



THE  
*Reception*

EVA WINNERS

# THE EXCEPTION

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# EVA WINNERS



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# PROLOGUE

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## GEMMA- ONE YEAR AGO



**M**y sixth sense warned me that something wasn't right. I could sense it in the pit of my stomach. My heartbeat kept skipping every so often.

I just couldn't quite put my finger on what was causing it. So, I ignored the feeling, blaming it on my adrenaline and paranoia. This morning's argument with Jack was worse than usual. Things were getting bad. His outbursts had become more frequent. I kept hoping our relationship would take a turn, but the only turn it took was for the worse. From the first word that aimed to humiliate to the first physical shove, then a slap across the face. I didn't think I could forgive. Ever!

But those deeply rooted standards of 'marriage is for life' were difficult to shake off.

I settled myself in my home office chair, deciding to work from home on impulse this morning.

A great perk of being with the same company for a long time. All the years of working hard and proving myself had finally paid off. I'd come a long way. Jack tried to diminish it, but I couldn't help feeling proud. Silently scoffing to myself, I dismissed Jack's stupid comments that he seemed to love throwing my way. I wouldn't take criticism from someone that had absolutely no goals and liked to talk down to everyone.

*One day you're in love; the next you can't stand the sight of each other. Geez, how did we get so far apart!*

Shaking my head, I hoped to forget all of the real life problems and just focus on the numbers in front of me. Time seemed to fly by and daily

troubles faded into the back of my mind when the slam of a door startled me back into reality.

My head snapped up and my spine straightened. Had it been the front door? My heart raced into overdrive and I swallowed a shaky breath. I wasn't supposed to be home today. It was a last minute decision. But how would a burglar know that?

The sound of something being knocked over had me standing abruptly. My office chair fell back with a loud thud, and I cursed myself for my clumsiness.

Would they know I'm here now?

"Goddamn it," I whispered while my heart hammered frantically.

*A quarter into the swear jar for Mommy!* My daughter's sweet voice taunted me.

I held my breath as my ears buzzed from the adrenaline rushing through my veins. Fear gripped my throat, and all the while, I kept telling myself it was just my imagination. I lived in a safe neighborhood.

I didn't hear any footsteps. No movement.

*Calm down. Calm down,* my mind kept whispering. Otherwise, I'd hear nothing over this drumming in my head. Another deep breath and I took the first step, leaving the safety of my office. I quietly tiptoed out of my office and peeked into the foyer.

"Gemma!" Jack's angry voice echoed through the empty house.

*Jesus Christ!*

Relief washed over me and I relaxed, just slightly. I'd take Jack, my husband, over a burglar anytime.

Releasing my breath, I went back to my desk. I didn't bother answering him. I wouldn't engage in another round of arguing. We said plenty this morning, and lately, it seemed like a single word by me set him off into a rage.

Bending over to pick up my chair, a pain shot through my scalp. It was as if everything was happening too fast for my brain to process. Jack's hand fisted my hair, pulling me back while his eyes frantically searched my office. It was a simple room, each corner visible. What the hell was he even looking for?

"Where is he?" Jack spat out, his glare furious. His other hand lifted, and I knew what was coming next.

I'd had enough. '*Marriage is forever*' had been drilled into me, but this just wasn't worth it.

"Get away from me!" I pushed against him, desperately trying to block his hand.

The impact had my head jerking and a burning pain exploded across my cheek. A cry slipped through my lips, but I quickly stifled it, biting down on my lip. Tears stung my eyes and black dots swam in my vision.

"Let go of me!" I shouted angrily, shoving against him. Except that each move had him jerking my brown locks harder.

"You fucking whore!" he yelled, dragging me by my hair. "Where is he?"

"There is nobody here," I screamed back. "Let go of me, you sick asshole. Just because you sleep around doesn't mean that I do too!" This was it; I was done. I had reached my limit. This marriage was unsalvageable. I could honestly say I had tried to make it work. For longer than I should have.

This ended right here and right now. I'd be the first woman in my family to end up divorced, but at this point, I didn't give a fuck. My aunts, uncles, cousins... they could all say whatever they wanted. They weren't living this hell; I was.

He released my hair and I exhaled as the pain subsided, but my scalp still throbbed. The relief was short lived as he snatched my arm, his hand squeezing tightly and dragging me out of my office.

I'd have bruises for days; I just knew it. *It will be the last time*, I swore to myself. Jack didn't deserve any more chances from me.

"Let's go," he snapped, an unfamiliar menace in his voice. I didn't even recognize him anymore. He was not the man I married.

"Where?" I asked as he dragged me up the stairs. Where in the hell did he want to go?

"Why didn't you go to work?" he shouted, spit flying out of his mouth. "Waiting for your man?"

"Stop it!" I snapped, trying to jerk my arm out of his hold. "You're being ridiculous. I *am* working. From home."

I stumbled, my knee hitting the corner of the step. I silently cursed as pain shot through my knee, but I swallowed my whimper. Straightening back up, I tried to keep up or risk falling again.

"Liar. You didn't say you'd work from home today."

He was cruel when paranoid and angry. Or over the top jealous.

"It was a last minute decision."

"Don't lie to me," he bellowed like a madman. "You are with another man. You think I'm stupid."

"No, I don't." He was the cruelest man I knew. "Let go of me."

He pulled me harder, and my arm cracked, causing another shot of pain from my shoulder to my fingertips.

A yelp escaped me. "Jack, you're hurting me," I whimpered. "Stop it."

"You didn't think I'd drive by, did you?" he ranted. He didn't hear a single word I said. "You're hiding him somewhere."

I attempted to yank my arm out of his grip again. Excruciating pain shot through me again and I couldn't hold back a whimper. The last thing I needed was to end up in the hospital and explain this embarrassment to anyone. Least of all my eldest daughter who has started to pick up on the tension. There was only so much I could hide from her.

I should have ended this marriage months ago. I blamed myself for allowing it to get to this point.

Enough was enough. This marriage was over, with a capital O.

Reaching the top of the stairs, he continued dragging me along. When I realized the direction of his steps, the blood in my veins froze. Pushing me into our bedroom, his eyes frantically searched around with a crazed look in his eyes.

*Doesn't he trust me at all? We have three daughters together.* I have never given him reason not to trust me.

"Jack," I pleaded. How could we have become such strangers after so many years together? "I promise you, there's nobody here."

"Then why are you home?" he bellowed. My ears rang and fear slithered through my veins. He'd never acted this unhinged.

"To work," I screeched. "It's you that is cheating, Jack. Not me."

He was prone to infidelity, always searching for some affirmation. He needed a reason to feel like a man. Each betrayal made him a lesser man in my eyes.

And it made him paranoid that I was doing the same. He really did not know me at all. I didn't believe in cheating or hurting people. No matter how much I detested him right now, I'd never cheat on him.

I met his hard stare, as if he was evaluating my words.

I could feel his rage subsiding. But before I could take a breath of relief, he rasped, "Good, then I'll fuck you."

My eyes widened at his crude tone.

I shook his arm off, pushing him away. He made my skin crawl. He gave me three beautiful girls, but lately his words destroyed everything and everyone around him.

"You are fucking crazy if you think I'd let you touch me," I snapped at him. I rubbed my cheek with my good hand. "Never again, Jack."

I wanted to swear it on the life of our children, but ingrained teachings held me back. Never pledge on anyone's life; it brought bad luck. Yes, it was superstitious, but when it was something you'd heard since you were a little girl, it was hard to shake off.

"I'm up for a challenge," he purred, sending each hair on my body standing straight up.

A crazed lust lurked in his eyes. Instinctively, I took a hesitant step back while I watched for any sign that he was joking.

It was the wrong move because I was backed up against the bed. For the first time, I cursed my high bedposts and wished I bought a simple bed that would allow me to run away swiftly.

With a cruel smile on his lips, he forcefully twisted me against the bed forcing my top half over, my face smashed against the duvet cover. I tried to move, to fight, but he only pressed me further into the mattress, using his body as leverage to keep me there. I heard the jangle of his belt and the sound of the zipper followed.

"Jack, don't." My voice shook with fear and dread. He had never done this, never gone this far. "Please don't do this."

His pants dropped to his ankles and his fingers began to work, unclasping the button of my own jeans, all the while I tried to jerk my knee just right so I'd kick him in the balls. A lump in my throat threatened to make me choke from disgust. Or fear. Or both.

"Go to one of your willing girlfriends," I gritted through my teeth, hiding my fear. "I despise you. You make me sick, and your touch makes my skin crawl."

My body wasn't strong enough to outmaneuver him, but I hoped my words would be enough to cause him to react. I just needed a second. A second for him to ease up from me slightly, giving me enough room to react.

My pants slid down slightly, and a tear trickled down my temple.

Pushing me hard against the bed, he forced his hand between my legs, spreading them apart. My ears rang from the fear and adrenaline pumping through my veins. How could this have happened? Memories flickered through my brain. How we met. Our wedding day. Happiness when I found out we were pregnant. The birth of our beautiful daughters. To this!

As my life flashed before my eyes, never in a million years did I fathom I'd find myself here. In this situation.

Towering over me, he pushed his hands hard against my pussy. My face was wet.

Somewhere along the way, tears started to stream down my face. "Please, Jack." I whispered, choked up. "Don't."

He never even heard me. He was too far gone. I knew him well enough by now. He wouldn't stop, not unless I fought him.

I would fight him... until my dying breath.

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## CHAPTER I

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# KRISTOFF

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## PRESENT DAY



I threw the documents onto my desk and took three big strides, making my way over to one of the two walls of floor-to-ceiling windows, looking down on Washington D.C. The view of the East Front Plaza and the U.S. Capitol filled my vision. The view that many powerful men would kill for. The city sparkled under the morning sun, a perfect disguise for corruption and greed.

It was the reason my father bought this building. Power was important to him. At all costs. Though I couldn't argue the benefits of it. He'd probably shit himself if he was still alive and could see how far I grew the Baldwin empire. He was always greedy for money and power.

It was the reason he almost bankrupted my mother's inheritance and W&W before I took over. He decided to chase his dick at the expense of my mother and her fortune. When his affair and filthy methods got exposed, he put a bullet in his own brain. It was the easy way out for him while the rest of us were left cleaning up his mess.

Coincidentally, all the dirty laundry of our family happened at the same time I got out of the military to find the company almost bankrupt and my ex cheating. With my best friend.

The door to my office swung open and Byron Ashford sauntered in. As the oldest legitimate son of Senator Ashford, Byron was practically a celebrity. He hated it and preferred the shadows, which his corrupt father definitely didn't approve of. Not that Byron gave a fuck. In fact, none of the Ashford brothers seemed to care much for their father. The only thing the Billionaire Kings, as the press loved to call them, cared about was their little sister.

Byron and I were the closest in age, him being slightly younger than me, but we had a lot in common. Starting with asshole fathers and ending with serving in the Middle East together. We'd always had each other's back.

"By all means, don't bother knocking," I grumbled.

I had been more tense and more agitated than normal. My last administrative assistant got herself a boyfriend over two months ago. She swore he'd propose. *Delusional woman*. Unfortunately, it ended my mutually beneficial and pleasurable side arrangement I had going with her and she moved on to another position in the company. So here I was scouting for a new administrative assistant. I needed one that was efficient, smart, and emotionally detached. And wouldn't get fucking serious with a man.

I walked over to my desk to take a seat in my chair. I had another stream of candidates to go through and delaying it wouldn't do me any good. Even with my friend here.

"I won't," Byron grinned as he sat in the chair opposite of me and leaned back, placing his ankle over his knee to rest.

"Don't you have some shit to do?" I muttered as I skimmed through the first paper and immediately dismissed the candidate. Byron's cold, blue eyes stared back at me as he shrugged. He was close to forty, five years my junior. "Ensuring your father doesn't become our next president and burn this country to the ground. Our forefathers wouldn't approve."

He scoffed. "Our forefathers wouldn't approve of most of these fuckers."

He had a point there. Washington D.C. was a mecca for corruption.

For a moment, we both remained silent and lost in our own thoughts. I had no idea where his ventured but mine were going through the applicants of eager and hopeful women who only aimed to crawl into my bed, my money, and my heart. Except, there would never be room in my heart for them. Nor my bed. I didn't take women into my bed. I fucked for the release and moved on to the next task to be handled.

"Are you still looking for a personal assistant?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Maybe dating would be easier," he suggested.

"Women need promises and time I don't have. Besides, I don't see you fucking dating."

He leaned over and grabbed a cigar from the case. "Fuck you. I don't need to date."

"But you need a fuck," I pointed out.

"For that, I go to a club." He lit up a cigar and inhaled deeply. It was a good thing it was past seven at night and Kimberly, my long time secretary who used to work for my grandfather, was gone. She fucking hated the smell of cigars and didn't hesitate to snark about it. "How is your cousin Sophie? The doctor?"

I shrugged. "She's good. And no, she still doesn't care to date you. There aren't enough praises that would make her change her mind."

He snickered. "You're not saying the right things."

"You mean, I'm not lying."

Sophie, my much younger and only cousin, dated Jonathan, my ex-best friend who fucked my wife. Needless to say, it hit her differently than me.

"Why don't you go to the club?" Byron suggested, changing subjects back to our original topic. We went a few times. It was an exclusive club where anything and everything goes, as long as both parties were willing. I didn't see the appeal. Or maybe I was just getting too fucking old.

"It's more convenient when it's right here," I smirked, though by the look he gave me, I suspected he guessed.

"Yeah, some days it is exhausting to go," he muttered. Then his eyes softened at the corners. "You should date my sister," he suggested. It wasn't the first time.

"Thank you, but no thank you," I scoffed. "First, I have no desire to test my fighting skills from our military days each time your sister comes running home to her four brothers. I'm too old for that shit. And second, you never mix pleasure and friends."

"You're gonna make me choke up," he snickered. "It's the first time you called me a friend."

"Get out of my office," I grumbled. "I still have work to do and you're wasting my time."

"You don't want to hear why I'm here?" he drawled. "And I brought you a potential candidate."

I cocked an eyebrow. "For?"

You never knew what kind of shit Byron would come up with. "For your personal assistant."

I pushed my hand through my hair. "I'm not interested in hiring your sister as my personal assistant. Isn't she a bit busy being a special agent or whatever the fuck she does?"

He chuckled. "I got her tucked nice and safe behind a desk. She's in New Orleans so she can't be your assistant. Someone else."

"So you actually had a purpose for coming here?" I snickered. "And here I thought you came just to annoy the fuck out of me."

"An old high school friend called. Betty Feely." I shrugged my shoulders. The name meant nothing to me. "Her friend's looking for a job and is aware of your special requirements."

"Really?" It wasn't every day you ran into a woman who was okay with an arrangement like this. For most of them, it was hard to accept no emotional attachments or that it would never be more than sex.

Unfortunately for all of them, I'd never take a woman into my bed. It had been over sixteen years since I had allowed one into my bed and my heart. I should have known love was a fool's errand. After all, I had a front row seat to my parents' marriage. The man that married a woman just for her wealth and my mother let him run it to the ground, all the while he was ruining our family's reputation.

Love made you stupid and blind. Plenty of evidence to support that statement. Starting with my mother. I couldn't believe my mother let my father run her into the ground. I loved her but the way she blindly trusted my father was lunacy. When I took over the family business, it was basically a shell of a company, on the verge of collapsing and bankruptcy.

I almost fell into the same trap with my ex-wife. Never again. There would be no exceptions to my rule of no emotional detachments. Ever!

"Yes, really. According to Betty, Gemma Rose is not interested in relationships. She just wants a job and understands the occasional extra responsibilities."

If you'd told me twenty years ago, I'd be one of the richest men on the planet and my personal life consisted of a contract arrangement with a personal assistant of my choosing, I'd tell you to fuck off and laugh.

And here I was. Not laughing. At. All.

"What's the catch?" I inquired.

He shrugged his shoulders. "None that I know. I looked into her briefly. No flags. Widow. Three children. Active mom, not much of a social life."

I furrowed my eyebrows. "How old is she?"

“Early to mid-thirties.”

I watched him pensively. “Kind of unusual for a single mother to go for this kind of arrangement,” I muttered. The idea of doing this with a young mother didn’t sit well.

*Wonderful*, I mused silently. Suddenly, I grew a conscience.

Pushing my hand into my hair, I had to admit to myself that this was becoming a damn pain in the ass. Byron was right. It would be easier to date, but the idea of pretending to care for a woman and entertain her notion of a future together that would never happen felt nauseating.

A cold, upfront arrangement with rules was much better.

“Fine, send me her info,” I finally resolved.

If this single mother was fine with it. So was I.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# GENEVIEVE



I stood in front of the impressive glass W&W building in downtown Washington, D.C. my eyes raised up to its top floor. The building was five stories high and stood out with its modern but elegant architecture. Sun reflected against its glass windows and the glare blinded. The voices around me felt distant as the street buzzed with life.

The crisp May weather promised a beautiful afternoon and an even more gorgeous weekend.

Yet, as I stood here, something about this whole situation made my stomach flutter with nerves.

*Unconventional job*, my best friend, Betty, called it.

She didn't elaborate and something about this potential job opportunity made me feel uneasy. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

*We all do what we must to survive.* My father's voice echoed in my head. My savings was pretty much nonexistent at this point. I was flat broke. Stone broke. Drowning in debt broke. If there was another term for broke, it applied to me. All my education and degrees in finance couldn't save me from this one - ironic really.

The mortgage would be due in a few weeks. Again! I wished it was a once a year event. Every time I turned around, another damn bill was due. *Yes, a quarter into the swear jar.* Except I didn't have a quarter on me. Not even a penny.

Unless I got a job very soon, I'd sink and take my girls right along with me. And that would never be acceptable. I'd do anything for them.

Going back to Croatia was an option. My parents' old home there had been sitting empty ever since their death. So has my little side project villa

that I had kept hidden from my late husband. That one needed funds for repairs.

