lighting me on fire from within.

"No," I say, snapping.

I take a large step backward and attempt to slam the door closed. Before I can, however, Jace's foot shoots out in desperation to stop the door, the man wincing as the heavy wood hits his foot through the soft leather of his shoe. Several petals fall to the ground, but he manages to hold onto the flowers.

"Please," he begs. "There's a lot we need to talk about. So much has happened, and we need to put everything on the table."

"Have you been speaking to Louise?" I ask suspiciously. Is this how he found me? I don't think I could cope with the betrayal if that's the case. "That sounds like what she's been saying."

"I've never met Louise," Jace says, shaking his head. "I swear. It took me a whole week of research, but I found Louise's last name from the owner of that café, who has been missing you lately by the way."

I pause. A week of searching?

"Why were you trying so hard to find me?" I ask blankly.

This isn't meshing with what I thought I knew. If Jace had been cheating on me with Corina, then why was he so desperate to find me? Why didn't he just let me go after I disappeared on him?

A tiny spark of hope lights in my heart before I can stop it.

"I had to," Jace says. "There's a lot we need to talk about. Please, can I come in?"

I hesitate and then step away, releasing my tight grip on the door. Jace smiles at me, relieved, and enters.

"These are for you," he says, handing over the colorful bouquet.

"Thank you," I say quietly. "I think Louise has a vase. Would you like coffee?"

I almost kick myself after the offer leaves my mouth. If I make him coffee, then it will give him the excuse to stay a little longer.

"Yes, please, it's been a busy day today," Jace says with a sigh as he takes a seat at the small dining table.

"Yeah?" I ask, interested despite myself. "Anything new happening?"

"Settlement for the new building will happen in a few days," Jace says with a proud smile. "I've got all the departments working on a list of everything they think they'll need when they've got more employees, as well as how many employees they think they'll need. With a comprehensive list, I can start buying everything to eventually take to the new building."

"Impressive," I comment. "Well done. I bet everyone is happy."

"They seemed excited," Jace says. "We can't move until the repairs are done, but this keeps everyone busy for now." He glances at me. "I know I'm not the only one who's hoping you'll be there to help us move."

I busy myself with the kettle, making two cups of coffee. There are two reasons why I couldn't help much. First, I'm pregnant, so heavy lifting is out.

Secondly...

"I resigned," I say bluntly.

"Oh, I saw that," Jace says flippantly as I bring his coffee over and take a

seat. "I'm refusing your resignation."

I blink, surprised. *That* wasn't the answer I was expecting.

"What?" I ask blankly.

"I refuse to allow you to resign," Jace repeats. "If you're going to leave us, at least do it properly. And you definitely can't take a two week holiday in order to not be there for your two weeks' notice."

I flush. I'd forgotten I'd written that.

"Look, I was angry when I wrote that, but I don't regret it," I say. "I just don't think it's a good idea for me to be there anymore."

"Because of Corina?" Jace asks.

I glance at him.

"What do you mean?" I ask warily.

"I noticed that Corina was talking to you a lot," Jace says. He's studying his coffee, not looking at me. "Did she happen to mention that I told her that we were dating?"

"What?" I gasp. "No, when did you tell her?"

Jace looks up. His eyes are serious, and there's a tiny bit of hurt there, too.

"On the first day the two of you met," he says.

The first day? But that means, after Jace told her that, she then came to me two days later and...

"That bitch," I say in shock.

"Yeah," Jace agrees. He grimaces. "She was telling me that you weren't good for me and feeding you stories about how close she is to me to make it seem like another relationship was possible between us. In the end, it was all just a nasty ploy to get what she wanted, yet again."

That's why he looks hurt. Corina was his friend, after all. Her attitude must be painful.

"Where is she now?" I ask gingerly.

"I don't know," Jace says with a shrug. "I fired her."

I'm not entirely certain I heard that right.

"Fired her?" I ask incredulously.

"As soon as I figured it out," Jace says. "I don't need someone in my company who will stab others in the back and spread lies. She hurt you and she hurt me. So I fired her. I offered her a reference so she could get another job, and she took it, but I don't know what happened from there."

My head is spinning. Jace fired Corina? He *wasn't* interested in getting back together with her like I believed?

"She did it all on purpose to break us up?" I ask.

"Yeah," Jace says in regret. "I'm sorry I didn't see it earlier. If I had, things definitely would have been very different."

"No... I didn't see it either," I say quietly.

I suddenly feel very foolish. I've been hiding away for over a week... for what? To hide from Jace because I thought he was cheating on me? Over and over Louise tried to tell me that I needed to talk to Jace about it, and I kept

refusing. If I had been far less stubborn, we would have gotten to the bottom of this days ago!

“She just... seemed so genuine,” I say, still shocked. “She kept saying how much she still loved you and regretted losing you, and that she could still see the connection she had with you. It all seemed so real.”

“I don’t know how much of what she said is real, and what isn’t,” Jace says, shaking his head. “But I really couldn’t care less. One of the reasons I broke up with her is because of her selfishness. She hasn’t changed a bit. Believe me, I never wanted another relationship with Corina. The first time was *more* than enough.”

I look at him and, finally, I believe it. I allowed myself to get so tangled up in my own thoughts that I pushed Jace away, frightened of getting hurt just when I had allowed myself to be vulnerable.