The sound of the revolving door had me lowering my eyes to the entrance. A woman came out of the building in an expensive, crisp dress suit. I didn't think you could look glamorous in business attire, but she pulled it off. She looked fabulous.

My reflection in the window of the building stared back at me. My petite frame made me look slim thanks to the fit of the white blouse and skirt, and my usual five-five height was given an extra two inches in the black heels I wore. I looked plain. Oddly enough, I had always been fine with plain, but after seeing the runway model look-alike just walk out of this building, suddenly being plain didn't sit so well.

I met my reflection's gaze, my whiskey brown eyes staring back. *Tired*. I looked exhausted and no amount of make-up could hide it. Not that I bothered putting on much makeup, only a light blush on my high cheekbones to hide my paleness. My dark brown hair was up in a professional twist.

I fought the urge to turn around. I did my research. W&W was a corporate America type of company. Large. Cold. Impersonal. Corporate America wasn't really up my alley. I was used to small, privately held businesses.

Except I didn't have many other choices. Scratch that. I didn't have *any* other choices. The thought of my mortgage payment, utility bills, and groceries to be bought pushed me forward. Each step heavier than the last.

I smoothed my skirt down, my nerves teetering on the edge. Life had been hammering bad news after bad news in recent years. I hung by a thread, ready to lose everything. This was the *only* lead at the moment. That made this interview all the more important to me.

*Desperation isn't a good look*, I told myself.

Taking a deep breath, I entered the large building using the revolving door. The lobby was elegant and pristine, white marble everywhere with a wall water fountain creating a serene environment.

Except that it had the exact opposite effect on me. Ignoring my insecurities, I approached the man at the large desk. "Can I help you?"

Clearing my dry throat, I forced a polite smile. "I'm here to see Mr. Kristoff Baldwin. I have an appointment. My name is Genevieve Rose."

My fingers clutched into small fists, nails digging into the palm of my hands.

*Geez, you'd think this was my first interview ever!*

It was desperation that had my ears ringing with anxiety. When so much depended on how this went, I couldn't help the anxiety that swam through every pore of my body.

His eyes lowered to his monitor and I held my breath. Not sure why since the appointment was confirmed by the company.

He must have been satisfied finding my name, so with a slight nod, he pointed to the notepad on the counter.

"Sure, Miss," he commented. "Just sign in here and take the elevator to the fifth floor."

Grabbing the pen, I signed my name with a slightly shaking hand.

Thanking him with a smile, I walked towards the elevator with the confidence I didn't feel. The sound of my heels against the marble floor echoed through the lobby, mocking me. I couldn't remember the last time I wore heels.

*Fake it till you make it.* It would be my motto until something came through.

Once in the elevator, I entered and pressed the button to the fifth floor.

*Ding.* Breathe in. *Ding.* Breathe out. *Ding.*

Two more floors and the elevator doors opened. I exited, stepping hesitantly into another smaller lobby.

The first thing I noticed were five other women waiting in leather chairs. My step faltered. They were drop dead gorgeous. Like they just stepped off the runway. It shouldn't matter. Qualifications were the only thing that mattered here, but it was hard to fight the insecurity. They were much younger than me. At thirty-four, I wasn't old by any means, but I felt much older.

All the events that led to my late husband's death aged me decades. I might not have looked like it, but I felt it.

Lingering in the middle of the fifth floor lobby, self-doubts plagued me. They were the enemy to every woman. And right now, they mocked me. I was confident in my skills and hard work. Yes, I'd never been an administrative assistant before but how hard could it be?

Ignoring the voices that told me to turn around and leave, my eyes traveled to the only woman sitting behind a desk. In her fifties and her

silver hair in a fancy bun updo, she raised her head.

“Can I help you?” she called out, her sharp hazel eyes on me.

She had to be the secretary. Maybe she was leaving and this position was to replace her.

Ignoring my nerves, I walked over to her, then cleared my throat as nerves fluttered in my stomach.

“Hi.” Everything about this interview sent a nervous energy through my veins. “I’m here to interview for the position.”

Despite a wave of nervousness that rushed through me, my voice came out calm. I refused to lose my chance at this opportunity if it kept a roof over my girls’ heads and kept them fed. Everything else, I’d figure out as it went.

“Your name please.” she inquired.

“Genevieve Rose.”

She looked at her computer and nodded.

“Please have a seat until I call you.”

I exhaled silently and went to one of the empty chairs. Sitting down stiffly, I risked a glance again to the other women waiting for the interview. *Bad move!* I thought to myself. *Such a bad move!*

These women were dressed like they had boatloads of money. Otherwise, how could they afford Christian Louboutin shoes? It was hard to miss the red soles of those heels. They definitely didn’t juggle three kids, after school practices, jobs, and a household in those heels.

*Focus, Gemma.*

Their stupid shoes didn’t matter. If this job turned out to be an epic fail, I’d have to start packing. Maybe I could find a way to get the girls and I to Croatia and we could sunbathe somewhere on the beach. I wouldn’t need a lot of money to survive there. Maybe I could get a job as a waitress.

Panic slowly rose, my heart thumping wildly. I could hear blood passing through my ears - thump, thump, thump. My chest moved up and down and my hands started trembling as cold sweat trickled down my spine. *Jesus, not a panic attack now.*

I forced my eyes shut, inhaling deeply. Measured breath out, then back in. Repeat.

The interview hadn’t even started and I was losing my shit. This is surely going to end badly, humiliatingly. And I did not need a lesson in

humiliation. Then I mentally slapped myself out of my pity party. I could do this.

*For my girls!*

I wouldn't just give up. I had just as much of a chance of getting the job as these gorgeous women sitting here. I'd give it my all. I'd do anything for them. To keep them safe.

Coffee. Print documents. Make appointments. *Piece of cake*. I could handle that. To keep my girls happy, I'd handle anything.

I couldn't lose our home. I worked so hard to get here, to survive, and now, it felt like everything was slipping through my fingers. Jack was probably getting a kick out of the predicament I found myself in. Either from up above or down below. Wherever he ended up.

Wrapped up in my thoughts, I lost track of time when someone called out my name. My attention snapped to my surroundings and I straightened in my chair. The room was empty except for the secretary.

I met her gaze, noting her strange expression. Like she had been calling me several times and I missed it completely.

"Are you alright?" she asked, concern lacing her voice.

"Yes, of course."

She hesitated for just a moment. "Go on in," she said, tilting her head towards the door.

I stood up with determination, smoothed my skirt, and headed towards the door that could have led only to one office. *Here we go*.

Putting my hand on the cool handle, I inhaled deeply and pushed the door open. Stepping through, the scent of leather and smoky cologne reached me as my eyes traveled over the massive office.

Windows covered the entire outside wall from ceiling to floor, showing the beautiful weather and the city beyond. The bright room with all the light pouring through the large window was furnished with sleek furniture. A large, round table stood off to the right and a couch with a coffee table on the left side of the office. In front of me, a huge executive desk dominated the space with a man sitting in the chair behind it and for a moment, I forgot to breathe.

Suddenly, the large office shrank, every single cell in my body aware of him. His gaze found me and it burned. Like standing in front of a campfire on a cold winter night and I couldn't quite decide whether I liked it or not.

He was gorgeous. Older, but fucking gorgeous.

As he stood up to his full height, his presence touched my skin. *Consuming. Hot. Dangerous.*

His stare was intense, intimidating, magnificent. Piercing green eyes. Reminding me of cool moss, pulling me deep into the forest, ready to swallow me whole. Those eyes... the color of deep forests that made me shiver from his icy stare. Yet, I was sure there was a fire burning deep within despite his reserved expression, almost calculating. Like he was purchasing me.

The notion was ridiculous, yet I couldn't shake it off.

He was tall, way too tall, standing over six-four. Broad shoulders and an expensive, custom-made suit molded his muscular body. And his hair... it was almost pitch black with a hint of silver at his temples. Just long enough to grip its strands as you devoured his mouth.

My heart leapt at that thought and heat rushed through me.

With each step he took, my heart beat faster. Good God, my pulse was sure to send me into cardiac arrest, yet, I was unable to pull my eyes away from him.

He was insanely attractive with a face that would leave you staring for hours. A perfectly chiseled square jawline. Hooded eyes. Symmetrical face. Flawless.

He strode towards me with an air of confidence, grace, and ownership. It was like someone pulled the rug from underneath my feet, and I didn't fight it. I'd gladly go down, as long as I got to stare at him. Stupid fucking thought. Yet, I continued staring as the intensity of him sent a shiver up my spine, raising the hair on every inch of my body.

As his eyes coasted down my body, I had to fight a shudder and the need to flee.

On one hand, I wanted to remain in his vicinity for the rest of my life, basking in the glorious sight. On the other hand, I wanted to crawl into a hole and hide from him because he was just too much.

Forcing myself to stop staring at his body, I looked up, craning my neck at his tall frame. That face! There was scruff on his jaw. Just enough to give him a little edge to an otherwise clean-cut appearance. My fingers itched to trail over it. His jaw was strong and firm indicating his determination, and that mouth had me thinking not so pure thoughts.

He smiled, stretching those kissable lips to reveal a perfect set of teeth, but the smile didn't quite reach those haunting eyes. Something about the

shadows lingering in them made me want to wrap my hands around him and tell him it would be alright.

Which was dumb as fuck.

“Genevieve?” he asked in a deep voice. He only said my name but *the way* he said it was like talking to a lover after an intense fuck. I remained silent, finding it hard to breathe.

*I should turn around and go.* Instead, I remained, breathing him in.

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## CHAPTER 3

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# GENEVIEVE



“G enevieve Rose, right?” he asked again.

I swallowed hard, that voice sent shivers down my spine. The kind that I had never felt with any other man.

“Yes.” I answered in a raspy tone, feeling dazed. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from him.

He extended his hand, and for a moment, I debated whether it was smart to take it. Though I wanted to. God, his hand was attractive too. Strong, veiny, his skin tone slightly darker. I bet he knew how to use those hands on a woman’s body.

I shook my head. I couldn’t let my thoughts wander down that path.

Tentatively, I raised my hand and accepted his handshake. Warm. Strong. My pulse quickened at his touch, the heat from his closeness surging off of him and melting my core. Something inside of me shuddered with delight.

He let go of my hand, and I caught myself leaning towards him. Like a moth towards a flame. Lowering my hand to my side, I pressed my palm against my thigh and rubbed it. Something about his touch unnerved me.

His gaze followed the move and he raised an eyebrow as if he was intrigued.

“Please take a seat,” he offered, motioning me forward. I couldn’t keep my eyes from flickering to his strong hands again, wondering how good they’d feel on my skin.

We took several steps, his body too close to mine, the hint of his citrusy cologne entering my lungs. Suddenly, it felt like my legs were going to fail

me before I managed to sit down. Butterflies twirled in the pit of my stomach.

“T-Thank you,” I stammered out, staring into those sexy eyes again. I sounded idiotic, like a damn virgin. Though this electric shock he ignited with his presence wasn’t virginal.

*Get your shit together, Gemma!* I had to stop gawking at him; otherwise, he’d start to think I was mental. There had to be one thing that was unattractive on this man... just one... because I might start drooling.

“Did you bring your resume?” Mr. Baldwin asked.

“Yes,” I breathed out. My hands fidgeted, trembling with anxiousness. Pulling it out of my folder, I handed it to him quickly to hide my shaking fingers. It would be beyond embarrassing if I dropped it.

My mouth suddenly felt as dry as a desert. My tongue swept across my bottom lip as I clutched my hands tightly in my lap. Mr. Baldwin traced the movement, something dangerously hot flashing in his eyes.

I gulped, every fiber of me on hyperalert. I forced a polite smile to hide how much he impressed me. He seemed mesmerized by me, and I wasn’t sure if it was in a good way.

His eyes never once wavered from mine, and I wished he’d just look at my damn resume so I could take a deep breath. Under those striking darkened greens, I felt like I stood in the middle of an inferno unable to move, letting it consume me.

A single heartbeat passed. It felt like a lifetime. He turned his attention to my resume and I missed his gaze. Jesus. First, I didn’t want his eyes on me and now I wanted them. It’s like he had taken away all the heat.

*Pull yourself together!* I scolded myself while my cheeks flushed crimson, imagining how those eyes would darken as he thrust inside me making me burn with something I had never experienced before.

“So tell me,” he drawled, his voice vibrating through me, a distinct ache between my legs. I wanted to jump his bones. *What? No, no, no. I don’t want to jump his bones!* This man unnerved me, rattled me in a bad way. “Why would someone with your extensive experience in finance, and with an MBA from Harvard, show up in my office applying for an admin position?”

*Oh, here we go,* I thought wryly.

I cleared my voice. “The economy sucks right now,” I explained in a firm voice. At least I hoped it was. “I worked for a small marketing

company. They were hit by the downturn. Unfortunately, it's not the best time to be looking for a job. But here I am."

I went to Harvard and here I shook like a leaf in front of this man. Goddamn his penetrating gaze and his savagely gorgeous body.

I couldn't even talk clearly, let alone form a smart, coherent thought. I was turned on beyond belief. And I suspected the latter was making me sound like an idiot.

*For Pete's sake, I birthed three children*, I reprimanded myself. I'm an accomplished mature woman. *Okay, okay... I was an accomplished mature woman before this damn economy started working against me.* Hmmm, maybe not mature all the time, but fuck it, I tried. But still. I wasn't a fretting teenager nor a young virgin.

"Genevieve?" His voice startled me.

I blinked. "Excuse me?" It would seem I missed part of his conversation, rambling silently to myself.

"I asked whether you are open to tasks outside of an administrative nature?"

"Yes, of course," I answered, wondering what he had in mind. *Unconventional.*

Damn, why did that word linger in my mind?

Maybe he'd use some of my finance background. I went to put my hand on my inflamed cheek but caught myself midair and dropped my hand. Now would not be the right time to start fanning myself. I finally understood Betty's reaction. When she spoke about him, ninety percent of it had to do with how smokin' hot he was.

God, it was too damn hot in here. *Another quarter in the jar*, I added in my mind.

"Do you have limitations with working hours?" he rumbled his next question. His voice was doing something to me. Something deliciously wrong, which made my heart race with adrenaline.

*Shit*, I cursed silently. I might have a heart attack before this is over.

Ignoring my confusing reaction to this man, I thought about the schedule. Summer break was about to start, but my mother-in-law assured me her schedule was flexible and she'd watch them no matter how late I'd have to work.

"No limitations." *Unconventional*, my mind screamed. I ignored it. "I would like to know if I have to work past eight at night, at least a few hours

in advance,” I added, although I hated the idea of not having dinner with my girls. *But beggars can't be choosers*, my father's voice echoed in my brain.

My husky tone made it sound as if I worked on seducing him. I had lost control over my own body in just the short amount of time spent with him. Could you imagine working for him? His gaze went over my flushed face, lowering to my chest before returning to my eyes.

I'd burst into flames at any moment. I was sure of it. The heat from this man scorched all my reason and cool demeanor to hell.

Leaning forward, he braced his elbows on his desk. The move was casual but something about it reminded me of a trap. He'd get all casual, put me at ease only to get me to spill all my secrets.

“Do you have any hobbies?” The question was unexpected. “What do you usually do?”

I stared at him dumbfounded, completely unprepared to talk about something personal.

“Do you?” I blurted out. Ugh, my interview. Not his.

The corner of his lip tipped up.

“We can talk about me some other time.” I'd bet all my non-existent money that he never talked about himself. “I'd much rather hear about you.”

Heat crept up my neck and singed my cheeks.

“Hmmm... I don't have much free time,” I answered in a reserved tone. After all, this was an interview, and not a date.

When he didn't comment back, my nerves rattled. I really had to impress him to get this job. It seemed I was the victim of my nervous jitters because I couldn't believe the next words that came out of my mouth.

“Ugh... so I hate cooking,” I blurted out. *Mental facepalm!* So much for impressing him. The weirdest things came to my mind sometimes.

After a stretch of silence, I continued. “But then that wouldn't be a hobby, huh?”

Suddenly all the clumsiness of the teenage years that I missed came back tenfold.

The. Worst. Timing. Ever.

“No, it wouldn't classify as a hobby,” he drawled nonchalantly. I tended to be good at reading vibes from people. Usually. But with Kristoff Baldwin, I had no idea where I stood.

“I love to hike,” I remarked with a tight smile. “We try to go at least once a month,” I added. “My kids and I.”

He remained silent. His eyes focused on me, observing me, and I had no doubt he noticed every single thing. Every movement. Every breath. Each fidget.

I cursed in my head for such a stupid question. It was a job interview, not a matchmaking interview. Hence, the question should be about the job skills, not damn hobbies.

“I mess around in my garden in the spring and summer,” I continued, making an idiot out of myself.

“Interesting,” he responded, and I could have sworn I detected humor in his voice. “Do you *mess around* in your garden alone?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say I wouldn’t mind him messing around in my garden. Inwardly, I groaned at my stupid reaction to this man. It had to be my desperation causing all these weird thoughts. Yes, desperation was to blame.

“Yes, mostly alone,” I replied bravely. Even managed a smile. This was what my Harvard education paid for. Such a good investment, I scoffed in my head.

“So you are a loner?” His voice was nonchalant, even his posture was relaxed, but there was tension streaming off of him. The problem was that I was unsure which side of him to trust - the tense one that vibrated under all that hotness or the seemingly relaxed one. This man was difficult to read.

“I’m not sure if I’d call myself a loner. I love to read.” I mentally sighed after the words left my mouth, realizing that I’d yet again given an example of something I do alone. “But I’m excellent at writing book summarizations.” We stared at each other in thick silence and I could almost hear the thundering of my own heart.