And now I feel like an utter idiot.

“So, can we talk about this?” Jace asks tentatively. “About us? Can we put everything on the table, now, and decide what we want to do?”

I give him a tremulous smile. There’s only one answer I can give him.

“Yes, we can.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Jace

Finally, *finally*, it feels like I'm getting somewhere.

There had been a part of me that feared that I would get here and Faith would completely ignore anything that I had to say. Getting through the door had been the hard part. Making her listen to me had seemed all but impossible.

But she is listening. She's sitting in front of me, staring at me in shock, as though she can't believe what I'm saying. I wonder what's going through her mind right now. Is she surprised that Corina betrayed us? Is she surprised that I fired Corina?

It doesn't really matter. What matters is that I finally feel like there's a chance to make things right between us. If we had only been better at communicating, all of this could have been avoided.

Going forward, that's the first thing we need to work on. Her distrust is painful, but also understandable. She knows very little about me, and I, her. If we want to make this work, we need to know more about one another.

"How... why would she do something so cruel?" Faith finally asks.

I'm not surprised that she asked. I've been expecting it.

"Corina has had everything given to her on a silver platter for a very long time," I sigh. "She was born into a very rich family to parents who just gave her whatever she wanted to keep her quiet. The entire family is selfish and self-absorbed. We could never see eye to eye, and we decided that we didn't work together. I'm not sure why she decided to give it another try."

Though... I have my suspicions. Surely it isn't a coincidence that she was cut off from her parents and then she comes to find me. I close my eyes briefly. That's a betrayal that I don't want to think about right now.

"So she saw me as a threat and tried to get rid of me," Faith says slowly.

"That's what I believe," I agree. I sigh and look up at her. "But it was never going to work."

She meets my eyes. There's electricity in the air between us.

"Why?" she whispers.

“Because *you’re* the one I’m in love with,” I reply.

I thought it would be scarier to say the words out loud, but it isn’t. It just feels right.

“How can I not be?” I ask rhetorically, reaching across the table to link my fingers with hers. She doesn’t pull away, just stares at me, her eyes searching my face. “You’re smart, beautiful, and kind... you’re amazing. From the moment I met you, I knew I wanted you in my life. And the more I got to know you, I knew there was no going back. You’re it for me, Faith. You’re the only one I’ll ever want.”

Faith must have found what she was looking for. She presses her trembling lips together and tears gather in her eyes before she gives me a shaky smile.

“I thought... I thought you didn’t want me anymore,” she says, tears slipping down her cheeks. “I thought you had Corina, and she just seems so perfect...”

“She isn’t,” I say fiercely. “She will never be more important to me than you.”

I lift her hand and press a soft kiss to the back of it. And then Faith is on her feet, falling in my arms and burying her face in my shoulder. I breathe in her scent; she isn’t wearing perfume today, but the smell of her shampoo is familiar and comforting.

“I love you, too,” she chokes out, and my heart soars. “It hurt so badly when I thought you were going to leave me. That’s when I knew I had fallen in love with you. I’m so sorry. If I had just *talked* to you...”

“Yeah,” I say simply. “But I should have talked to you, too, so we’re even.”

She lets out a wet chuckle and pulls back. Tears cling to her eyelashes, but she’s smiling. It’s been so long since I’ve seen that smile, that I can’t help but lean in and kiss it soundly, relishing in the way she responds so eagerly.

And then, abruptly, she pulls back.

“Um... before we go any further,” she says. Oddly, she looks nervous. “There’s something I need to tell you about.”

My heart sinks. Thoughts of her finding someone else, or getting another job, or maybe even being in the process of moving across the country dart across my mind.

“I’m pregnant,” she says.

My thoughts stutter to a halt.

“What?” I ask blankly.

“I’m pregnant...” Faith repeats. “We’re having a baby.”

For a long moment, I just stare at her. But all the dread has completely disappeared.

“A baby,” I breathe. “We’re... having a baby?”

“Yeah,” Faith says. She gives me a tremulous smile. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, I thought...”

I reach out, and she trails off. I lay my hand on her still flat stomach, full of wonder. There’s a baby in there. *Our* baby.

I move before I’m even conscious of it. I kiss Faith fiercely, pushing all my

love, hope and amazement into that one kiss. Faith mewls under me, throwing her arms around her neck and pressing back just as strongly, our tongues tangling. When we pull apart, we're both gasping for air.

"We're going to work this out, together," I promise her, laying my forehead against hers. "You, me, and this child. Together."

Faith relaxes in my arms and a bright smile spreads across her face.

"Together," she agrees.

God, I want her so badly, I could take her here and now. But I'm suddenly mindful of the fact that we're in Faith's friend's apartment right now.

"Do you want to go somewhere more private?" Faith asks, almost as though she's reading my thoughts. "My apartment is closest."

"Sounds good," I say. "And when we get there, I want to show you just how much I love you right now."

Faith shudders and looks up at me through hooded eyes.

"I look forward to it," she says, her eyes low.

Shit, I don't want to wait. But I reluctantly let her go, watching her with every nerve in my body vibrating with need, as she rushes around the apartment, picking up her things to shove them in a bag. Then she grabs a pen and notepad off the kitchen counter, quickly scrawling a note on it.