On a happy note, I was no longer perspiring. I just wished he’d ask me something about my skills already. I mean, he should care whether I could type, use Excel or Word. Anything but this. My hobbies would never have anything to do with him. And technically, the only thing I would read when working for him would be his emails.

This was pure torture. When he showed no inclination to ease my suffering, I continued with my rambling.

I tried to recover by adding, “And I do yoga on a regular basis.” At least that was a group activity. Right?

I should get the focus away from me. A filthy thought snuck into my mind, imagining sex as a hobby. Because I could totally enjoy that kind of hobby with this man. *And that's definitely not an individual hobby*, I snickered in my mind.

A throbbing ache pulsed between my legs, and my breathing slightly hitched imagining myself tumbling between the sheets with him.

*Stop*, I scolded myself. *Not good timing.*

I shifted uncomfortably, squeezing my thighs together. I was turned on like never before. This had to be happening because of my long-term abstinence rule. After all, how many times did Betty warn me abstinence would backfire?

"Anything else?" he asked.

Jesus, how many things were there? I had kids; I barely had time for hobbies.

"I'm part of a smut book club," I admitted. I'd die of embarrassment later. "I have a monthly happy-hour with the ladies. And sailing, though, I'm waiting for the little ones to get older before I get back to it."

I cleared my throat, already regretting my last admission. "Umm, about this job-" I started, hoping we could shift back to the real interview.

"Yes?"

Either this man was horrible at interviews or there was something big I was missing here.

I swallowed. "Is there a transition time with the last secretary?"

"No." I blinked, confused at his clipped answer. He must have read my confusion because he continued, "Kimberly has been with me for a long time. I need someone who can help her with certain duties and carry certain responsibilities directly for me. Booking, planning, and attending business travel and events, to name a few."

"I see." Truthfully, I really didn't see. What was the point of having two secretaries?

"You're good at Excel, I imagine." I nodded. "How are your Word and PowerPoint skills?"

"I'm better at Excel and Word than PowerPoint, but I can manage it."

"Excellent."

I sighed. This interview wasn't going excellent, not by any means. The worst part, I didn't know how to fix it. It wasn't as if I could tell him I've

done plenty of business travel and events booking or planning of business events.

“Why did you stay at your last company for so long?” The question surprised me, though it wasn’t a hard answer.

“The owners were good to me and I loved working for them,” I told him, meeting his gaze. “There was no reason to leave. I enjoyed my job and the people there.”

“Was there anything you didn’t like at the company?” he asked curiously.

I tilted my head pensively. “Truthfully, I only remember the good things. I’m sure there were things that maybe annoyed me. But they weren’t big enough for me to ever consider leaving. My father used to tell me the grass isn’t always greener on the other side. I tend to think he was right.”

“Smart man.”

My lips curved up, as they always did when I thought about my parents. “The smartest.”

Mr. Baldwin rose from his chair and came around the desk. God, his body was truly a work of art. I could stare and admire it, even attempt to paint it and trust me, my artistic skills were non-existent.

*Maybe I could feel his body and pretend I was sculpting,* I mused to myself. Yep, my mind surpassed the gutter. It was basking in a pleasure realm.

“That would be all,” he concluded in his deep voice. “I think I’ve taken enough of your time.”

“Oh.” Well, that was abrupt. “Thank you,” I added, unsure what else to say.

The reasonable, put together Gemma Rose was forever gone and rattled under this man’s gaze. Butterflies in my stomach fluttered on adrenaline just as my heart raced with it too.

Taking a step to the right, my legs gave out. Apparently, my muscles decided to fall asleep. I would have fallen straight onto my face, but his hand shot out and gripped my elbow, pulling me back up into a standing position. I had no idea how he managed to move so fast or so gracefully, but he steadied me.

For a fraction of a second, I froze, my eyes locked on where his hand held me up. His warm, firm touch seared through my skin. And his cologne

this close up smelled even better. It made me want to lean into him and inhale his scent deep into my lungs.

*Gosh, he smells so good.* All man.

My heartbeat pushed into a disturbing overdrive while I pondered why I had never felt anything like this before.

“You okay?” His firm voice penetrated my brain, and I willed my breaths to come out steady.

I met that piercing gaze and realized my hands were pressed against his hard chest. I was tempted to run my hands up and down to feel those muscles flexing under my palms. Even with him clothed, I bet it would feel nice. *Really* nice. A fleeting gaze made me realize my hands were clutching at the expensive material, and I quickly let go, causing myself to lose my balance again. Luckily for me, this man was less klutzy than I was today. His grip tightened, steadying me again.

“Yes... yes... yes, just fine.” Oh my God, how many times do I have to say yes. “I’m so sorry,” I apologized in a breathy voice, removing my hands from his body.

Taking a step back to gain space, I made sure not to trip or fall. This man was just too much. And I was behaving like some damn virgin. Or completely wanton! It was switching up on me from second to second.

“That will be all for today,” he added calmly. While I was flustered and tripped over my own feet, he was completely unaffected. “Check in with my assistant outside, and you will hear from my office either way.”

I nodded and turned around, hurrying for the door like the devil was at my heels. I had to get myself back to a normal state, and around him, it was impossible. Closing the door to his office, and this man, I exhaled the breath I wasn’t aware of holding.

I’d just made a complete fool out of myself. This was hands down *the* worst interview I ever had. I wasn’t even sure we made it to the interview part. Inhaling deeply, I pushed my hand through my hair, making it an even bigger mess. I was certain I had committed this bad habit multiple times while I was interviewing. It was my form of fidgeting, though I hadn’t experienced it recently in my adult life.

I walked over to the secretary’s desk and checked in.

“You alright?” Worry lingered in her voice and her eyes. I wasn’t sure why, but somehow it hit me in the chest. The look reminded me of my parents.



“Ah, yes,” I uttered, my voice still a bit breathless. “Not the greatest interview.”

The old lady grinned. “I’m sure it was better than you think,” she comforted.

Handing me a piece of paper, she then added, “This is a newsletter about our company. Just in case you want to read up and get an idea of what we are about. Either way, we’ll be in touch.”

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## CHAPTER 4

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# KRISTOFF



**G**enevieve Rose.

Her resume didn't do her justice. As she rambled about her hobbies and desperately grasping for straws to prove she wasn't a loner, I got my fill of her.

She intrigued me. Every single thing about this petite brunette tugged on strings I long thought dead.

Her soft voice. That pouty mouth. Caramel-colored eyes. Her beautiful face.

Her crimson cheeks made my dick twitch. She appeared younger than her age. Much younger. Until you looked into her eyes. Those were ancient. I couldn't help but wonder why. I wanted to know her story. It was a novelty to me.

Her face barely held any makeup, and she didn't need any. Her beauty was more the fresh, natural kind. Dangerously beautiful. The kind of beauty that could make men like me do stupid things.

Because I wanted to fuck her.

My mind already contemplated ways to get her into bed. Except she was all wrong for this position.

Regardless of what her friend told Byron, I'd bet my fortune she wasn't the type to have sex without an emotional attachment. It was my number one hard rule. Then why in the fuck was I still thinking about her? I should pick up the phone and tell Kimberly, my secretary, to send her a denial letter before I did something stupid.

Except I didn't want to turn her away.

She'd be competent. At everything. If only I could somehow keep the emotional detachment part of our agreement. I was used to women falling to their knees to please me, but somehow my sixth sense was warning me that Genevieve Rose would refuse to please me unless she wanted to.

Not because she was a defiant woman, but because she only pleased people she loved and cared about. I didn't bother with background checks until the second round of interviews and right now, I fucking regretted it because I wanted to know *everything* about her. And when I said everything, I meant from the type of coffee she drank in the morning to her favorite color and what got her going. Things I wasn't likely to find in a background check.

How long was she married? Did she love her husband? I found the possibility of her being married unpleasant. Very fucking unpleasant. But at least she wasn't a cheater, since she was a widow.

A bitter thought slithered through my mind.

I couldn't stand women that cheated. They stabbed you in the back and smiled while doing it, all the while trying to take it all from you. My ex attempted that and failed, although she succeeded in dragging my family name through the mud. It certainly wasn't the first time the Baldwin family was dragged through the mud. My own father managed it quite well himself, and after he destroyed our family reputation and company, it was on me to rebuild it from the ground up.

Gemma Rose would be a distraction. I didn't need those.

Yet as I strode back to my desk and sat in my chair, I was fully aware I didn't make the decision to flat out reject her application.

## CHAPTER 5

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# GENEVIEVE



Three days.

It wasn't reasonable to expect a response so fast, but I hoped. Either way, I didn't think I'd get it. So I applied to Target, Walmart, and even a fast food chain. Desperation clawed its way through me, overwhelming me, and I had to choke it down. Single mothers had no luxury of dwelling, self-pity or even desperation. Yes, I was overqualified for all of those positions, but it didn't mean I couldn't do them.

*Then why can't I get a job,* my thoughts hounded me and I ignored it.

I tried my best to forget every second of my interview with Kristoff Baldwin. Not exactly a highlight in my life. People like him were clearly way out of my league. I wasn't even sure I had a league beyond my daughters. But that sizzling attraction! For a moment it made me believe in all those smut books I read. I bet he did it as good as any book boyfriend. Just the thought of his hands on me had my heart speeding up into unhealthy territory.

Instinctively, I knew Kristoff Baldwin would be the type to dominate a woman in the bedroom and probably any other aspect of her life.

"No, thank you," I muttered to myself. I hated controlling men, but even that couldn't ease the throbbing ache between my thighs. Just thinking about it had me turned on and that was definitely not me. I was never overly experimental when it came to sex. But that man made me want to experiment until doom's day.

My phone rang, pulling me out of my inappropriate thoughts and I pressed my cool palm against my heated cheek.

*Maybe these are pre-menopausal hormones*, I mused. I just happened to see the most gorgeous man on the planet at the same time the hormones came to life. Yes, that was it. It was natural.

I glanced at the cell phone sitting next to me on the couch. No caller ID, just “Blocked” on the screen, yelling at me. Bill collector? Or a possible job? I didn’t want to deal with a bill collector right now. I was perfectly content sitting on the couch in my living room staring into nothing while worrying about my bills and fantasizing about a man.

I didn’t need any additional help, thank you very much.

Flicking another glance at it, I let out a heavy sigh. Responsibility always won. I grabbed the phone, swiped to answer, and put it against my ear hesitantly. “Hello?”

“Miss Genevieve Rose?” A woman’s voice came through.

*It’s a bill collector*, I determined, annoyed at myself for trying to behave responsibly. *Fuck responsibility*. Great, another quarter into the swear jar.

“Yes?” My mind was already working on how to get out of this call.

“This is Kimberly Smith from Mr. Kristoff Baldwin’s office.”

Hope flickered in my chest but before it could bloom into something bigger, I pressed the pause button. Rejection would be even harder if I let my hope wander off. After all, it could be just a polite call letting me know I didn’t get the job.

“Yes, hello,” I answered politely.

“Mr. Baldwin would like to invite you to a follow-up interview,” she said in a professional voice. “It is scheduled for next Monday. Will that work for you?”

My first thought was that I’d get to see his hotness again. And second, that I might have a chance at getting this job. Yeah, my priorities were screwed up.

“Yes,” I finally answered.

This was the first call back I received in the past five months for the second interview. I questioned it since I knew I did poorly during the first interview. Maybe the other candidates were just as mesmerized by the man, and they were even more impacted by him? That seemed like a reasonable explanation.

“I just emailed you the details,” the woman continued. “Please read over the documents, bring a signed copy of both with you Monday, and let me know if you have any questions.”

Holy crap, I'd get to see him again. Yay! I immediately groaned in my head. Someone really had to shake some sense into me.

"Thank you." My voice sounded choked, whether it was from excitement for the job or the man, I wasn't sure. Thankfully, Kimberly didn't seem to notice because she said her goodbye and ended the call.

Maybe-just maybe things would work out.

Like a zombie, I stood up off the couch and walked into my office. My laptop sat open on my desk and a soft ding of an incoming email signaled that something just hit my inbox.

I took a seat behind my desk and moved the mouse. The email from Kimberly was the last email received. The subject line read, *Mr. Baldwin's Contracts*.

That was an odd title for a second interview. Thinking nothing of it, I clicked on the email and opened the first attachment. A rather standard document, confidentiality contract with the employment terms. My eyes skimmed through the words, searching for any odd clauses. There were none. I clicked the print icon and sent the document to the printer.

Curiously, I went to the second attachment and opened it, wondering if it's a job description that outlines the duties. Just as I was about to start reading, my youngest two daughters ran into the room arguing.

I closed the email and immediately jumped up.

"What is going on?" I asked, lowering myself to their level. Sierra wore her elaborate, yellow dress up gown while Saoirse stood with her hands on hips. In her underwear. Both their faces were smeared with tears. And makeup. How in God's name did they always manage to find makeup? It was pointless to hide it.

"Saoirse want Belle princess," my youngest, Sierra, claimed, shooting glares at her older sister. Her two-year-old speech made it for a cute protest. "Bad sister. Mine."

"It's my turn to be a princess," Saoirse, my middle one, cried out. She wiped the back of her hand over her face, smearing red lipstick across her cheek.

I shook my head, holding back my smile. Her feelings were hurt and chuckling about their comical makeup was the last thing they needed.

"Mine," my youngest replied, stomping her foot down. She was my stubborn one.



“Come on girls,” I tried to keep the peace. “You have to learn to share. Sierra, give your sister a turn and then she’ll give it back.”

*Negotiations between the girls should have been one of my hobbies, the thought came out of nowhere.*

“No, I won’t,” my youngest grumbled. “That was my gift from Santa.” Of course she would remember. As bad as my memory was, I could always count on my kids to remind me of what I forgot.

“Well, you two have to share. That’s just how it is in this house,” I explained in a firm voice. “Sharing is caring.”

Saoirse rolled her eyes. She actually rolled her eyes at me, and she hasn’t even reached the first decade in life.

“Young lady,” I scolded gently. “Do not roll your eyes at me. Or anyone else.”

“I didn’t,” she defended. If rolling eyes was a natural gesture, I was in big trouble.

I exhaled, pulling them both into a hug. “Be good and share. There are plenty of dresses for you to switch back and forth. How about you-” I locked eyes with my youngest, “-pick your *Frozen* dress and let your sister wear Belle for a while.”

“I want it now,” Saoirse whined. “I’m cold.”

“No. Mine.” Sierra replied, folding her arms in front of her. The scene would be comical if my daughters weren’t so stubborn.

“I’m cold,” Saoirse repeated. “My bones are freezing.”

“You’re cold because you are naked,” I reprimanded softly. “And Sierra, you have to share.”

They shared a glance, returned their eyes to me clearly unhappy and stormed off mad with my solution. I shook my head, my lips curving into a smile. I’d give them five minutes and their argument would be behind them.

Quickly glancing at the clock, I noted I had an hour before I had to pick up my eldest daughter, so I dialed up Betty.

“Gemma!” Betty exclaimed. “I’ve been trying to call you for the past few days!”

I bit my lip. I had avoided her, but at this moment I didn’t want to ruin it.

“They called me for the follow up interview,” I exclaimed softly.

“Oh my God!” Betty was squealing like a little girl. “I *knew* it!”

I couldn't help but feel her excitement. It was promising and the fact that my first interview wasn't a total failure gave me hope.

"You weren't joking," I whispered in a hushed tone. Though I didn't know why since there was nobody but my girls at home. "The man is hot. I don't think I've ever felt so nervous, and I'm not sure if it's my desperation to get the job or the fact that he is too good looking."

"So you like him?" Betty asked excitedly.

"He makes me nervous," I answered honestly. "I felt like jumping his bones, which is horrible, so unlike me. Something about him is just too much, you know." Her *mmhmm* agreeing noise came through. "I wish I had other job possibilities," I admitted softly. "I'm grateful to get this call, but I don't think I'll like working for someone like this guy. He seems too intense, and I'll be on eggshells every day."

Betty let out an exasperated sigh.

"You seriously have to loosen up. If you want to fuck him, do it. You need some of that right now. Just because he makes you nervous doesn't mean it's a bad thing."

Instead, I countered back at Betty, "I'm pretty sure it means exactly that. My sixth sense is usually right. And it is telling me to keep away from Kristoff Baldwin. I sure as hell won't fuck him." I shook my head like she could see me. Betty has always been and will always be a damn wanton. Even in college.

"You are just scared you'll find him so hot you won't be able to resist him, and you'll jump his bones, he'll jump your bones, and you two will be going at it all day."

I choked out a strangled laugh. It was kind of inappropriately funny.

Betty had been pushing me to get back to the dating scene for over six months now. Thankfully, Rick, her husband, was on my side and kept reminding her to stop rushing me. I was really in no rush. Since Jack's death, I'd been on less than a handful of dates. They were all set up by Betty and did nothing for me.

Maybe it was because I couldn't allow myself to get past the friend zone with any of them. It could be that Jack had ruined my desire for companionship, but then I'd scold myself. Only I dictated my own life. I learned from my past and focused on the future.

"You really have to grow up," I scolded her softly, though after so many years of friendship, I was used to it. If she didn't make those comments, I'd

think I would worry more. “You are about to turn forty, for Pete’s sake.”

“Never. You are serious enough for both of us,” she replied, chuckling. She had a point there. “By the way, Rick said he’ll talk to HR again to try to get you an interview. He should know something tonight.”

“He’s the best,” I answered. Hope instantly flared in me. It would be awesome to work with my best friend.

Rick and Betty were our family. All the times we’d been through together, I had a hard time imagining my life without them. He was the brother I never had, always there to ensure the girls and I were ok. She always listened when I needed to talk and cheered me up when I was down.

“Promise me, you’ll keep your options open,” she quickly added.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

“Show me how much you appreciate it by going to that second interview, and Rick will let you know the day and time for your interview at his company.”

“I’m going to that second interview,” I promised. “Scouts honor and all that,” I teased.

We got to talking about her boys and my girls. Before I knew it, I had to go pick up my eldest.

Just as I got into the car, my phone beeped, signaling a text message. I glanced at it and seeing Rick’s name pop up, I smiled, then slid the message open.

***\*You got the interview for Monday morning. They’ll love you, just like we love you.\****

## CHAPTER 6

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



Monday morning came too quickly. Back in downtown Washington, I walked into the elegant marble lobby with more confidence than the first time around, wearing an emerald green, Michael Kors business dress.

*Things are finally picking up*, I thought enthusiastically.

Betty's husband, my late husband's cousin, secured me an interview at his company and it went very well. Like an offer coming soon well. My outlook on life had improved and I could feel the sheer excitement and hope deep inside that made me anxious to put the last few years behind me. A fresh start was exactly what I needed.

With less of the pressure and despair, I reported to the front desk with the folder in my hand containing the signed confidentiality contact and was directed back to the fifth floor.

As the elevator smoothly lifted up to the targeted floor, my heart did an awkward pitter-patter and my breathing grew erratic. My breasts tightened and excitement rushed through me. It was wrong. So darn wrong to feel this attraction, but I didn't know how to fight it. Each time I thought of Kristoff Baldwin over the last week, my body went into some kind of hyper overdrive. Or maybe it was a heated overdrive.

Still up for debate.

Butterflies in my stomach fluttered and my breathing became shallow. It was like having your first crush all over again. Every nerve within me tingled with each floor that dinged bringing me closer to him. This strange attraction to the billionaire had me on edge so when the elevator dinged, I almost jumped out of my skin.

Pushing an unruly piece of hair back, I exited, finding myself in front of Kimberly. This time, it was just us. No runway models.

She quickly glanced up and smiled. "Have a seat. He'll be right with you," she greeted me and went back to whatever she was doing.

I sat down as the images of my last encounter with the hot billionaire played in my mind, wreaking havoc on my nervous system. Every nerve in my body came alive with anticipation ghosting across my skin like a shiver. Heat ran between my legs and, frankly, it terrified me that the man affected me like this from behind a closed door.

*This will not do, not at all!* My mind whispered as I dug my fingernails into my palms, hoping they'd ground me.

The man impacted me while not even in my sight. I couldn't imagine how bad it would be if I worked for him. Suddenly, panic swelled inside my chest at the thought of seeing him every single day. Would I be able to handle *him* on a daily basis?

So much hotness; a daily temptation.

I shot up to my feet. I had to get out of here. Another interview with Kristoff Baldwin was a bad idea. Turning to leave, Kimberly's voice stopped me.

"Miss Rose, he will see you now."

I stood there, indecision swirling in my mind, staring at the door to his office. I should get the hell out of here, but the pull I felt to this man had me straightening my back and heading to him.

Much later, I'd realize it was this moment that irrevocably changed my life. That man rattled me to the marrow of my bones even then.

With a sigh, I headed for his office. I'd see him one more time. Maybe memorize his image better and use it to get myself off.

*Mental facepalm.* This attraction would be the death of me.

Entering his office with a confidence I didn't feel, I found him sitting in the chair behind his desk. Broad shoulders. Impeccable black suit. His gaze found mine then coasted over my skin and sent a shiver down my spine.

As I made my way over to him, he casually leaned back, watching me with his hooded eyes like I was performing a show for him.

*Oh my sweet Lord, those eyes.*

Getting lost in them meant he could order me to strip and I might just do it. *Eagerly.* I could only imagine how those eyes would burn in the heat of passion. Dark and stormy. Consuming.

*I have to stop reading those smut books. Maybe switch to horror, mystery, history. Anything but books full of sex.*

Lowering myself down in the chair opposite his, I crossed one leg over the other and waited. My heart drummed against my ribs while I held his gaze, hiding the effect he had on me.

The desk between us seemed too small of a barrier for the heat that instantly shot down to my core. This attraction had to go. It rattled every fiber of me, and my instincts warned that I'd shatter if I tested this attraction, changing me forever.

Uncomfortable with my own thoughts, I squirmed in my seat. For the first time in my life, I found the silence uneasy. Usually I thrived in it but around this man, it unnerved me.

"Hmmm." I cleared my throat but it did nothing to ease the tension inside me. "Hello again," I greeted him with a slight rasp in my voice.

His eyes sparkled. I wasn't sure whether it was in amusement or something else. Whatever it was, it made this strange attraction feel like static electricity charging the air in this office.

"Miss Rose." His voice was laced with a commanding tone that did something to my insides. "Did you review both contracts?" A woman could get off on his deep, rough voice alone. Never mind his looks and those strong, veiny hands.

"Yes." My voice sounded soft, breathless.

Until realization slashed through my lust-filled brain. *Damn it!* I never went back to the second attachment. *Shit, shit, shit!*

"I have a few questions on the second one," I added, clearing my throat while silently scolding myself. Maybe I could figure out what that second document was about if I asked the right questions. "So I only signed one."

"Fair enough," he responded. "Do you mind if I go first?"

"Not at all." After all, he was the boss. Nervously, I shoved a loose piece of my hair behind my ear, his eyes following my movement. And there was something *hot* in his eyes. Like fire on a Siberian winter day, it tugged at me. His gaze on my skin felt like a gentle caress, sending shivers down my spine.

Two heartbeats. It took two heartbeats before his expression changed to something dark and absolute. Like he made a decision at that very moment.

"You were recommended by a friend of a friend. Betty Feely?" he stated in a measured tone, yet I sensed a tightly-reined control in it.

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“Do you have the confidentiality contract?” he asked, and upon my nod, he added. “Give it to me.” I blinked. Did he not know the word *please*? When I remained immobile, he added, “Anything discussed here cannot leave this room.”

I frowned in confusion. None of this made sense.

Still, I pulled the contract out of my folder and leaned over to hand it to him across his large desk. Our eyes met and his gaze flicked down. Lowering my own eyes, I caught a glimpse of my cleavage and my cheeks heated. Immediately straightening up, I flickered a gaze his way.

He watched me with a lazy expression, and I got the impression nothing passed without his notice.

Taking back my seat, I kept my eyes on him like my life depended on it and watched him return his attention back to the document for a second before his gaze flicked to me.

I fought the urge to chew on my lower lip. Silence stretched. My nerves rattled. This must be how others felt whenever I enjoyed my silence. Duly noted. I’d consider it in the future when keeping quiet.

“Your background check states that you have been widowed for over a year, and you have three daughters from that marriage.” His voice was matter-of-fact and his intense gaze solely focused on me. I didn’t know whether I wanted to bask in it or hide somewhere so I wouldn’t feel that itchy, hot gaze on every inch of my skin.

“Yes,” I breathed my confirmation while the look he gave me made my heart stutter. Through this thrill, lust fog, my mind warned. He was walking a thin line between legal and illegal. There were labor laws that dictated certain things.

“Your education is impressive. And your last employer raved about you,” he continued while looking at a piece of paper in front of him. I couldn’t help the flicker of pride that swelled inside my chest.

“Thank you.”

The review of me continued.

“Not much of a social life, although your friends are very protective of you and speak highly of you. Your late husband’s cousin is particularly fond of you. Anything between you two I should know about?”

My lips parted in disbelief. *Oh, he did not.*



My skin flared with deep irritation and anger boiling in my chest. My chest was probably ugly blotchy red right about now.

“Excuse me?” I snapped, undignified. “Rick is my children’s uncle and my best friend’s husband.” *You... you... asshole.*

I wanted to spit that last word into his face. But I’d never been a violent person. Except for once and I didn’t care to remember it.

“Okay, I’ll take that as a no.” His expression and his voice told me he couldn’t be bothered with my indignation.

My cool palm came to my chest, trying to soothe the heat. My pulse fluttered in my throat. His eyes followed the motion and my entire body tingled. It was wrong. He was out of line. Yet it seemed my wanton pussy didn’t understand that because it throbbed with an ache only one thing could fill.

*This man*, my reason mocked me and I immediately corrected myself. *My vibrator, damn you woman.*

Like I got caught doing something bad or he heard my thoughts, I lowered my hand down to my lap and averted my gaze, scared he’d see desire in my eyes. I felt so damn exposed, I might as well be sitting here naked.

“Do you research all your admins?” My voice was breathless, husky like I was in the middle of sex. *I wish.* I had to get control of my body because this attraction was unreal. The air pretty much sizzled, and sparks were about to explode.

At this rate, I’d combust into fireworks before this interview was over. My earlier interview at Rick’s company definitely didn’t go this way.

“Only on those that are selected. I need to know that we can work well together under pressure, what your work ethic is, what your background is. And I need to know that we can trust each other. Professionally and privately.”

Staring at the man, I wondered if he was crazy. That would be one unattractive quality. *I think.* My personal life had nothing to do with him. Though my body seemed to disagree. Why did I feel like I was missing a piece of a puzzle here?

“I can assure you my personal life won’t impact my professional one,” I noted with assurance I didn’t quite feel. “Besides, what kind of background check would reveal my social life, my friends, and who’s fond of me or not?”

His lips quirked like he found my feeble protest amusing. “A close friend owns an agency that is good at getting information on people.” I lifted my shoulder, failing to see the point while his expression sparked with dry amusement. “*Everything*,” he added and somehow the significance behind that one last word shot cold terror through me. I stiffened and dread pooled in the pit of my stomach.

*You’re reading too much into it*, I silently comforted myself.

Averting my eyes, too scared he’d see in them the truth nobody knew, I focused on the spot behind him. The city that spread before this man every day and he could own for all his fortune. The disparity between us was so obvious. My hands were stained with blood while his big ones probably ruled half the world.

Hesitantly, I returned my attention to him. He couldn’t have found out *everything*. If he had, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.

“You married young,” he continued almost softly.

I nodded, although every fiber of me fought against his invasiveness. I mean really! What does any of this have to do with being an administrative assistant? Granted, I’ve never been one before, but c’mon. This is borderline obsessive and invasive. Maybe I should ask him personal questions and see how he liked it.

“You went out to dinner a few times in the last few months with men that your friends set you up with, never repeating a dinner with the same man. Did you ever take those dates further than just dinner?”

*What the fuck is going on here?* Anger flared inside me, like a boiling volcano and heat rose slowly, burning through my veins.

“There are certain things that are personal,” I hissed, keeping a lid on my temper. “My personal dating life has nothing to do with you.” My voice shook with anger, underlined with fear. My secret would cost my family *everything*. “I never gave you permission to dig through my past. You certainly don’t see me digging through yours.”

I should get up right now. Right now! But my body refused to listen, and I stayed glued to the damn chair, staring at his mesmerizing eyes of dark forest. The intensity of his gaze had me squirming under his scrutiny, for more than one reason.

“It’s stipulated in the second contract the need to know about the potential candidate's past relationships and social life.” I blinked. He stared

at me, and me at him. “I need to know you’re a good fit for me and my needs.”

*Huh?*

He stood up and walked toward me. I followed his movements until he stopped in front of me and my entire body tingled at his proximity. Heat radiated from his big, strong body. He took my hands into his, standing me up. Our bodies stood chest-to-chest, flush together. His intoxicating scent, leather and expensive cologne, invaded my lungs and had every fiber of my being throbbing with an aching need.

That should have been enough to question my sanity.

Except, there was something about him. The way he watched me, his gaze dark and heated. My pulse was throbbing between my legs. This man was getting my panties wet, making me all hot and bothered with his mere existence.

*Push him away*, my mind whispered but my hands refused to move. Instead, I leaned into his hard body, letting his heat consume me.

“What are you doing?” I breathed. Fear was nowhere to be found. Only lust. Everything about this man crept under my skin, flustering me beyond recognition.

Kristoff answered without hesitation. “I’m checking how your body responds to mine. This is one of the stipulations of the second contract.”

*Wait? What stipulation?*

Confusion and arousal were at war within me. His gaze burned through me for too many seconds until he lowered his head. The moment his lips brushed against my lips, all reason scattered.

He skimmed his mouth over my jaw and down my neck. A shudder traveled down my spine, while his hands traveled down my chest, to my breasts. I should have stopped him. This wasn’t what I was here for. This wasn’t professional at all, but with his lips and hands on me, the logical part of me disappeared.

My eyes fluttered shut, and a deep sigh escaped my lips without my permission. I was right. This man knew how to use his mouth. Every inch of my skin itched for more of his touch while my insides clenched. He nipped my neck, then licked slowly, his tongue burning a path along my skin. My heartbeat thundered frantically in my chest, threatening to burst.

I hadn’t been intimate with anyone in such a long time. A part of me had moved past what my late husband did to me, but there was still a small part

that feared it could and would happen again. Except standing here with this man's lips against my neck and his body pressed against mine, it felt completely different than any man that had come before him. Different from anything else I had ever experienced before.

His touch made my insides melt and my body hummed to the tune of his fingers as they lightly danced across my skin. It felt amazing to be in his arms. Strength oozed from him as his hands slid the length of my body, reaching for my inner thigh. All the while his lips didn't stop sucking, licking, and biting the sensitive skin on my neck.

God, I needed this release unlike any before. I missed being touched. Like I was desirable and wanted. My body trembled when his fingers brushed over my panties. I was so wet, and there was no possible way he'd miss it through the thin material.

*I will stop this. I will stop this in a second,* I whispered to myself. I just needed a bit more to get me through the lonely nights.

When his fingers slid under the lace, touching my most intimate skin, any thought of protest fled. I tilted my head back with a breathless sigh slipping through my parted lips. I gripped his shoulders, wanting more, needing more of this sensation.

"Yes," I breathed out when his fingers teased my opening. My fingers curved, digging into his shoulders. I could die and go to heaven. Or maybe this was heaven. Either way, I needed more. "Please," I breathed out desperately, grinding against his hand.

"Tell me you want me to fuck you," he urged in a soft voice. My heart leaped out of my chest and danced somewhere between us while a delightful shiver ran down my body. "Tell me you want to be mine," he commanded, his breath hot in my ear.

I was about to nod my head when the sound of glass shattering broke through the haze of desire. It was like someone threw a bucket of ice water over me. The term cold shower took on a whole new meaning here.

My hands pushed against him, and to his credit, he stopped immediately. Though it was a small credit.

"What the hell was that?" I rasped, my voice husky and laced with desire that didn't recede.

His green gaze darkened and burned through me, setting me aflame.

Staggering backwards in confusion at what just happened, I felt his eyes watching my every move. I could see wrinkles on his expensive suit where

my fingers had been digging into him. Colors swirled in his eyes - a mixture of gray and green.

Too embarrassed at my reaction and how far I let it go, I looked away from him. How could I have let that happen? With one last glance at the man that set something in motion within me, I turned around and sped out of the room, scared of what I might do if I felt his hands on me ever again.

As I rushed out of his office, his secretary eyed me like a crazed woman. I looked like one, disheveled and aroused.

“Are you alright, dear?” she asked, with sincere concern in her voice. Broken glass laid at her feet and I sent a silent prayer to whoever was listening up there. If not for that shattered glass, who knew how far I would have gone?

“I’m running late,” I mumbled an excuse, and not bothering to wait for her answer or the elevator, I rushed to the exit and down the stairs.

I had to get out of this building because temptation had green eyes.

## CHAPTER 7

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# KRISTOFF



That went unexpectedly.

I groaned in frustration, rubbing the back of my neck. I thrived on control, yet I lost it around Genevieve Rose. The moment her soft body molded against mine and I heard that little whimpering moan, I lost my tightly reined control. My cock strained against my zipper, eager for the dark-haired beauty with soft brown eyes.

Fuck, I had lost my mind *and* my control.

That never happened before. Even when I caught my wife sleeping with my best friend, I had punched Jonathan and then told them both to meet me downstairs. Then ended my marriage on my terms despite Jacqueline's pregnancy. That ended up resolving itself - she lied about the baby being mine.

I shoved that bitter memory aside and focused on the woman that somehow had me obsessing over her. There were candidates that were better suited for this role - cold and detached.

Yet, I wanted this one. A simple brush of Gemma's lips and the way she moaned into my mouth had me losing my goddamn senses. Her lips were the softest thing I had ever felt. And her body was pliant and small, molding to mine like she was always meant to be mine.

A strange warmth crept down my spine as her body pressed against mine. I hadn't expected the burst of intense heat that flared between us. The flash of desire that burned like an inferno through me. And I knew, *fucking knew*, that having this woman would be the most exquisite pleasure. Hot, pulsating, perfect pleasure that would pale any other woman in comparison.

If she hadn't come to her senses, I'd have fucked her. Right here. Right now. On my desk.

*I'm a fucking moron*, I groaned. She hadn't even asked the questions about the second agreement and certainly hadn't signed it. Rather than keeping my head, I let my dick guide me.

*Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*

The last thing I needed was to act like my bastard father. He swung his money, actually my mother's money, to play hard, fuck harder, and act like the selfish playboy he really was. He disgraced our family name. The reporters would have a field day if they got a hint of my agreements.

The last thing I needed was to chase a skirt like my old man. Except, Genevieve Rose wasn't just a skirt. There was something about her that fascinated me. Maybe it was the silent strength that shone through those caramel eyes. Or maybe the vulnerability she was desperate to hide.

She stormed out of here like the devil himself was chasing her. Well, this devil seriously debated going after her. Nobody, and I mean nobody, in my entire life had felt as good as the woman that just left me without a second thought.

My sixth sense cautioned about the influence she was having on me. If she was able to get to me already, and I'd barely touched her, she'd be dangerous for my control. The emotional detachment could backfire, and for once, I feared the tables could be turned. I didn't need a detailed background check to tell me nobody mattered more to Miss Rose than her children.

Yet, as I strode back to my desk, I already contemplated how to get the beautiful, single mother with the warmest caramel eyes to come back to me.

Picking up my phone, I dialed Byron. He answered after a few rings.

"Hello?"