"To let her know where I am," she explains.

"Why don't you send her a message?" I ask.

"I'll do that, but she doesn't always look at her phone straight after work," Faith explains, pulling her phone out of her pocket. She presses a few buttons and then slips it back. "I think I have everything."

"Great," I say, more than ready to go.

Faith grins and slips her hand into mine.

I pull her out of the apartment. It doesn't take us long to burst out of the front doors of the building. Remembering that I stupidly *walked* here, I hail a cab as it drives close, relieved that it doesn't have any passengers. I give him Faith's address and we settle into the back seat.

I want to touch her, but I settle for sitting next to her, our hands clasped firmly together. Every second stretches out agonizingly, and my heart is pounding within me, needing more and more and more.

Finally, the cab pulls up outside Faith's apartment, and I throw a few bills at the driver.

"Keep the change," I say, not even willing to stick around long enough to get money back as I pull Faith with me.

"Impatient?" she teases.

"I've been waiting for this since I last saw you," I say. "I don't even want to wait a few more seconds for you."

Faith grips my hand in silent apology. I wasn't asking for one, though. I press a soft kiss to her temple, breathing in her shampoo once more. It smells amazing on her. It tickles all my senses and makes me want to have her right here and now.

I know there are a lot of things Faith and I need to talk about. We need to clear the air between us, once and for all. We need to discuss what we want going forward. And we need to get to know each other better.

But that can all come much later. Right now, the only thing I want is to touch Faith. And, from the way she presses up against me as we ride in the elevator, she wants that too.

Everything else can wait. At this moment, I'll just hold her in my arms and keep her close.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Faith

Jace and I crash through the door of my apartment. Energy thrums through me. Far from settling my lust, the short wait between my apartment and Louise's apartment has only made my need grow to astronomical proportions. I can't wait to touch Jace and have him touch me in return. It feels like too long since we last were together like this.

I know that this is largely my fault. I allowed dark thoughts to take over my mind. I convinced myself of a reality that couldn't be further from the truth. If Jace had been the type to just walk away and forget about what we had, I'd never know what actually happened. I'd been left to raise our child on my own because I was too proud to ask for help from its father.

The shock of finding Jace on Louise's doorstep has long since faded. Everything he said about Corina is still whirling through my mind, but I've pushed it back and locked it away for the time being. I can deal with it all later. There's so much we need to discuss.

Later, though.

Right now, I just want Jace.

"God, Jace." I groan as Jace snaps the door shut behind us and presses me up against it. I can feel his throbbing erection, and I writhe between him and the door, my head falling back as his question fingers skim over my skin.

There's no time for play or niceties this time. It's been far too long since we've touched each other. We need to make it count.

I push Jace backward, and he stumbles back. Before he can wonder what happened, I'm in his arms, leaning up to kiss him fiercely, mapping out his mouth with my tongue before he regains his senses and deepens the kiss further. My heart is thumping in my chest as Jace pulls back slightly.

"You're perfect," he whispers. "I can't wait to fuck you again."

Yes, oh yes... that sounded amazing. Just the memory of the times Jace has been in me makes my heat levels skyrocket. Jace's touch is all that matters right now.

Jace must take my groan for an answer because he kisses me again. I regain

some of my senses and resume guiding him toward my closed bedroom door.

I pull at his clothes as we go, and his button-up shirt hits the floor quickly, followed by my old, overlarge t-shirt. We tear at each other's clothes, impatient to feel skin to skin contact as quickly as possible.

Before I know it, my track pants are lost somewhere in the room, and I push Jace up against the closed door of my room, my hand drifting down to feel for his zipper.

Jace shudders, and I can feel his cock through the material.

"You're so eager, Jace," I say, my voice low as I skim my palm over his cock. "It's a shame we don't have time; I'd love to suck you dry again."

Jace groans, bucking up at my words. I'm not lying though. Jace and I don't have much time before we completely burst with the need to have one another.

"Fuck, Faith," Jace gasps out.

"Soon," I promise.

I reach behind him, winding both arms around his torso, to fiddle around until I find the doorknob of my room and twist it. As I'm doing that, Jace takes advantage by unclipping my bra. I allow it to drop to the floor before pushing Jace into my room and toward the bed.

This bed was the one where we first had sex. For days afterward, whenever I went to bed, all I could think about was those precious moments when we had been connected. It thrills me to be back here now, remembering. It thrills me even more to know that I'll have him in this bed far more often from now on.

I push Jace backward onto my bed, and he sits down with a thump, his legs falling open so I can step between them. He looks up at me with hooded, darkened eyes, his toned chest rippling as he breathes.

As I run my hand over his muscles, I feel his heart thumping hard beneath his ribs. It's heady to know that it's my touch and proximity doing this to him.

I want to explore. I want to know every part of his body and be as familiar with all his scars, bumps, and curves as I am with mine. I want to know each spot that makes him jump or groan. I want this forever.

I'm such an idiot. If I had only admitted this to myself sooner, I wouldn't have gone through all this grief.

"Stop thinking," Jace says suddenly, making me look up at him in surprise. "I can almost hear how loudly you're thinking now." He grins and leans in to press a kiss to my bare shoulder. "If you're thinking that hard, I must be doing something wrong."

His hands drift down to my pants, skimming over my hips, and my back arches at the feeling, groaning as all other thoughts flee my mind. He's right. I want to focus on Jace right now, not on what could have happened before now. It's enough that we're here together now.

"What are you thinking about now?" Jace asks.

"You," I gasp as he tugs me in closer to him. "Just you."

"Good," he says in a low voice. "That's the way it should be."

He moves forward, wrapping his arms around me and hooking a leg behind

my knees. Before I can do anything else, the world suddenly shifts alarmingly, and I'm falling on my back onto the soft covers on the bed, looking up at Jace as he hovers over me with a smug smirk.

I can't even bring myself to be annoyed since his hands are instantly on my body, tugging at my pants as he flicks the button open, leaning down to suck on the skin between my neck and shoulder. I groan, my eyes fluttering shut, and wrap my arms behind his neck.

"God, don't tease me too much," I moan. "I need you to fuck me."

"I know," Jace says.

He pulls my panties down and I hear them hit the floor before there's the rustle of clothes. I open my eyes and get an eyeful of him dropping his pants, his weeping cock springing free. My mouth runs dry as I look at it. Fuck, I want that in me, now.

I wrap my legs around him and draw him in, writhing underneath him as lust runs through my body, too strong to ignore.

"Fuck me," I rasp.

"With pleasure," he murmurs.

I feel him line up against me, rubbing the tip of his cock against my entrance. My grip on his shoulders tightens until I'm surely leaving bruises, but I need something to anchor me. And then he's sinking into me.

But I don't want to be slow and gentle. It's been so long since I've had him. I want to know, without question, that he's here with me. I want to feel him so deep that I'll never forget the feeling.

"Harder," I hiss. "Fuck me hard."

I half expect him to protest. I haven't had sex that many times, after all. He pauses, but perhaps he knows what I need... and maybe he needs it, too. He shifts as he sinks fully into me, sliding back out and then slamming in again.

I cry out, my back arching. Some logical part of my mind tells me he's still being careful, but the rest of me can only focus on the way his hips piston back and forth, driving his cock into me over and over again. It almost feels like the first time all over again, so overwhelming that I can do nothing other than lay there and try to clumsily meet each thrust.

The seconds slip away in a haze of pleasure and movement, and all I can feel is Jace as he moves, grunting above me with each thrust, sweat beading on my skin. My hands scrabble for purchase on his shoulders, and my body jolts every time he moves, making the springs beneath us creak.

I can feel it coming up on me before long. I both want it and to force it away, desperate to hold onto this feeling for far longer. But my orgasm steals over me quickly and my vision whites out momentarily as I let out a garbled cry. Jace moves a few more times before the clench of my body around his cock becomes too much and he shudders with a shout.

I think I black out a little. When I open my eyes again, my body is thrumming gently with the aftershocks, and I'm lying flat on my back.

I catch my breath, feeling my racing heartbeat begin to settle. I look over at

Jace, who has collapsed beside me, with his eyes closed as he draws in deep, even breaths. As though he feels my attention on him, his eyes open and he turns his head to look at me. On meeting my gaze, he smiles softly.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

It’s a loaded question. My body is relaxed. My mind is a whirling maelstrom of emotion and thought that has broken through the moment conscious awareness returned to me, making me feel exhausted.

“Tired,” I finally say.

It’s not the answer Jace is likely looking for. But he smiles anyway and nudges my shoulder gently with his.

“We should get some sleep, then,” he says. “You look like you haven’t slept properly in days.”

“Because I haven’t,” I say ruefully.

After all, it’s hard to sleep when there’s far too much on my mind. Lying here with Jace now, though, I can feel sleep finally starting to creep up on me. It says a lot about how safe I feel with him.

But I resist it. I don’t want to go to sleep right now. I want to talk to Jace more and make sure he’s going to stay here with me.

Jace chuckles and scoots up the bed, pulling me with him. Clumsily, I crawl after him, and he throws the blankets over us. Then he tugs me against his side, his arm securely wrapped around my shoulders.

There’s no fighting it now. I feel safe and content. My eyes flutter closed. The last thing I remember, as I drift off, is a soft kiss to my temple.

* * *

When I wake, I start before I realize that I can still feel Jace holding me. I pause. Now that I’m more awake, the feeling of being held is both odd and soothing. I shift into a more comfortable position and I look up at Jace. He’s slumped against the headboard, reading something on his phone.

When he realizes I’ve moved, however, he looks down and grins.

“Hello, Sleeping Beauty,” he teases.

“How long did I sleep?” I ask with a small yawn.

“Long enough to make you look a lot better,” Jace observes.

I give him a half-smile.

“I guess we should get up and clean up,” I say.

But I make no move to do so, and neither does Jace. His arm tightens around my shoulders and I snuggle in, breathing in his unique, musky scent.

“Let’s just stay here,” Jace says, his warm breath blowing across my skin as he presses light kisses along my jaw. I can’t help but shiver. “I’m happy to spend the entire day in bed with the woman I love.”

My heart skips a beat. There it is again. And, this time, he isn’t emotional or tired or driven by lust. His words are soft and there’s a calm expression on his

face.

“Yeah?” I manage past a tight throat. “And what would you do all day in bed with the woman you love?”

Jace smiles against my skin.