"Byron, how deep did you dig into Miss Rose's past?"

I could hear some movement, a moan in the background and I silently groaned. It was obvious he was in the middle of getting laid.

"Not terribly deep," he answered. Another moan. "Why?"

To us, digging deep into someone's past took on a whole new meaning. By the time Byron was done, I'd know what color panties Miss Rose preferred to wear.

"Dig deeper," I told him. It didn't escape me how she flinched when I told her my background checks reveal everything. "I want to know



everything there is.”

His chuckle came over the line. I could already picture the knowing smirk on his face. If he was here, maybe I’d wipe it off with a round of boxing, something we did to release our tension.

“Ahhh, so I did good sending her your way,” he drawled.

“Just get me the information,” I demanded. “I’ll owe you big.”

I ended the call, knowing he’d probably have something for me within the next twenty-four hours.

Reclining in my chair, I stared out the window. The city stretched before me. I owned a good number of properties in it as well as around the globe. Yet, somehow it felt insignificant. Growing up, I was glaringly aware that my parents’ marriage was a sham. My mother tried; my father didn’t. I swore I’d never become them.

Though now, as I stared at the city with billions of dollars in my portfolio, I wasn’t so sure I succeeded.

## CHAPTER 8

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



Two days since I felt the most sinful touch that burned my skin.

The memory lingered, my body remembered, despite the fact I tried to forget *him*. The entire last interview and how good those firm, rough hands felt on my skin. The whole incident played on repeat in my head - every touch, every kiss, his scent - during the day and night.

His words haunted me, wondering what he meant by it. His comment about checking how my body responded to him lingered in the back of my mind. It wasn't until a whole day later that his words finally sunk in.

*Stipulation of the second contract.*

My girls tucked into bed, I rushed to my office, my laptop still in the same spot I left it in when I printed out the first document. Clicking my email open, I double clicked the other attachment I never got around to.

My eyes traveled over the second contract, widening with each sentence. I couldn't believe what I was reading. The *other* duties of the job were clearly addressed here.

Holy shit! This *had* to be a joke.

What kind of damn job description was this? My eyes roamed over the pages, the words *sex* and *oral* dancing in front of my eyes.

*What. The. Fuck!*

Mr. Baldwin was looking for an executive assistant who would do his administrative duties, as well as have sex with him when the mood strikes, without any emotional attachments.

*Sex!* It was all I had been thinking about since I stormed out of his office. Wild, reckless sex with the most gorgeous man I had ever seen. My pussy clenched and I squeezed my thighs together, trying to squash the

desire running through my bloodstream. Sex with him would be good. Better than good. I'd stake my life on it.

God, all of this was so wrong. *Right?*

The man was testing me to see how I responded to him. Like I was some cheap whore. He'd better hope I never saw him again. I'd slap him. Something was wrong with him.

*Then something is wrong with you, too,* my mind mocked.

Yeah, this was a turn off.

*Then why are your panties wet,* my mind ridiculed me. Goddamn it, I had to stop with the monologue.

With a shake of my head, I continued reading the contract. My cheeks grew hot, and the words I read sent flames rushing through my veins along with some deliciously filthy images. My breathing turned shallow, each word creating images in my mind of the two of us tangled together.

God, why did I find it so hot? Something was seriously wrong with me. My breathing was ragged and the drumming of my heart fluttered in the silence of the night. The throbbing between my legs ached, needing release, but I ignored it. I shouldn't want release when reading something so wrong.

I forced myself to continue reading the document. The next paragraph had my heart racing into overdrive and lust turned into inferno. He actually outlined his preferred sexual methods. Doggy style. *Well, dude, that is not my favorite position,* I thought wryly. He listed the frequency of oral and anal sex. I shook my head in disbelief while my body burned with an inferno only that man could extinguish.

*Hell to the no!* I reprimanded myself. I didn't need this. Nobody in this century did this and got away with it. Well, except Kristoff Baldwin, it would seem.

I skimmed to the next requirement. Birth control and the requirement to be on it at all times.

"Well that won't be necessary," I grumbled. "No more kids for me."

And it wasn't like I was entertaining his offer.

I continued reading over the contract. No emotional attachments. No cuddling. No romance. It laid out everything, from my required dress code, to my right to ask him to stop before any sexual acts, and my right to refuse him, which was limited to five times a month.

"Geez, how considerate. How many times did that man want to have sex that I'd be allowed to refuse him five times a month?" I whispered

incredulously. While my head found this contract completely offensive, my body disagreed. It wholeheartedly objected to me telling him to go to hell.

A surge of anticipation leaked into my bloodstream. It didn't make sense, since I would never see him again. After I ran out of his office, there would be no job for me there. I didn't want it. I didn't want *him*.

Yet, desire burned through every pore of me. God, I had never felt this raw, earth-shattering desire before.

Ignoring my body's response, I continued skimming the document. The contract continued to indicate that Miss Genevieve Rose, newsflash *me*, was never to be harmed, bound, gagged, or given to and/or shared with another man.

*Well, isn't that nice of him*, I sneered.

I sighed. Sex with that man would be volcanic. I just knew it. If those few minutes with him were any indication, sex would be hot, consuming and explosive. I clenched my thighs; my skin burned with the remembrance of his touch. He handled me like a pro, and I liked it. I'd never admit it, but those were the hottest few minutes of my entire life.

In the back of my mind, I stored the images of Kristoff Baldwin for my lonely nights with my vibrator. Because there would be many lonely nights in my future.

I wasn't sure who was crazier. Me, because I was reading this document fantasizing about him fucking me, or this guy for having something like this going on. He was a lawsuit waiting to happen. Yes, he made it consensual, but nobody sane would consent to it.

Except that I kind of wanted to, just to experience more of that fire.

I had to get my head screwed on right. Forget sex with the hot billionaire that wanted no emotional attachments. *Yeah, buddy... keep on searching*, I scoffed in my head.

Rick assured me his company would be sending me an offer any day now. No sex with the hot, sexy billionaire.

Determination washed over me, and I deleted both contracts, and the email permanently. The guy might be hot and intense, but obviously he was crazy. And that craziness was contagious because I was starting to act crazy too.

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FOUR DAYS HAD PASSED since the sexiest man alive trailed kisses along my neck and set my body on fire. It would never burn the same. I almost convinced myself it was a dream, except it was impossible to forget the feel of his hands against my pussy or the way he turned my world upside down.

Pushing through the door of the Starbucks, my regular rendezvous spot with my best friend, I focused on the job that should be coming my way. With Rick's company. Away from the hot billionaire.

The late morning sun shone through the windows, the aroma of coffee and beans entering my lungs. Today seemed brighter, either due to the beautiful weather or anticipation of the impending offer.

Both Betty and I still had a while before we had to go get our kids. I spotted her at our usual table with our usual drinks. She was all dolled up, as usual, while I wore my signature jeans and chucks.

To an outsider, we couldn't be more different.

Her blonde hair to my dark brown. Her taller frame to my short one. Her fancy clothes to my simple outfit. The only similarity we currently had was that both of us had our hair in a high ponytail, my dark brown hair slightly longer and thicker than her blonde hair.

"Hey there," I greeted her with a smile as I lowered myself onto the seat next to her.

"You must be the only woman on this Earth to have refused Kristoff Baldwin," was her greeting to me. "That man is panty melting."

I sighed. I knew she'd grill me about it, but I thought I'd have at least five minutes before it started. If it was up to me, we'd never talk about it again, but Betty just couldn't drop the subject.

"How are the boys?" I asked instead. As their godmother, I'd usually see them every week, have playdates or just park dates. But with all the events happening this week, I hadn't had a chance to have them over.

Betty waved her hand off. "They're fine. What I need to know is why didn't you accept? Didn't you think the man was hot?"

I gave her a scolding look. She didn't flinch. What could I say? He kissed me, and it was so hot, I was ready to let him fuck me right there in his office. The truth was that if I'd have read that second contract, I would have never gone for that second interview. Or I would have gone prepared. Nah, who was I fooling? I wouldn't have gone.

She leaned over to me conspiratorially. "Don't you want to jump his bones?" Betty whispered, her cheeks flushed.

“And I can’t believe you wouldn’t have explicitly told me that’s what he was looking for in his executive assistant,” I accused. “I thought we were friends.”

She rolled her eyes exasperatedly. “Of course we are.”

“How did you know about the *unconventional* job duties?” I questioned her. “Something like that is sure to land that man in court.”

Of course, I wasn’t concerned for him nor did I care about what happened to him.

She chuckled, waving her hand. “Byron Ashford went to high school with me. We ran into each other and he asked me if I’d be interested in the position because a while back, I really wanted it. He didn’t know I got married and all that. Anyhow, I told him you’d be interested.”

I groaned. “Seriously! You think I’d be interested in prostitution?”

She took my hand in hers. “Gemma, don’t be such a little Miss Proper! You have to get a bit wild! It would have been good for you, and it’s exclusive so it’s not prostitution. Just a slightly unconventional relationship.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not a relationship,” I hissed. “It’s basically prostitution,” I retorted dryly.

Yes, thoughts of sex with that gorgeous specimen set my insides on fire, but that didn’t make it right.

“You are just too uptight.” She waved her hand nonchalantly like we were discussing today’s weather. “You should have let him take control and enjoyed the great sex that came with it. At least you would have gotten laid.”

At her crude words, my cheeks warmed and images colored my mind of how getting laid by Kristoff Baldwin would be. *Doggy style*. Ugh, it was all Betty’s fault with her *creative* words.

“Betty,” I warned her in a low voice.

“I’m sorry,” she quickly apologized. “I just want you to give yourself a chance and get out there. I know you are shy because of Jack, but you can’t continue, even in death, to let him hold you back. You deserve to be happy and have a good man.” Her voice was soft. I knew she meant well. Of course, taking that agreement wouldn’t be moving on. There was a specific clause about emotional detachment. When I didn’t say anything, she continued, “The man also happens to be hot and rich. Best of everything.”

“That would be prostitution,” I whispered, glancing around us to ensure nobody else was listening to our conversation. “There is no way this was meant to be enjoyable for anyone but for him.” Even as the words slipped through my lips, I was certain that sex with Kristoff Baldwin would be more than enjoyable. Those few minutes with him were proof that it would be *extremely* pleasurable for me. “I’m just not comfortable with such an arrangement,” I ended up saying with a sigh. Maybe it would be easier if I could enjoy sex with him without any emotional detachment. It would be simpler. “And if you’re so keen on it, why don’t you apply?”

“Trust me, I totally would,” Betty claimed with a soft chuckle. “But I have this little obstacle of a husband. But you are a widow and single. And the pay would have been good, right?”

“Yes,” I said wistfully. “The pay was great.”

The starting salary was a hundred and fifty thousand. Jesus, what I could do with that money!

“Maybe you should call him,” Betty was pushing. “And say you’d like another try.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Trust me, it was for the best. I’m not capable of just sex and no attachment. I’m not even that great at it, so it would have ended fast. He’d get bored of me quickly, and then I would have felt used.”

It wasn’t until this very moment that I realized how much Jack’s diminishing words impacted me. Calling me a cold fish. Telling me I was lousy in bed.

My heart started thumping as the memories flashed through my mind. Blood rushed in my ears. Something cold slithered down my spine, fear mixing with disgust. Jack certainly did a number on me. On my confidence and self-esteem.

And then there was my secret. I brought my hand up and placed it over my chest, my heart hammering against my ribs.

“You are not giving yourself any credit, Gemma,” she reasoned. Maybe so, but certain scars were harder to heal than others. “You were only ever with your husband. And we know how that went.”

That might be, but getting over the past scars by jumping into a sexual relationship with a clause of no emotional attachment was bound to end badly. Or maybe that was exactly what experts would recommend for a rebound? Hell if I knew.



“Well, I just got my offer from Rick’s company,” I switched subjects. “I’m super excited for it, and it is more up my alley. There couldn’t be a better perk than working for the same company as Rick. And he’s excited too, already planning our lunches.”

“But, Gemma,” Betty frowned and attempted one more time. “Kristoff Baldwin could-”

“Anyhow,” I cut her off, hoping to close the issue. “It’s over. I told him I’m not interested or rather, I showed him.” When I bolted out of his office. “There’s no going back. I’ll go grab us round two. Same thing?”

We shared a glance and her shoulders slumped in resignation. “Fine,” she muttered.

I headed for the line to place our order. While walking back to the table with our drinks, the song “Remind Me to Forget” came on and I strode to Betty with a smile on my lips. She was smiling back, knowing we both enjoyed the song. I moved my body with the sound of music as I put both of our cups on the table. The beat picked up, and I swayed my body to the rhythm. Betty was doing the same, still sitting down, while raising her arms and swinging them.

A whistle sounded behind me and I followed Betty’s gaze. A few boys clapped their hands, cheering us on, chanting, “More, more, more.”

We both burst into laughter. “We should go clubbing,” Betty announced. “Looks like we still got our moves.”

I smiled. I haven’t gone clubbing in a long time.

“We’ll probably be the oldest ones there. There’s nothing that will lift our spirits more than hanging around a bunch of twenty year olds,” I said in a sarcastic voice but Betty clearly didn’t pick up on it. Her loud laugh traveled over the noisy room, attracting several gazes our way.

She stopped abruptly, and her eyes widened in shock while locked on a spot over my shoulder. I turned and followed her gaze, curious as to what shocked her, fully expecting some kids to be making a stupid joke on our account.

The smile on my face froze and my stomach dropped. Kristoff Baldwin was walking through the crowd towards us.

## CHAPTER 9

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# GENEVIEVE



Dressed in a dark navy button down, perfectly fitted suit, his walk shouted confidence to everyone without even having to open his mouth. Women gawked and men threw hesitant glances his way. He didn't look like he belonged here with his tall frame and expensive three-piece-suit.

And much to my reluctance, I had to admit that nobody ever wore a suit as good as this man. It highlighted his strong, muscular shoulders and his legs. I could just imagine their strength pushing against me. My stomach fluttered. What was it about this man that did this to me? He made me feel like a twenty-year-old virgin again.

He stopped right next to us, his eyes on me.

"Hello, ladies," he greeted us, his eyes never wavering from me. His voice gave me shivers while remembering the words he murmured into my ear while his fingers snuck up my panties feeling my most sensitive skin. "I see you are having a good time. My apologies for interrupting."

He didn't sound sorry at all.

"You are way overdressed for Starbucks," I remarked for no good reason. Then added silently, *And way too hot for my own sanity.*

I mentally slapped myself. His calm demeanor was so stark against my rattled heart.

"Hello," Betty chimed in, her voice sounding slightly breathless. I was so glad she didn't have anything intelligent to say and was just as impacted as me. My shock at seeing him unexpectedly left me dumbfounded, staring at him with my mouth slightly parted and heat burning my cheeks. It was hard to look at him and not recall what happened the last time I saw him.

Damn it, I was really counting on never seeing him again. Except when I touched myself, then he was all I thought about. And just like that, my body heat spiked another ten degrees.

Without glancing at her, he stared at me intently and I had to fight the urge not to fidget. Could he see it in my eyes that I got off on thoughts of his hands on me?

“Genevieve, could I have a word?” His voice spoke of a dark, sensual bedroom, his body on mine. Me screaming his name.

*Get yourself together*, I scolded myself in my mind.

“Ah... sorry,” I mumbled flushed. “I’m busy... we were just having tea... coffee, and I’m busy so ummm...”

“Oh, Gemma,” Betty interrupted and stood up in a rush. “I don’t mind. Seriously. I have to go anyway.” I glared at her, hoping I conveyed the ‘*Don’t you fucking dare leave me alone with him*’ message. Then just in case she couldn’t understand my silent warning, I shook my head in a barely noticeable no, but she ignored me. “I will pick up the girls for you, Gemma. Just swing by my house to get them.”

*Fucking traitor!*

“Ah, Betty... no, that’s okay. I have time to get them,” I objected, my voice quivering with something hot. How was I going to talk to this man knowing I got off last night and the night before thinking about him? His hands on my breasts. His hands on my pussy.

Good God, people weren’t lying when they said hormones spike for women later in life. Mine were doing a number on me.

“No, no, no. Don’t rush,” she objected and started for the door. “I’ll pick them up.” *Traitor*. And she was gone. I never saw her move that fast, and in four inch heels. I couldn’t believe she abandoned me. After everything I told her. She knew how uncomfortable I was in his presence.

So here I was, alone with a billionaire in Starbucks with the aroma of coffee and some electricity buzzing through my veins that was sure to get me in trouble.

*Nervous energy*, I excused.

We stood there in silence as I waited for whatever he had to tell me, my hands wrapped around my tea cup sleeve trying to hide how badly they were shaking. *God, I can’t believe I’m even thinking this, but Betty might be right. I have to get laid.*

Slowly exhaling a silent sigh, I lifted my eyes to his gaze intently on me and cocked my eyebrow. "So... what do you need to talk about?"

"Have lunch with me." It wasn't what I expected. I blinked in confusion, wondering if maybe my brain wasn't working properly today. And why did it sound more like a command than a question?

"Right now?" I asked.

"Yes." His voice... oh so seductive... was making a flustered woman out of me. Biting my lip, trying to figure out the best way to get out of being around him, my mind worked vigorously. It didn't escape me that a simple smile and 'No' would be adequate. After all, this was a free country. My parents pointed out that privilege to me many times.

So why didn't I just say no and leave?

This man was confusing me like nobody else ever had... and I didn't like it. For my well-being and self-preservation, I shouldn't be around him. But the orgasms he could give me. Maybe if I had gotten laid since my late husband passed away, I wouldn't be so horny around him. I mentally slapped myself. *I do not want him!*

Yes, yes, *you do*. My inner self was a bitch. And another quarter to the jar.