“I would talk to her,” he says, punctuating each point with another, soft kiss down my neck. “I would worship her body. I would find out more about her and tell her more about myself. I would talk to her about our stupid communication skills. I would show her just how much I love her.”

I smile tremulously, tears burning in my eyes as he sits up.

“What if she already knows how much you love her?” she asks.

“Then I would just have to keep showing her for the rest of our lives,” Jace says simply.

I let out a watery chuckle. Jace has it all planned out, it seems. But I find that I don’t mind that.

“Sounds good,” I say, reaching out to twine our fingers together. “I love you, Jace.”

Jace grins at me. He’s happy, and that makes my heart soar.

“And I love you, Faith,” he says. He lays a hand on my stomach. “You, me and this baby... we’ll figure it all out as a family.”

I smile and lean against his shoulder. There’s still a lot to work through. But in this moment, none of that matters.

I know everything is going to be okay.

EPILOGUE



Faith

Three years later...

I whistle to myself as I move around the office, the tune jaunty and upbeat. I'm in a good mood today, and it doesn't feel like anything can ruin it.

Satisfied, I click the computer off and look around the office. As clean as it was when I arrived this morning. I cast a critical eye at Jace's desk. *His* large desk could use a clean, but I've already told him I absolutely refuse to clean it for him. I agreed to share this massive office with him, so we got used to it back when he first bought Amity Greens and we were forced to work together in a dingy little office, but I'm not going to clean up behind him.

Remembering that little office makes me smile fondly. We've come a long way since then. The next building we moved to was spacious and finally allowed us to hire more employees so we could get the company running. Jace worked tirelessly to make sure we could not only continue functioning, but also so that we could expand in the direction *we* wanted to go.

Three years later, Amity Greens is doing far better than I ever thought it would. It will never be one of those massive, chain superstores like Finest Pantry, but that doesn't matter. None of us ever wanted that anyway. What we wanted was to see Amity Greens thrive under our tender care. Now, with several family-orientated greengrocers opening under our name across the country, we've achieved that and more.

Together, we've made something fantastic. Just a few months ago, we were able to afford to upsize our building once more. We found the perfect place to buy and it was ours within the month. Moving was a hassle, but it was worth it. Moving again just made us all feel like we've accomplished more.

I hear the elevator ding behind me, but I don't turn and look, thinking it's one of the other employees. Then I hear a shriek of laughter and turn just in time to catch a three-year-old as she throws herself at me like a bullet.

"Mommy!" she exclaims.

"Lucy, what are you guys doing here?" I ask, pleased.

"We wanted to come and see you," Jace says with an easy smile.

When Lucy was born, I was incredibly stressed about what to do. It was Jace, however, that came up with the solution. Sebastian had run Finest Pantry while Jace was over at Amity Greens and I was managing Amity Greens long before Jace came along.

As such, he proposed a solution: his two PAs would both be promoted to senior executive staff, capable of making all decisions in Jace's absence. In return, Jace would do most of his work from home and take care of both Lucy and the house.

I was reluctant at first, especially when I had to go back to work following my maternity leave, but it's worked out amazingly. So much gets done, and someone is always with Lucy, which means we've never had to worry about getting nannies or babysitters unless Jace and I want a few hours to ourselves.

I smile at the thought. I hadn't thought I would see Jace today, but I'm glad that I have. I've been thinking something over all day, and now I'm certain I can tell him.

"Any plans for tonight?" Jace asks.

"Oh, I don't know," I purr. "I might have a hot date waiting for me?"

"Yeah?" Jace asks, voice deepening. "Don't tell your boyfriend, he might get jealous."

"Mm, I'll make sure not to," I say, leaning in.

Then Lucy knocks something over and I'm reminded that we have a three-year-old in the vicinity. I sigh and lean back, smiling ruefully at Jace. Lucy is a handful, but I certainly wouldn't have her any other way.

"What's for dinner?" I ask.

"Spaghetti and meatballs," Jace says with a grin.

"Yum, my favorite," I say with relish. "Is there a special occasion today?"

"Maybe," Jace says with a small smile. "Just give me a minute, okay?"

Bemused, I watch him head over to Lucy and pull a few books out of the bag he's carrying. I know I have some exciting news, but it seems Jace has something too. I grin. I'll let him go first.

"That should keep her occupied for a few minutes, which will hopefully be enough time," Jace says with a laugh.

"Enough time for what?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

Jace smiles at me and reaches out to wrap his hands around mine. Like always, his touch makes me feel safe and secure. I'm bursting with curiosity now. Whatever it is, it's big.

"Today, three years ago, I stepped into a tiny meeting room at Amity Greens, and said that I was your new boss," he says. "I still remember the utter shock on your face. Looking back now, it was hilarious."

"You were just as surprised," I say with a huff.

"I was," Jace laughs. "It was just the first of many hurdles. Between the company, Corina, and then Lucy... the world just didn't seem to want to give us a break."

“But we got through it,” I say with a warm smile. “It made everything completely worth it.”

“It did,” Jace says. His thumbs rub gentle circles on my hands. “Being with you these three years has been amazing. I’ve never been happier. I have you and I have Lucy. There’s almost nothing else I want.”

“Almost?” I tease.

“There’s just this one thing,” Jace says.

He lets go of my hands and, to my utter shock, drops to one knee. Of everything I was expecting to happen, this was not it.

“Faith,” Jace says, pulling a small box out of his pocket. “I’ll always treasure the day we met, because that day brought the most beautiful, amazing woman into my life. You’re the mother of my child, and my soulmate. With you, I’ll never want for anything. I’m yours forever. I’ll love you to the end of the world.” He flicks open the box. The diamonds on the ring sparkle in the light. “Faith Kelly, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Tears are running down my cheeks. I’m so happy right now that I can barely think straight. With a repressed sob, I throw myself at Jace, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Yes!” I exclaim. “Yes!”

The noise is enough to attack Lucy’s attention. She looks up from her books, highly confused to see Jace and I embracing so fiercely.

“Mommy? Daddy?” she asks.

“Hey, honey, come here,” Jace says as I pull back. He gestures over to her. “Your mother and I just had to talk about something is all. We’re going to have a big, exciting day coming up, soon. We’re going to get married.”

Lucy’s eyes sparkle. In one of the last fairy tale books I read to her, she wanted to know what marriage was. She’s probably still remembering my explanation.

“It’s when two people love each other so much that they want to be together forever.”

“Can I wear a pretty dress?” she asks enthusiastically.

“Of course,” I say.

“Yay!” Lucy cheers, so happy at just the smallest prospect. “I can’t wait!”

I laugh.

“Well, I think you might have to wait for a little while,” I say to her with a smile, deliberately not looking at Jace. “Maybe around nine months?”

“Nine months?” Jace asks, confused. “That’s pretty exact.”

“Well, if we have the wedding any earlier, I won’t fit into my dress,” I say casually.

It takes a moment for my meaning to sink in. When it dawns on him, Jace’s expression is the very picture of shock. I laugh, pleased that I was able to surprise him just as much as he surprised me.

“Wait... seriously?” he gasps.

“Yes,” I beam.

“What, what?” Lucy demands, looking between us.

“Lucy, before the wedding, there will be one more special thing,” I say to Lucy. “We’re going to welcome one more person into this family. You’re going to get a new baby brother or sister.”

Lucy stares at me, in awe. We enrolled her into a once a week program so she could interact with other children, and some of her friends have baby siblings. I smile fondly, waiting for her reaction.

Then, Lucy’s expression drops.

“I don’t want it,” she declares. “Take it back.”

I can’t help it. Laughter bubbles up in me. Lucy is too hilarious for words, sometimes. Jace is chuckling beside me.

“Sorry, kiddo, there’s no refund on babies,” he says. “Don’t worry, your baby brother or sister is going to need your help. Being a big sister is a very important job.”

“It is?” Lucy asks, looking a little suspicious as though she thinks we’re tricking her somehow.

“Very important,” I confirm.

Lucy huffs and runs off, not really caring for the conversation anymore. I chuckle and turn to Jace, finally ready to get his reaction.

“A wedding and a baby,” Jace says with a small smile. “It sounds like the start of a joke.”

“Instead, it’s the start of our forever,” I counter.

Jace smiles and leans in, cupping my cheek so he can kiss me softly. I long to deepen the kiss, but Lucy is here. Later, we can celebrate in private.

“You’re amazing, my beautiful fiancée,” he says.

My heart leaps. I’m his fiancée now. It feels so wonderful to say and hear.

“Here,” Jace says, taking the ring out of the box. “I’m assuming you were wordlessly saying yes?”

“Yes,” I say with a laugh. “I can’t wait to marry you.”

Jace slides the ring onto my finger, where it sits snugly, fitting perfectly. It feels a little odd, because I’m not used to wearing rings, but I don’t care. This is one ring I’ll never take off.

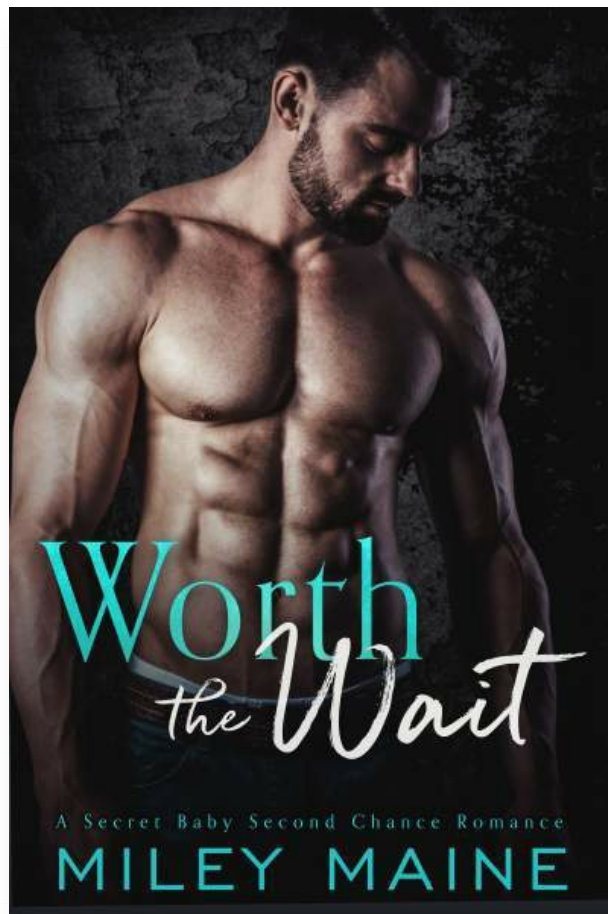
“I love you,” I say, leaning in to kiss him again.