"It's too early for lunch." *What a lame excuse!* "And I'm not hungry." I sounded like my daughter. I just had to add a whiny tone to my voice and we would have sounded like identical twins. I wasn't sure whether it was him that made me nervous or the fact that my body woke up after years of being in a sexual coma. Now, all I wanted was to feel his hands on my skin, explore every inch of that gorgeous body, and reach the pinnacle I knew he could deliver.

*Yeah, don't ask me when I became a sex addict.*

"We'll be in public," he assured me, noticing my indecision and probably reading my mind. As if he felt my will caving in, he took my hand instantly sending a shot of warmth to my lower belly. "Come with me."

The smart woman that I used to be would have taken back her hand and stayed put. Well, that woman disappeared around this man. Instead, I grabbed my purse and let him lead me out of Starbucks, his big hand on the small of my back. No protest ever left my lips.

Guiding me to a black, luxury car illegally parked, Kristoff nodded and a man opened the rear door. Jesus, this guy had a driver. Kristoff helped me

slide into the car. I furrowed my eyebrows in annoyance, throwing him a narrowed look. I didn't need any help.

But instead of meeting his gaze, I caught his eyes lingering on my chest, my pink blouse snug against my body. The blouse wasn't revealing, so self-consciously I lowered my eyes too, worried there was a stain on my shirt. Nothing.

Before I could open my mouth to ask him what he was looking at, he shut the door, only to come around the other side and get in. Sliding next to me, I swore the heat of that man's body warmed the entire car. Inconspicuously, I scooted towards my door, avoiding his closeness. And God help me if our bodies brushed. I'd go into a full jump-his-bones mode.

He noticed my movement. Our eyes met, my cheeks blushing excessively while a small crease formed between his eyebrows. Like he didn't understand something. Maybe the man expected me to scoot closer to him, but that would be detrimental to my restraint. After all, no sex for such a long time was about to backfire.

No words passed, and a small sigh slipped through my lips. Because how did you explain to someone so damn hot that your body couldn't be close to his because you get turned on. That would go over so well. Maybe end up with a restraining order.

Glancing out the window, I noticed we were speeding down the busy highway that connected Annapolis and D.C. Before I could question him about where we were going, he broke the silence.

"You and Betty were having a good time." It was a statement.

*Until you showed up*, I thought to myself.

"Yes." I figured there was no reason to be rude. We were all adults here. Well, maybe not everyone since the man sitting across from me was probably used to getting his way. I snorted. There was no *probably* in that assumption.

"Something bothering you?" he asked.

Ignoring my internal rambling, I met his gaze.

"How did you know where I was?" My question came out breathless, my heart thundering just a tad bit too fast.

"I have my ways," he told me, his voice deep, sending shivers down my spine.

"Well, I don't like your ways," I answered, staring at him with a challenge in my eyes. He might make my body burn with just his gaze or

the sound of his voice, but it gave him no right to stalk me.

“Are you sure about that?” His voice was pure seduction that made goosebumps break out on my skin. Images of him thrusting into me while he whispered filthy words. I had never felt this horny in my entire life.

I met his gaze straight on.

“Yes,” I responded with assurance I didn’t feel.

It was strange. Everything about him screamed wealth, easy life, arrogance. Except when I drowned in his eyes. Hidden secrets within the depths of those green eyes drew me in. Like he had been hurt before, hid all the pain deep in his soul, and his eyes were the only windows to that pain. But he had it buried so deep, you only got a glimpse of it.

Did my thoughts make any sense? Absolutely not. But I still wanted to offer him comfort, run my fingers over his scruff, and kiss away the worry creases on his face. It made no sense, and it was probably sentiments like this that made me a gullible woman. Yet, I couldn’t shake it off.

Or maybe my broken soul was projecting something onto his and seeing something that wasn’t really there.

“I could convince you my ways will be pleasurable to both of us.” My breath hitched, his words sending something hot through my veins while my face burned.

He was right; I knew he could. Our last encounter proved it, but there were certain lines that shouldn’t be crossed. It didn’t matter that I wanted his touch. *Right?*

I never dreamt that in my adult life I’d be so damn confused. Turning my head away from him, I stared out the window while the wheels in my head turned. Not about signing the contract, but wondering why he was here. Pondering whether it would be sane to ask him to prove to me he could make it pleasurable for me. Maybe it’d get this man out of my head and my system. But I’d always been a reserved person and being so openly suggestive didn’t come naturally.

The car came to a stop, and I looked out the window. Before I could say another word, Kristoff exited the car and came around to open the door for me. The man was such a proper gentleman. *Except in his second contract*, I added dryly. All his sexy filth came out then. Except, doing it all would be even more filthy.

At this rate, I’d need a cold shower by lunch time.

He extended his hand to help me, and I hesitantly took it, hating that his touch made me feel so damn hot. And vulnerable.

Because this desire for him would be disastrous.

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## CHAPTER 10

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



Stepping out of the car, I quickly pulled my hand from his. His touch overloaded my senses; he was just too much. Glancing around, I noted we were in the National Harbor area before my gaze landed on the building in front of us. Traveling up the architecture of the building, my hand shielded my eyes from the bright glare off the side before they settled on the large glass top.

“The view must be fabulous up there,” I muttered more to myself.

Washington D.C. was a fabulous city to visit when you had money. Yes, there were free museums to visit, but they gouged you when you grabbed lunch or brunch. Even snacks were outrageous. As such, I didn’t visit too much. Annapolis wasn’t exactly cheap, but compared to D.C., it was certainly affordable. Though, there were upscale restaurants that would empty your wallet easily with their price tag.

Just like any other girl, I liked to be wined and dined. But I had given up on it a long time ago. The only expensive dining I got since my girls were born was on my own dime. And with kids, I had better things to spend my money on.

“We should be done in about an hour and a half,” Kristoff told his driver, bringing my attention to him.

“Yes, sir.”

And the driver was gone, leaving me alone with the most attractive man to walk the Earth. Or at least this state. It didn’t prevent me from looking longingly after him. We needed a chaperone if I was to be comfortable around this man.

Kristoff motioned for me to walk, striding casually next to me, guiding me towards the fancy glass building.

"I noticed Betty called you Gemma," he commented. "You prefer Gemma to Genevieve?"

Glancing sideways, I answered. "My friends always said my name was a mouthful," I admitted. "So they shortened it to Gemma. I guess it didn't help that I love gems. So it stuck."

"I like it. Gemma," he replied simply, repeating my nickname as if he was testing it, then added, "You said you had questions before we got sidetracked in my office."

I had a distinct feeling his first word would have been cruder. I was really curious to know what he would have said. Maybe... before I almost fucked you in my office? Or was it... before I made you see stars and come for me?

Too hot!

"Ah... Mr. Baldwin..." I started, flushed with the creative imagination that suddenly worked against me.

"Please call me Kristoff when we aren't at work."

*When we aren't at work?* So Mr. Baldwin in the office and Kristoff when he fucked me. Duly noted.

Mentally, I slapped myself. I was my own worst enemy here.

I played it cool, ignoring my internal dialogue as I raised my eyebrows and looked him straight in his gorgeous eyes.

"Well, I won't be seeing you at work or outside of work. But have it your way... Kristoff." His name sounded so damn exotic. If only this man knew I whispered his name as I got myself off last night. I bet he'd get a kick out of it. "I think you are wasting your time here," I continued. "I'm not sure what you want, but I'm not the right person for your... um... administrative position. Personal assistant. Or whatever you're calling it."

Once inside the building, I glanced around while we waited for the elevators. Every single person was dressed to the nines. Didn't anyone believe in jeans and chucks anymore?

"You are the right person for the position," he argued calmly. "Trust me, Gemma, I know exactly what I'm doing." His words were confident, matching his appearance. But now that I knew what the second contract called for, it was hard to reconcile the words on that contract to this man standing next to me. He behaved polished, professional, but the contract

called for oral sex, anal sex, and doggy style, which was his favorite position.

Goddamn it, you couldn't unread words like that.

I wouldn't trust him. I couldn't. He was exactly the type that only cared about getting what he wanted until he no longer wanted it. And where would that leave me? Broken with my self-esteem in worse shape than ever.

Glancing up, I gazed down his body, his wardrobe impeccable and expensive. His three-piece-suit was probably worth more than all of my possessions. He fit in among people here; I didn't.

His gaze turned hot, and I realized he mistook my look for interest. Yes, there was interest, but I wouldn't entertain it. I'd make that clear to him, just not now with a bunch of people around me.

The elevator door beeped, and we entered together along with two other men, which forced me to stand closer to Kristoff. Way too close. The scent of his cologne was alluring. Unlike many others that were too invasive, his scent was clean and citrusy.

A man in front of me took a step back, and in order to avoid him bumping into me, I stepped to the side. My shoulder brushed against Kristoff's, spiking my adrenaline. This man would make an adrenaline junkie out of me. But just for him. His arm reached around me, pulling me closer to him.

*Damn it*, I scolded myself. I wanted to keep my distance, not get closer. Yet, the way he kept me away from the others, protective and possessive, stirred something inside me. Jack never did that. Or maybe he did when we first started dating, but it seemed so long ago, I couldn't remember it. All I remember was how much he hadn't done since we'd had our first baby.

Leaving me to struggle with the stroller and a baby in my arms while he chatted football with his buddies. Or leaving me to feed the kids while he sat on the couch lounging knowing that I still had tons of work to do. It didn't matter to him that I'd work until all hours of the night after I tucked them into bed. As long as his routine wasn't disturbed.

Yes, I let it go for far too long. I was to blame for not ending it sooner, knowing our relationship was no longer a partnership. God knew we didn't have passion. By the end of our marriage, I wasn't even sure I recognized myself. I couldn't even blame it all on him because I let it happen.

The elevator ding pulled me from my thoughts, bringing me back to reality. The door slid open and I rushed out to put some space between us. It

was easier to think rationally without his tall, hard body brushing against mine.

The host approached, his eyes traveling over me with a scowl of disdain in his eyes, conveying he thought he was better than me. Clearly my wardrobe wasn't up to par here. Kristoff's arm came to my shoulder, the host's eyes traveled behind me and he froze, recognition flaring in his eyes.

"Mr. Baldwin," the waiter stood up straighter, reverence in his voice. It was almost comical, the temptation to roll my eyes was hard to resist. Kristoff Baldwin might be filthy rich, but he wasn't a god.

"We would like a table away from the others," Kristoff demanded in a tone that screamed confidence. This guy had no doubt he'd get what he wanted. Shit, it should terrify me. Yet, it also excited me.

Good God. All these contradicting thoughts were giving me whiplash.

"Of course, this way." The host gave the biggest smile to *Mr. Baldwin* and turned around to lead us to a table. Kristoff's hand slid down to my lower back, the touch firm and intimate. Gently nudging me along, unaware of my internal struggles.

So I followed the host. All eyes were on us, making me painfully aware of my inappropriate attire. I was way underdressed for this place, wearing jeans that accentuated my figure, a light pink, girly blouse, and a pair of matching pink chucks.

*I dressed for Starbucks*, I wanted to shout to everyone staring. Instead, I just smiled tightly.

We stopped at a table with a prime view of Washington, D.C. and an awed sigh slipped through my lips. I'd like to think I wasn't overly impressed by wealth, but this view was worth a million bucks. Which I didn't have, but that was beside the point. Unfortunately, another host was getting ready to sit two guests there and I kind of regretted not having this prime table. I'd most likely never make my way to this restaurant again.

The moment the other host saw us... not me, but *Mr. Baldwin*... he quickly moved to shift his guests to another location.

"Will this do?" The host asked Kristoff, not even bothering with me. Of course, I was a nobody. Whatever. It didn't matter to me. I'd get to see an incredible view for a short hour and remember it for the rest of my life.

"Yes," Kristoff answered.

The host went to pull out the chair for me. At least he had *some* manners. But before he had a chance to grab the chair, Kristoff beat him to

it. God, I always had a thing for gentlemen. Though you'd question that since I married Jack, but that was water under the bridge.

I sat down feeling a bit like someone important, though it was a ridiculous notion. I couldn't remember the last time someone pulled out a chair or opened a car door for me. And today, it happened twice. Gosh, if that was all it took to make me feel special, I was doomed. Kristoff Baldwin would chew me up and spit me out before I even realized what was going on.

I peered his way noting his seat opposite of mine when our waiter approached.

"Would you like to start with some drinks?" the waiter asked, his eyes on Kristoff. I expected to see him start drooling at any minute. Yes, I felt like drooling too, but at least I hid it. *I hope.*

Agitation slowly started to rise within me. The day started off hopeful and was quickly turning in a mysterious direction. I didn't like it. I liked my days planned out. The only surprises I liked were presents. That's it.

Looking up directly at the waiter, I answered as if he was asking me, "Yes, thank you. Ice water with lemon, please." And before he could say anything else, I turned my head and looked out the window.

*Damn snob*, I thought to myself. Kristoff ordered something but I wasn't paying attention. This mood swing was uncharacteristic of me, but usually I hung around with more down-to-earth people and friends.

Sensing Kristoff's gaze on me, I turned my head to face him. The waiter had left, leaving me alone with this enigma of a man. I stared back at his focused and intense eyes. The way he watched me sent shudders through every fiber of me. I hoped to God he couldn't read me because it would be embarrassing if he knew his affect on me.

"I'd like to hear your questions." He broke the silence, his eyes on me like a predator on his prey.

I really wasn't in the mood for any of this.

"What questions?"

"During your second interview, you said you had some questions about the position."

I sighed. "First of all, those questions are pointless now. And second of all, not sure if you noticed, but I'm very underdressed for this place." His look was fixated, and hot, on me. I didn't want to feel this much lust and desire.

“I think you look beautiful.” My insides melted at his compliment and his tone sent a blush to my cheeks. At this rate, my cheeks would be stained red for the rest of my life. Damn man! “Ask me your questions.”

Why couldn’t he just let it go? It was probably why he was so successful and rich. I exhaled a heavy sigh.

“Fine, if you really want to know... I never read the second contract,” I admitted reluctantly. “I got sidetracked with my children. I was going to ask a question, hoping you’d give me a clue as to what the second contract was about so I wouldn’t have to say I didn’t read it.” My hands fidgeted over the napkin on my lap. “I was thinking more along the lines of the job description. But then, you demonstrated what the second document contained.”

I had nothing to lose at this point. This rendezvous with Kristoff couldn’t be over soon enough. I’d get a lunch out of it and an incredible view, then I’d forget him and never see him again. Great plan.

The waiter was back with our drinks, water for me, and a glass of scotch, if I had to guess, for him. An expensive one. Scotch for lunch. *Maybe he was an alcoholic*, I thought to myself, looking for any traits that would make him less appealing.

I took a sip of my water, hoping this torture would be over soon. Kristoff waited until the waiter was out of earshot.

“I guess that explains your shock then,” he retorted in a calm voice, like we were discussing the weather.

“Shock?” I asked incredulously.

“I’m guessing your friend didn’t give you a full picture of the position either,” he continued in his deep voice.

I sighed. “No, she failed to mention a few key items.”

“Well, now that you know, we should start over,” he continued.

I blinked, confusion evident on my face. “Are you for real?”

Not a single flicker of emotion crossed his face. But those eyes, God, how they pulled me in.

“I’m for real, Gemma. And I’m serious. I’m prepared to update your starting salary to one hundred and eighty-five thousand a year. You will be fully vested, and you will also get some stock options and bonuses throughout the year, with a Christmas monetary gift at the end of the year.”

My mouth fell open. “You pay that much to an admin?”

“Gemma, we both know this is a little bit more than an admin position.” I blushed, agitated that this man is able to get me so flustered.

“Thank you for the reminder,” I answered shakily. There is no denying that my body wanted him for some stupid reason. “But I’m afraid I have to reject it. What you’re offering is just a nicer version of prostitution.”

The waiter was back for our order. And thank God because I needed to calm down. Kristoff’s pointed look told me he wanted me to order first. I hadn’t even looked at the menu. “You go ahead; I’ll hurry up.”

While Kristoff was ordering his lunch, I skimmed through options. No prices next to the food was a sure indication they were outrageously expensive. So I focused on the salad selection.

“And for you, ma’am?” the waiter asked me. I hated to be called *ma’am*; it made me feel so darn old.

“I’ll have a garden salad, no onions, and dressing on the side, please.” I closed the menu and handed it to the waiter.

“Would you like to try a sandwich with it?” he asked.

“No, thank you. I don’t have much of an appetite right now.”

“Only salad then.” And he disappeared again.

I looked back at Kristoff to find him frowning.

“What?” I asked, my tone slightly cranky.

“You’re thin,” he answered. “You should try some meat with your meal.”

“I will,” I said. “For dinner. I kind of lost my appetite when this guy thought it was okay to buy me.”

If my jabs at him were working, he hid it well.

“Don’t think of this contract as a black and white arrangement,” Kristoff went right back to his main topic. I had a feeling this man was relentless when he wanted to close the deal.

“Oh, I forgot about the grey,” I scoffed sarcastically. “*Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

He ignored my sarcastic tone and continued, “I will make sure you are satisfied each time. You are currently not involved with anyone, and neither am I. You are smart, driven, and this will expose you to all the right connections.”

I blushed again thinking back to our encounter during the last interview. I believed he’d deliver pleasure. Probably the best pleasure I have ever experienced.



"I read through the contract after... well, after the last interview," my voice was a bit too soft, too raspy. It sounded seductive to my ears. Not what I was going for here at all. So I cleared my throat hoping he didn't take it that way.

"I'm glad," he commented. His voice was deep and sexy, taunting my resolve. "Everything in it is negotiable, except the birth control clause. I want this to be pleasurable for both of us."

*Pleasurable.* My body screamed hell yeah, my blood was on fire, and my thighs were clenching with need.

"I don't need birth control," I whispered in a daze. "I had one too many miscarriages. My OB/GYN indicated I had one in a billion chances to get pregnant. So there's that." Realizing what I just said, I shook my head. "What am I saying! I'm not having sex with you, damn it."