“I love you, too,” Jace says.

Sometimes, I look back on how everything started, and I still can’t believe how we ended up here. But that’s okay. We’re here, in love, and that’s all that matters. Together, we fought for one another, and we won.

Now that I have my family, I’ll never need anything else.

EXCERPT: WORTH THE WAIT



Surprise, surprise!
My baby daddy bailed me out of bankruptcy.

I never expected James to be back.

It means trouble.

He has no clue that he's the father of my kid.

How could he?

He abandoned me when I needed him.

And now, he thinks that my whole world belongs to him.

Yeah, right...
It's a lie he needs to stop telling himself.
Even if he's the hottest FBI field agent to ever exist.
James is investigating a dangerous threat.
A threat that wasn't supposed to harm me.
But I'm connected to him, so that must've made me eligible.
Danger is right around the corner.
So is heartbreak.
What will strike first?

Bree

If I set my own mailbox on fire, is that a crime? Or does the federal violation only kick in if I destroy someone else's mailbox?

Who was I kidding? I was the poster child for fire safety—literally, since I was the lead volunteer firefighter in town. I wasn't going to be setting anything on fire.

Digging the mail out, I didn't have to open the envelope to know what was inside. The red letters and the word "overdue" let me know exactly what I'd find when I tore open the paper. For a second, I considered ripping it up and scattering it all over the floor of the horse barn. It would look really good mixed in with the manure.

But that was not a great strategy. Ignoring my problems wasn't going to make them any better. Gritting my teeth, I popped the envelope open.

My stomach twisted into a knot. The number was way worse than I'd expected. I knew we were behind on the mortgage, but I'd guessed it would be about \$2,000. Instead, a bold \$5,000 glared at me from the page.

I leaned my back against the rickety mailbox and tried to take a big, calming breath. For a Texas evening, the air was a perfect seventy-five degrees and there was just the tiniest breeze in the air, but the deep breath didn't work one little bit.

As the sun set over the field where the cows were grazing, I tried to focus on something to slow my rapid breaths. Cows? They needed vaccines. Barn? Needed a new roof. The fence? Nope. Not even the fence was okay. It was a mangled mess in need of total repair.

Damn it. Get it together before your kid sees you.

He might only be four, but he was pretty adept at picking up on emotion.

As if summoned, the screen door on the house banged closed behind me and a little voice cried "Arrr!" right before I was whacked in the back of the head with a foam sword.

"Hello, matey," I said, bending forward to straighten the costume eye patch that was covering my son's cheek instead of his eye.

"Momma! I'm a *pirate*!" My son's little face scrunched up. "You're supposed to say 'Ahoy, matey!'"

“Oh, I’m sorry. Let me try again.” I straightened up and inhaled. The sight of his bright grin always lifted my mood, no matter how shitty it was. “Ahoy, matey!” I exclaimed with a flourish. With my son staring right at me, my heart slowed down a fraction. My stomach stayed coiled, but that was pretty much its constant state these days.

“That was better,” he said with a big nod. He smacked me with the sword again, this time on the arm, and raced off. Sometimes I couldn’t keep up with all his wardrobe changes, but at least I could mostly understand his words these days. He needed more speech therapy, but until I could get ahead on the bills, that wasn’t happening.

Wheels crunched over the gravel driveway as my best friend pulled up. At the sight of her patrol car, Ian was back, flinging himself at her car. “Aunt Lacy!”

“Hey, kiddo!” As soon as she was out of the car, she picked him up and spun him around. He wiggled free.

“I gotta get my police outfit!”

Lacy gestured toward her brown sheriff’s deputy uniform. “So you can match me, right?”

“Yep!” he shouted, and then he was off again, boots pounding against the wooden front porch.

“You sure you don’t mind hanging out with him while I get the cows vaccinated?” I asked. After battling several illnesses with the cows, I was determined to prevent any more.

“You know I love that kid,” Lacy said.

She really did, and I was glad for it. The more loving adults, the better. I’d had one and I figured I turned out okay. If one was passable, then three had to be pretty fantastic.

I wasn’t going to pretend our living situation wasn’t crazy. I lived on a working ranch with an older couple, Walter and Mary, and Walter just happened to be my son’s grandfather, and Mary was his step grandmother. Not that any of us had ever acknowledged that fact.

Walter had to know it though. My kid was a clone of his father at that age.

“I appreciate it,” I said. Ian was beyond hyper—spending all day on the ranch had made him a little stir crazy. Walter was great with him and so was Mary, but they’d had him all day and they deserved a break.

So, now my poor friend—my childless, free-from-obligation friend—had taken pity on me because the cows needed their shots. Yes, even our free-range, grass-fed cows needed a vaccine or two. There were a lot of things Ian could tag along for, but when the cows were all gathered up and getting jabbed with needles, it would be too easy for him to get trampled.

Lucky for me and for the cows, Dr. Casey, the veterinarian I worked for part-time, gave me free samples whenever she could and I’d been trained to do the shots myself, so that was free. The only cost was my sanity when I’d already been working sixteen hours that day.

Sunset turned to dusk, and the yellow sky turned into a deep purple that spread over the green fields. I'd only left Texas one time for a school trip back when I was only sixteen years old, but I couldn't imagine a prettier place. Good thing I liked it, since I was pretty much stuck here for good.

"Okay, Molly," I said, stopping to pet the last cow once I'd finished. She was a docile brown cow with a sleek hide and she was the most gentle of the group. I absolutely reeked like cattle and my entire body ached, but the cows were good to go.

In the distance, Ian and Lacy traded shouts of glee. Oh, Lord. She let him stay up way past his bedtime. He'd be a beast tomorrow, but it was a small price to pay. I used the inside of my elbow to wipe a stray hair from my face, but a movement on the road caught my eye. I let my arms drop to my sides.

South of the ranch, on the main highway into Laurel Bay, a row of black SUVs drove in a single file line. I counted four of them, all the same size. And on the side of each vehicle, in white letters, read "FBI."

Before I could get my gloves off to snap a picture, they were gone.

"Lacy." My friend was sprawled across my porch on her back, covered in fishing net while Ian stood over her.

"Yeah?" She looked up. "I'm a bad guy. This police officer is trapping me."

"In that case, carry on," I said, laughing at my son's antics.

She patted the space beside her. "Come on, sit down. You can be a bad guy with me."

"No way. I'll never get up again." I glanced back to the road, but there was nothing there. "I just saw four big SUVs drive by. They all said 'FBI' on the side. Do you know anything about that?"

She sat up, dislodging the netting, which caused Ian to leap on top of her. She caught him easily, wrestling him as he giggled. "No. I don't know anything about that." She pulled her phone from her pocket, but the screen was free of messages.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," I said. "Surely it's nothing serious." Laurel Bay was in the middle of nowhere. There was no way the FBI would be here for anything other than a stopover.

James

Cyber-attack. Terrorism.

Those were the words I'd been waiting for.

It sounds twisted, but it's what I'd trained for.

In the three years I'd been at the Houston FBI field office, I'd worked on several cybercrimes. All had been white collar with perps who were looking to steal, blackmail, or bribe their way into having more of someone else's money than they ought. This was the first time I'd be on an assignment directly related to possible terrorism.

Not that I wanted terrorists to exist. But they did, and my goal was to eliminate them.

In front of me, my boss yanked at his tie. The Houston office was new and it was nice, but he still sweated like we were in one of the old cinder block buildings. “Alright, people. As you all know, the word on the street is that all the cool criminals are attacking the power grids now. We’ve heard chatter that there are some potential threats to the Texas power grid right here at home. Any questions?”

The room stayed quiet, so he kept on going. “The Dallas field office is already maxed out with this, so we’re going to help out in their territory. Now —” My boss paused to clap his hands together “—we all had that briefing last month on power grids, so you ought to be familiar.”

We all nodded and he continued. “This group is affiliated with a South American terrorist cell, but our intel says they’ve been infiltrating rural Texas towns. They’re setting up shops in barns, tents, old farm houses. They’re behavin’ like they own the place. We are not gonna let that stand,” he said.

My boss thought he was really funny. I’d suffered through much drier meetings, so I wasn’t going to complain too much about his attempts at humor.

“Now, you may be wondering why the perps are here when the grids can be hacked remotely, just like any cyber-attack. As we all know, sometimes a perp likes to see his handiwork up close and personal.”

I sat up straighter. I was ready for this.

“Six of you are going to be heading to Laurel Bay, about an hour off on the other side of Dallas,” my supervisor said.

My spine straightened. Laurel Bay was a tiny spot in the middle of fucking nowhere. It was also the place where I’d grown up. I’d never turn down an assignment, but God, I did not want to work in Laurel Bay.

“Wakefield!” my boss barked.

At the sound of my name, my eyes widened. “Yes, sir,” I said.

“You’re from Laurel Bay. You and the rest of your team will go there immediately.”

He must have looked at my file because I never told anyone where I was from. “Yes, sir,” I said. It would be fine. I’d go there, do my job, and catch the perps. There was no reason I should come into contact with anyone I know. Like my father. Or his wife. Or Bree, the only woman I’ve ever loved.

Nope. No big deal. I’d be there to do a job, not catch up. I was the youngest field agent in the Houston office for a reason: I got shit done. And when assignments got hard, I didn’t avoid them. I jumped straight in.

* * *

I was going to have to get a grip and quit jumping every time someone said the name Laurel Bay. So far, the rest of the team was peppering me with non-stop

questions, like, “Hey, James, are there any good places to eat? Is there a decent hotel? Is there an actual bay, or is that just made up?”

(Answer: the bay was made up, although there was a lake that was decent for fishing but not so much for water skiing.)

I’d survived plenty of difficult assignments before, and the fact that I was going back to my hometown for this mission wouldn’t be hard, just awkward. I could deal with that. Heck, it had been four years since I’d seen Bree. Maybe she’d even be glad to see me. It wasn’t likely, but maybe the distance would have given us both some perspective.

I was the youngest FBI agent on my team. I could handle Laurel Bay, Texas.

Hope you loved the excerpt of **Worth the Wait**. You can read the full story **here**.

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