I put my hand on my forehead, I regarded him warily. I wondered who was crazier here, him or me. My skin was hot to the touch and I relished in the coolness of my palms. I didn't want to share that piece with him.

After my eldest, Jack wanted a boy. I guess to carry on his legacy or something. The next five pregnancies ended in miscarriages. A cervical insufficiency. The last two pregnancies were high risk and a blessing. I wouldn't go through that again.

Kristoff leaned across the table, his eyes never wavering from mine. "I'm sorry about your miscarriages." It wasn't what I expected.

"That's okay," I murmured. "No plans for another marriage nor kids."

"You must have thought about it if you had a solution for the birth control clause," he drawled. Oh, how suggestive his voice was! The tone of it sent shivers to all the right places. Or wrong, but it felt so right. "What other comments do you have about the contract?"

I swallowed. "I'm sorry, but this isn't something I can do." I was proud my voice came off firm. "I'd never be able to fulfill your clauses. I'm not capable of emotional detachment with that type of a physical relationship."

"You enjoyed our encounter," he rasped, sure of his capabilities. "And you're not emotionally attached to me. So I'd argue otherwise."

I sighed, ready to talk sense into this man. Or myself for even talking about all this with him.

"Kristoff, what you're doing is *wrong*." I emphasized the last word in a low voice and tried to keep my cool. "You will get yourself sued. Haven't you heard about the *Me Too* movement?" I shook my head in disbelief. "Do

yourself a favor and find a girlfriend. It's safer for everyone. And cheaper for you."

"Are you volunteering?" His voice was deep and his hot gaze gave me butterflies that I didn't need. All my thoughts scattered just like those damn butterflies.

"What?" I muttered confused. Was he changing the subject to confuse me? "Volunteering for what?"

"Are you volunteering to be my girlfriend then?" His voice was all business.

An exasperated sigh left my lips. He was utterly frustrating.

"No, I'm not volunteering for anything, least of all to be your girlfriend! I need a job. And I'm not sleeping with you or anyone else as a part of that job." I rolled my eyes in annoyance. "Seriously, Kristoff, this is probably illegal." I leaned closer to him over the table and lowered my voice, adding, "This is fifty shades of kinky, and there is nothing cool about it."

"I'll upgrade the salary to two hundred and fifty thousand a year. Just say yes."

I stared at him in disbelief. Was this guy for real? What he proposed was completely inappropriate but so fucking tempting. Why?

*Because the sex would be out of this world.* The devil on my shoulder whispered.

No, no, no! It was out of the question to consider anything like this. Completely wrong! Maybe I should just tell him I'm not that great in bed.

*Who in their right mind would pay that much for a salary?* I thought to myself. *Maybe he wasn't that great in bed either?* Mental facepalm. *What am I saying? Maybe I should be asking who in their right mind would refuse that salary?*

Money was the root of all evil. It was what my father used to always say. It started wars, divided families, caused murders. And people did things for money they would regularly never do.

At this very moment, I'd agree because the temptation was too great.

I could do so much with a salary like that. I would be able to pay bills comfortably, ensure my kids kept a roof over their head, and I'd be able to do a full grocery run after the first paycheck. I could take the kids on a vacation, a real vacation. It was more than I made working as the CFO for a small private company, and I worked my butt off.

I stared at him, wide-eyed, considering him and his offer. It wasn't as if he wasn't an attractive man. He was hot, and I wasn't the only one that noticed that. Most of the women in this restaurant were gawking at him. He could easily get a woman to sleep with him without a contract.

*Why the hell is a man like him still single?* I thought to myself.

Was the reason that glimpse of pain that lurked deep down in that icy stare? I wanted to peel his layers off and help him move past it. Though how could I? I was a fucked up mess on my own, and obviously, I didn't know how to move past certain things. *No, I was reading too much into him. There **has** to be something wrong with him to need a contract like this.*

"Do you want to know more about our benefits?" Kristoff's voice was smooth, like he was talking to a lover about something sexy. I nodded, buying myself time to get my sanity back.

"Our benefits are excellent with no copay. We provide a catered lunch every day, and breakfast every Monday. Four weeks of vacation per year. Working hours are from nine sharp until six in the evening on some days, but more often until eight."

*That's not so bad,* I thought. If I could only get over the whole sex thing. I mean I wanted sex, but the morals ingrained in me were hard to ignore. As if he could hear my thoughts, he continued, "Generally, I would require one day a week for sexual activity, approximately an hour. I'll ensure your pleasure."

*Holy fuck, that's so hot! Sign me the fuck up. Get your shit together, Gemma,* I scolded myself. Staring at him, I wondered when the world came to this? I didn't know which one of us was crazier. Me for considering it. Or him for offering it.

I leaned back in my seat, unable to peel my eyes away from him. Did he not realize that what he was proposing is wrong on so many levels? More importantly, didn't I?

The most important lesson of my marriage with Jack had taught me to never let a man think they own me. I was foolish thinking my marriage to Jack was going to be like my parents' relationship who loved, cherished, and respected each other above all else. I would never put myself in such a vulnerable position again, and I strongly felt that signing that piece of paper gave Kristoff Baldwin some ownership over me and my body.

The waiter returned with our lunch and must have sensed the tension at our table because he quickly placed our plates in front of us and left.

Glancing at the magnificent view, I came to the conclusion I was way out of my element with this man.

“Try not to look at it as black and white,” Kristoff interrupted my thoughts, repeating his previous statement.

I locked my gaze with his green one. It was easy for him to say that when he wasn’t the one that had to be available at my every whim. It would be the other way around. God, but the money. That was a lot of money!

I looked at my salad, realizing I had no appetite at all. Despite it, smoothing the napkin on my lap, I picked up my silverware and slowly started eating. Aware of his gaze on me, I studiously ignored him.

After a few minutes of silence, he spoke up, “Gemma...”

I swallowed hard, dabbed my lips, then opened my mouth with determination. “I’m sorry. It’s a very generous offer... it really is. But I cannot take it. I’ll be taking another job.”

I had to make sure to put that out there. It would end this temptation. After all, I was only human.

Determination entered Kristoff’s eyes. “If you are referring to the job where Betty’s husband works, that offer is no longer on the table.” I stared at him in shock, dumbfounded and trying to process what he just said. I opened my mouth several times but no words came out.

Finally, I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“What do you mean?” I whispered.

“You know very well what I mean,” he replied. “I spoke to the owner of the company, and they rescinded the offer.”

Thump. Thump. Thump.

He’d pulled the rug out from under me. That really took some nerve. This bastard didn’t even bother making up some bullshit story about why Rick’s company is rescinding the offer. The anger slowly rose within me, washing away any lust and desire and replacing it with boiling fury.

Anger flared inside me, ready to erupt like a volcano. Fuck his pain, assuming he even had it. He had no idea what normal people went through to survive in this world.

I took a deep breath, then another, and another, before I spoke up.

“Does it ever occur to you that you are an asshole?” I hissed, my words low. I knew nobody could hear us. But my body language said it all. “That you are playing with other people’s lives. What’s the matter, Mr. Baldwin?

Nobody ever said *NO* to you before? You should get used to it. You might discover a thing or two!”

I was so mad, my hands shook and frustration clawed at my chest. Just a simple request by a powerful man and my opportunity was squashed. He didn’t just take the chance away from me, but also from my daughters. And that was harder to overlook than just the damage to me.

I grabbed the napkin off my lap and clutched it tightly, imagining it was his neck. I was so mad, I could literally find strength to wring his neck. My words didn’t seem to have any impact on him. His eyes were hooded so it was hard to tell. Not that I cared if I upset him. That jackass!

“That was a dick move, Kristoff. If working for you is so desirable, why don’t you hire the next girl? If my memory serves me well, there were a few candidates in that first interview. Go get them. How many times do I have to refuse the job?”

Something flared in his eyes but it quickly disappeared.

“I have a proposition for you, Gemma.”

My eyes narrowed to slits. “I already rejected your proposal. And the answer will be no - with and without that other offer.”

“Guess we’ll do this the hard way.” His words were soft and vehement. “I’m familiar with the cause of your husband’s death.” My heart iced over, freezing the blood in my veins. “And I’m willing to use it to have you change your mind.”

The past had caught up to me.

## CHAPTER II

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# KRISTOFF



That was an asshole move, I'd admit.

After Byron delivered a detailed and in-depth background check, I finally understood this woman a bit better. Admired her even.

*"If you really want her," Byron said, sipping his scotch, "-you have a way to blackmail her."*

*I skimmed through the documents. There was a lot more to Genevieve Rose than met the eye. Daughter to immigrant parents, she spent a good part of her childhood in Croatia. After their death, she returned back to the States and went to college where she met her friends and her future husband.*

*Her financial situation was stable and separate from her husband. Until she lost her job. Now, it was just bleak and she was a payment away from losing it all.*

*But it was her husband that took most of the pages. While Genevieve thrived, her husband was a goddamn loser. A cheater and a fucking broke playboy. About five years into their marriage, odd things started happening, all of which pointed to domestic violence. There was no record of it, but the pharmacy supply purchases and visits to the hospital all pointed to it.*

*And then there was the day her husband died. It was what Byron referred to when he indicated I'd be able to blackmail her.*

*"Are you certain?" I asked him, reading through the report of her husband's accident and his wounds. Coincidentally, on the same day Genevieve's record shows a doctor's visit - broken shoulder, bruised face, and battered body.*

*“Yeah.” He downed his drink and put the glass on the table. “I tracked down the officer assigned to it. Off the record, they suspected she might have stabbed him. When questioned, she claimed she knew nothing about it. Considering he was in the car with the mistress, the car crash killed him as well as the mistress, and they had bigger cases to chase; they closed this one and moved on.”*

*“It could have been someone at the bar,” I suggested.*

*Byron shook his head. “According to the investigation, he was in and out of the bar. He met his mistress there and they both left without a word to anyone.”*

*I’d never understand how Byron obtained this kind of information when police records didn’t even indicate this information.*

*“If you asked me, the fucking moron deserved it,” I grumbled under my breath.*

*“Agreed.” Byron poured himself another drink. “The question is how bad do you want her, Kristoff?”*

*I wanted her pretty fucking bad.*

*For the past few days, I told myself Genevieve Rose was all kinds of wrong for me. She seemed to have morals ingrained in her. Except when she was in self-defense mode. Or maybe she just snapped. Either way, I fucking liked it. Maybe it was that which fascinated me.*

*Or maybe it was her delicious, soft body that melted into mine as I explored her in my office. She had molded into my touch, so addictively responsive that just thinking about it got me hard.*

*So despite the fact that she wasn’t the type that I usually preferred, I wanted her. Unlike anything or anyone else before her. I was willing to break the rules, call the man that used to be my best friend, the man who betrayed me seventeen years ago, just so I could ensure this woman would end up working for me. And worst of all, I was willing to blackmail her.*

*I miscalculated. I expected her acceptance once she learned her other offer was no longer coming. Another attribute to add to her - stubbornness. Blackmail with the information I found out was the last resort. However, now that her eyes widened and her face paled, an ounce of regret inched its way into my heart.*

*Clearly, my moral compass wasn’t as straight as hers. Not by a long shot.*



Her hands trembled. Anger flashed in her eyes, mixed with fear that she worked hard to hide. She took a deep breath in, then exhaled, attempting to calm herself. I had to admit, my respect for her went up another notch.

Any of the other candidates that interviewed for the position would have accepted well before my blackmail point.

But not Gemma.

The woman was as stubborn as she was beautiful. The attraction burned between us. She felt it. I knew it as well as I knew my own name. But she refused to acknowledge it. Her rejection was clear but my dick zeroed in on her. I was screwed; since I laid eyes on her, she was all my mind and dick focused on. I was familiar with the sensation; it was what I felt each time I found a new company to acquire and add to my portfolio. Yet, unlike the acquisitions, everything I did so far to get this woman was impulsive.

My cold detachment was out the fucking window when it came to her. And my cock was too invested. My contract required emotional detachment and here I was all fucking in. Ironical really. Women usually fell to their knees, eager to please me. Not Gemma. And despite that she was not the type I usually went for, I couldn't let go.

She felt too goddamn right in my arms.

And the way her cheeks flushed each time I hinted at pleasure was fucking addictive. Her plump, red lips would part and her eyes would darken, and I couldn't help but wonder how dark they'd get when I fucked her. I thought about her pussy way too much, the way her arousal smelled and the way her moans filled the air when I fingered her.

She had been married a long time, yet she almost acted like a sheltered woman. She had sex, no doubt about it. She'd birthed three girls.

My chest squeezed at the brief period I thought I'd be a father, but I immediately hardened it. No fucking thoughts about that shit.

Emotions and love did things to people. It changed them. Made them weak. My parents were a prime example. So was Gemma. She should insist on emotional detachment more than me. I was married for barely two years before it all went to shit. Truthfully, it was probably doomed from the get go, but I was too busy being deployed while she screwed around with my best friend, then tried to claim his baby was mine. Gemma, on the other hand, was married for far longer and if Byron's report was anything to go by, she went through some shit.

Her phone buzzed. Dismissing me, she reached for her purse and pulled out her cell. Worry flashed across her expression and I tensed. Something might have happened to her kids.

“Go ahead and answer it,” I encouraged her and an unfamiliar worry crept through me. That something happened that would upset this woman. It would be comical, except that it wasn’t. I knew at this very moment that I have gone too far to turn back now.

I’d keep this woman.

She slid the answer button. “Hello, Sienna. ”

I watched her hand smooth the non-existent wrinkle in the tablecloth, the motion almost self-soothing as she talked to her eldest daughter on the phone. Part of her background check listed her daughters’ names, and I had a tendency to remember everything.

“No, nothing is wrong. What’s going on?” Gemma spoke into her cell, avoiding my eyes.

Her face was makeup free, but she was naturally beautiful and appeared younger than her age. Much younger. Without knowing her age, I would have thought she was in her late twenties tops. She had that classic beauty that aged slowly. In my mid-forties, she was too young for me, though, that didn’t stop me from pursuing her.

One damn touch and I was obsessed unlike ever before.

“We talked about that last night, Sienna,” she mumbled into the phone. “My answer is still no.”

I wondered what they were arguing about. I didn’t have any kids, but from the friends I knew, the teenage years were a bitch. No matter the gender.

Gemma patiently listened to whatever was being said, and from the sounds I caught, it sounded like a teenage outburst.

“Whatever the reason, I don’t care. Unless the house is burning down, you are staying in.” Gemma’s voice was firm.

Life hadn’t been easy for her. And fuck it, I wanted to come in like a knight in shining armor, save the situation and take care of her. I had the means. Though the way I was going about it was questionable.

“The answer is still no, Sienna. I’ll come by in a bit and pick you up.” A heavy sigh left those full lips. I wondered if she’d cave in, though her next words showed me just how determined this woman was. “Yes, I know you’re mad. A month will be gone before you know it. Hmmm, well if he

does that, he is not that great of a guy anyhow, right?” She’d turn her daughters into women that wouldn’t take shit from anyone. Including guys like me. God knew, Gemma stood firm to all my offers thrown her way. Fuck, she could ask for five hundred grand and I’d agree. I wanted her to work for me. “Okay, I have to go. I’ll talk to you when I get home. I love you.”

She hung up and those warm whiskey brown eyes met my gaze. There was fire in them and I wanted to discover that fire when I fucked her. While she screamed my name with those throaty moans I heard before.

If it was the last thing I did.

“I’m sorry about that,” she apologized, offering a smile. She was pissed off at me and still she refused to be anything but polite.

“No worries,” I replied calmly. “Everything okay?”

“Yes.”

She kept fidgeting, her hand pulling on a non-existent tablecloth thread. Her ex-husband was a fucking moron to cheat on a woman like her. Much like her name, she was a gem among women. My wealth and status had always been a magnet for women. This one would rather take a job making a fraction of the salary I offered her than be around me and face this attraction.

Her gaze met mine, dark and secretive, hiding her ghosts that spoke to my own. “My late husband died in a car accident. Not sure what you’re trying to insinuate.”

A small smile tugged on my lips. “We both know that’s not exactly the entire story.”

I watched her fascinated.

Then determination flared in her eyes. “Then why don’t *you* tell me what the entire story is. Since you seem to know my life so well.”

I sat back in my chair, rested an elbow on the armrest, and ran a thumb across my jaw. I admired her fight. She was a perfect combination of soft and strong. No wonder I found her irresistible.

“I don’t think so, beautiful,” I retorted dryly, unwilling to reveal my cards. Truthfully, more than likely the cops wouldn’t re-open the case, and technically, she didn’t kill her husband. Not that I’d blame her if she did. More importantly, I wouldn’t use my knowledge. Blackmail her, yes. So she’d give this a chance, yes. “We’ll do this my way.”

A tendril of hair kept hindering her sight and she glared at me as she tried to push that unruly piece of hair back.

“Why are you doing this?” Fuck, the vulnerable expression on her face hit me right in the chest.

I should back off. Leave her alone and let her live her life. Yet, with each passing second, I wanted her more. I wanted her so badly that I’d go through extremes to have her. To keep her.

*Jesus.* Those dark, hypnotic eyes took hold of me and refused to let go. Worse, I didn’t even attempt to fight it because I wanted to keep her. Maybe I was going about this in the wrong way. Forcing her hand only made her want to fight me more.

“I want to offer you a trial period of two months to work for me,” I told her.

“You mean force me,” she spit out bitterly, eyeing me distrustfully. She had every right to be suspicious because when I negotiated my contracts, I aimed to win. Gemma would be my prize and I’d make it good for both of us.

“Pay will be the same as my last offer. Two hundred and fifty thousand. However, I won’t be asking for any personal contract from you at all. It will be a professional relationship.” She couldn’t afford to refuse a paycheck. This would ensure she got one and it’d give me time to convince her to take my offer. “At the end of the trial period, you can decide whether this job is worth the personal contract. If it isn’t, I’m prepared to find you an appropriate position elsewhere in my company, whatever position might interest you.”

She gasped softly and her eyes widened. Fuck, even that turned me on. Maybe my words hit the spot because she considered my words. I could see her turning over her options in her brain and realizing there weren’t many. In fact, this was the only one. Nonetheless, suspicion was still there. I couldn’t blame her, considering her past experience and the fact that I forced this upon her.

“And the blackmail?” Her eyes narrowed on me again.

“Never to be mentioned again,” I promised.

“I have no intention of sleeping with you.” The words flew out of her mouth, while her eyes flashed with annoyance. “I don’t indulge in risqué behavior with strangers with who knows what STDs.”

"I'm clean," I grumbled, annoyed she kept fighting me on this. "Are you?"

"Of course, I am!" she hissed, then put her hand on her forehead. "Why am I even discussing this crap with you?"

"Because you know where we'll end up."

She scoffed. "In your dreams."

"In my dreams. In my home. In my bed. In my office. Anywhere and everywhere." Her eyes narrowed on me, but the little gasp didn't escape me. And then of course, her rosy cheeks. "But for now, I'll settle for administrative duties."

"Why would you do that?" she questioned. "You don't want to have- Sex. She swallowed and her cheeks stained red. "I'd just perform admin work for you? Nothing else?" Suspicion colored her voice.

"Make no mistake, Gemma," I said in a measured tone. "I want you. And I want you to scream my name in ecstasy, begging me to fuck you. But I can be patient." *Lie*. But I'd do it for this woman. "If you'll give this job a try, I'll wait. This job could be good for both of us."

Her chest and neck turned red, and her cheeks turned crimson. Her breathing slightly hitched, she stared at me with her mouth parted. She was turned on and fuck, if she kept looking at me that way, I'd end up with blue balls.

"Is this some kind of trap, Kristoff? I should warn you that if you try something, I won't hesitate to kick your ass."

I smiled, amusement passing my expression. "That's a fair warning, Gemma. I never forced myself on anyone and I won't start now. I won't hurt you," I vowed. I paused, locking my eyes with her. I wanted her to know I meant it. I wanted her more than any other woman before, but I wouldn't touch her without her consent. I drew closer to her over the table, a serious expression on my face as I whispered, "When I take your sweet pussy, you'll want no other man." A visible shudder rolled down her spine and her eyes hazed.

Good, I wanted her to feel the same impact as me. To give into this craving.

Her eyes flashed. "When?" she breathed. My words must have sunk in. "Not if?"

"Yes, when," I rasped. "Both of us know this attraction between us will consume us. But only when you're ready."

*She didn't deny it*, I realized with satisfaction. She was an intelligent woman. She knew it as well as I did. She steeled her spine and straightened her shoulders, meeting my gaze head on. Fuck, I loved her fire.

"Will you work for me?" I rasped, though I knew the answer. Determination in her gaze offered it before her lips.

"Yes," she answered quietly.

Because really, what other options did she have? Except, I'd make it worthwhile for her.

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## CHAPTER 12

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# GENEVIEVE



This was playing with fire.

My hands were tied and I was left without any options. None. Accepting Kristoff's offer was a dangerous route to take, considering my body responded to him like a violin to a bow.

It was the reason I stood in front of the W&W building on Monday morning.

Despite the circumstances, I was excited to work. I couldn't remember a time when I didn't work. Even before college, when my parents were alive, I'd help them with their fruit stands in Croatia. It wasn't a big job, but I loved it. The smell of the fruit mixed in the air and bees buzzed around, tempted by the sweet nectar.

So opposite to my current situation with the man who blackmailed me into accepting this position. I couldn't comprehend the reason behind his offer. Even more, I feared that the temptation to taste the sweet but forbidden fruit was too great.

I checked in at the front desk at eight in the morning, wearing a black pencil skirt that was just an inch above my knee, black pumps, and a light pink blouse with quarter length sleeves. I looked professional, though, I would have preferred not wearing heels. But it was a small price to pay for the salary Kristoff was paying me.

As I entered the elevator, my pulse sped up. Whether it was at the notion I'd see Kristoff soon or my first day at a new job, I had no idea. Or maybe it was the idea of having sex with that man. My instincts reassured me that he wouldn't force me, but it was the matter of resisting him. For the entire day.



As I exited the elevator on the fifth floor, Kimberly met me at the same spot.

“Welcome aboard, Genevieve,” she greeted with a big smile. “I’m so happy you accepted the position.”

*‘I didn’t have a choice’* was on the tip of my tongue.

“Thank you,” I answered instead with a tight smile. “Please call me Gemma,” I added.

She guided me to the empty desk not far from hers, placing me closer to my new boss’ door.

“They have already set up a new laptop for you with your credentials,” she remarked. “This will allow you to work remotely, or when traveling. Once you get settled, please report to Mr. Baldwin.”

I nodded in acknowledgement and got to work reading through the login instructions with my credentials and turning on my laptop. Once I tested the login and all the access I was supposed to have, I stood up and grabbed a notepad.

Just as I headed for his office door, Kimberly came back from the kitchen carrying two cups of coffee.

“Here,” she offered, handing me a cup. “Mr. Baldwin will expect you to bring him coffee. One of your duties. He likes it black, no sugar and no creamer. ”

“Okay,” I acknowledged, though it made no sense to me why the man wouldn’t get his own coffee. It would probably do him good to stretch his legs despite his top shape and mouthwatering body. No complaints from me though! If the man wanted to pay me two hundred and fifty thousand to bring him coffee, sure, I’d bring him coffee.

Knocking softly, I waited for his ‘enter’ before walking into his big office. Light poured through those wide windows and I couldn’t help but remember what happened here last time.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably.

“Good morning,” I greeted him as I approached his desk. “Kimberly gave me your coffee.”

When he looked up from his computer, his gaze fell down my body, with a lazy expression, and I felt it in every fiber of my being. My heart rate picked up, and my breathing faltered when his gaze returned to my face and our eyes locked.

The way he looked at me made me feel as if I stood here naked, just for his pleasure. It made me feel like I was the sexiest woman in the world. It was dangerous and thrilling at the same time.

“Please have a seat.” His voice betrayed none of the flames burning in those cool moss green eyes. Placing his mug down in front of him, I sat in the chair that was clearly designated for me.

My grip tightened on the notepad I was holding.

“I want to explain your duties and the hierarchy in this office.” He broke the silence and a shuddering sigh left me. “You report to me, however, you will be helping Kimberly when needed. I want to make it clear that Kimberly does not work for you, nor do you work for her. She has some items she needs help with today so please do those, and then you can come back to me.”

“Sure, makes sense,” I answered. Truthfully, if he asked me to jump up and down, I’d do it for the salary. But apparently, all he wanted me to do was to help Kimberly and have sex with him. Former, I’d do gladly; the latter, I’d have to resist.

“Questions?”

“No.”

Since he didn’t add anything else, I got up and walked out of his office. It’d take time getting used to taking orders from him, or bringing him his coffee. I shook my head in annoyance at myself. It was a paycheck. That was all that mattered right now.

Well, that and keeping myself off the police radar. I couldn’t forget my boss blackmailed me into accepting this position.

The entire day passed in a blur. I was busy with, what do you know, administrative tasks. Before I knew it, it was six o’clock, and Kimberly was out the door telling me I did awesome today.

I knocked on Kristoff’s office door and peeked my head in, unsure if I should walk in.

“Come in,” he said. I walked over to his desk, and he motioned for me to sit down.

“How did it go?” he asked as I lowered myself into the seat across from him.

“Fine,” I answered. “Kimberly has been juggling a lot, so we had some things to catch up on. I think we made good progress. At least that’s what she said.”

“Good.” His eyes studied me carefully as if searching for some signs of deceit. He was an odd man. “How did you two get along?”

I cocked an eyebrow, surprised at the question. Men didn’t usually care whether women got along or not.

“Good, I think.” I wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to know. “We didn’t exactly go into chitchat mode but I like her.”

“Excellent,” he said as he loosened up his tie. My eyes followed the movement, noticing his tan skin. My stomach fluttered and my skin sizzled, an empty ache forming low in my belly. What I would do if I was the one loosening his tie. And those big hands, with long fingers and strong knuckles, prominent bones and veins.

I wanted them on me. I needed to trail kisses down his neck, taste his skin, beg him to fuck me.

*One day!*

I lasted a day and the urge to beg him to touch me had my teeth clenching. I’d never survive two months, not unless he had scheduled a very long business trip. Seeing him every day, I was sure to succumb to this man.

Shaking my head and shoving away thoughts of my boss fucking me, I reminded myself of the boundaries. He was my boss. Forbidden, despite the fact that he had some weird desire to make intimacy between us part of the job.

*Breathless. Itchy. Hot. Wanton.*

It was wrong to feel all those in the presence of my boss. Yet, fighting this attraction was fruitless. If his blackmail didn’t diminish it, I was doomed.

Flicking my eyes his way, I caught his gaze, heavy and dark, as it lazily slid down my neck and chest.

I shook off a shiver.

My ragged breathing filled the room and the air sizzled between us. I had to bite my lip to hold in a whimper. He didn’t move as if he was waiting for something.

Permission? For me to beg him?

“Is that all?” I asked, my voice husky.

“I asked if you had lunch,” was his reply. That was so stupid. I was so far into fantasizing about him, I never heard his question.

“Ah, no,” I admitted, then shrugged. “It’s almost dinner time now.”

He rose from his desk and came around to me. "Let's go grab dinner," he suggested. I shook my head. "It will be a quick one."

I looked at him unsure. It was my first day working for him, and already he was moving on to having dinner together, while I imagined taking off his clothes. My goal was to spend as little time around him as possible.

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea," I started.

Amusement flashed in his eyes, as if he knew I was teetering on the edge of self-control.

"It's just a quick dinner," he retorted with a slight tease. "I promise I'll keep you in check and won't let you seduce me."

My mouth parted and my eyes widened in shock. "I would never..." His smile registered through my hazy brain. He was teasing me. Okay, maybe half teasing me since I was mentally stripping his clothes off.

I glanced at my watch. My mother-in-law was watching the girls until eight-ish at my place. There should be plenty of time for a quick bite.

"Is this a request or part of the blackmail?" I couldn't resist asking, my tone slightly sarcastic.

We stared at each other in silence - a tense, yet almost comfortable silence. If I had spat back something like that at Jack, it would have turned into a huge argument. Kristoff didn't even twitch a muscle. He actually looked impressed, sardonic amusement in his gaze.

"It's a request, Genevieve." My insides melted at the way my name rolled off his tongue. Like a lover's caress.

I groaned silently.

"Okay," I caved, a forbidden thrill rushing through my veins. "Just to prove that seducing you is the last thing on my mind." *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* "Let me just check my phone."

He followed behind me as I went to grab my purse and pulled out my phone to check for messages. Sienna had messaged, confirming they were all picked up by their grandma, and she was at our house with her sisters. Thankfully, I had a good relationship with Jack's mother, and the girls adored her.

At times, guilt ate at me when I looked at her. If I'd have left Jack sooner, if I'd been stronger, she might have still had her son. But I was desperate to save my marriage until it got so bad, I had no choice but to fight back. Although I'd never tell anyone. The mess with Jack was my burden to bear.

Except now, Kristoff knew something. Not everything; nobody would ever know everything.

“All good?” he asked as I shoved my phone back into my purse after shooting a message to Sienna and then to Grandma, letting them know I’d be home closer to eight.

“Yep,” I answered.

He guided me out of the office and into the elevator, his hand on the small of my back. The move was almost possessive. As if he wanted to show everyone I was his, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that this man was extremely possessive.

My God, he smelled so good! The scent of his cologne cleansed my lungs. I wanted to bury my head against him, nuzzle my face in the crook of his neck so I could get more of it. Reason demanded I take a step away from him, that I force space between us. Yet, I remained glued to my spot, every nerve in my body focused on the searing touch of his hand against my back.

Walking out of the building, I felt overwhelmed by the sound of the city after our silent elevator ride. Rush hour traffic was in full swing and the sounds of car horns blasted somewhere in the distance. The cool breeze swept through, cooling my heated skin.

Kristoff guided me across the street. A few feet to the left was a fine dining restaurant. And very popular, it seemed. It was packed. There would be nothing quick about that line, yet, that was where we went.

I turned to look at him just as he nodded at someone, although I couldn’t see who.

His eyes lowered to meet my gaze. “I don’t think this is going to be quick,” I remarked. “Maybe we should do this some other time?”

No sooner did I say that, a hostess came over with a wide, seductive smile aimed at Kristoff. Something unpleasant slithered through my veins, but I quickly squashed it, not giving it any further thought.

“Mr. Baldwin, we have a table ready for you,” she purred, batting her eyelashes.

Throwing him a side glance, surprise washed over me. I didn’t realize he had made a reservation. But instead of commenting, I just followed the hostess since he urged me forward with his hand on my back. This had to be his signature move, and I couldn’t help but wonder how many women felt his hands on their body.

Seated at our table, we were given our menus with the promise that the waiter would be over momentarily to take our order. Opening the menu, a small gasp escaped me at the exorbitant prices. My head snapped to Kristoff ready to complain, but then realized he was a *billionaire*. What was too expensive to me was considered pennies to him.

“See anything you like?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you.” My eyes automatically skimmed for the cheapest thing on the menu. Certain habits were hard to break. I didn’t think a billionaire would understand that.

The waiter came and I ordered my chicken Caesar salad along with a glass of water.

Kristoff’s brows furrowed, displeasure flickering in his green eyes. I couldn’t fathom what annoyed him, but he said nothing. When it was his turn to order, he went for a filet mignon for himself.

With the waiter gone, Kristoff fixed his gaze on me. The silence stretched, our gazes clashed, and something about the way he looked at me blazed a path down my spine.

“What?”

“You are too skinny,” he drawled. *How dare he*. Something about his comment grated on my nerves.

“And you are too rich and too arrogant,” I shot back, my eyes narrowing on him. This man had to learn some manners when it came to his employees.

“You don’t eat enough,” he retorted back, ignoring my jab at his wealth. “We have to fix that.”

“You seem to know me so well.” I brought my unimpressed gaze to him. Of course, I’d never admit to him that he was right. When I was stressed, I didn’t eat. When I was sad, I didn’t eat. When I was super excited, I didn’t eat.

Well, you get the point.

“What do you like to eat?” he asked, ignoring my sarcasm. “Besides salads.”

I shrugged. “Anything and everything,” I replied, my tone slightly defensive.

“Elaborate.” My temper flared. This man *had* to learn how to say please.

I opened my mouth to tell him off but then closed it. *Think of your salary*, I reminded myself.

Maybe I was slightly too defensive? I mean, who could blame me considering he blackmailed me into this position. Yes, he paid me a ridiculous amount of money for it. But still. Besides, Kimberly spoke warmly of him and seemed to respect him. It must be saying something.

"I like desserts," I replied curtly. Then added, softly, "My middle daughter inherited that gene." Talking about my girls always made me smile.

"So, you have three daughters," he stated. He already knew that since he'd brought it up during my second interview. It was so tempting to snark a comment back. Something about this man made me want to kiss him senseless and banter. I almost couldn't recognize myself.

"You know that," I retorted dryly. Just like any other mother, I loved talking about my daughters, but with this man who had a contract about emotional detachment, it seemed wrong to talk about anything personal.

"You always wanted kids?" His rough voice blazed a path down my spine. Emotions in those deep forest depths feeding this insane sizzling attraction.

"I guess," I answered vaguely. The truth was I wanted a big family. My mother couldn't have any more children after having me, not unless she was willing to risk her health. My father forbade it. He couldn't live without her. "You?"

Something flashed in his eyes and then a muscle in his jaw tightened. His expression darkened, something volatile and conflicted in it, but he immediately masked it.

"It wasn't in the cards for me." There was a story there, I'd stake my life on it. "How old are your daughters?" Again, he knew that. Maybe this was his way of apologizing for the blackmail. A mild interest on his face stared back at me. Sensing my hesitance, he added, "If you don't feel comfortable talking about that, you can choose a different subject. We can't just sit in silence."

He had a point.

I sighed. "Well, since you dug up everything on me, you probably already know. Sienna is almost sixteen, Saoirse is five, and Sierra is two." Then in an attempt to move the topic away from me, I turned the tables. "How come you never had any children?"

Surprise flashed in his eyes, and something else. Something I couldn't quite hone in on.

"It's a long story." Yep, definitely something there.

"Well, we have time," I teased softly, then picked up my water and took a sip.

"I always assume everyone knows everything about me."

I studied him with interest. He assumed I looked him up. Betty did and gave me information on his age and his wealth. But that was where it ended, and I didn't ask any further questions. I was too focused on the *unconventional* aspect of this job.

Mentally, I made a note to look him up. It'd be important if I ended up caving in and sleeping with the man. After all, I had daughters.

I froze at the train of my thoughts. Did I just-

I shook my head. I didn't mean it. He'd never be around my daughters, but I *would* be looking him up for myself, nonetheless.

"I'll look you up on Google one day," I mused. "I'll have to be in the mood for it because I hate reading articles about people. Bore me to no end."

It was true, though no need to let him know I intended to look him up now.

He laughed, the sound deep and rough and shivers coasted down my spine. When he laughed, he appeared much younger. Almost carefree. *Almost*. My pulse skipped a beat as I stared at his face, mesmerized and fascinated by this man. Why, I had no idea. But I knew one thing; I loved hearing him laugh.

Just in time, our waiter came back with our food and suddenly, I was famished. Our food in front of us, we both dug into it.

The first bite and I thought a moan might have escaped me. This place made it superb.

"Either I was hungrier than I thought or this place has the best salads," I raved, getting another forkful into my mouth.

Kristoff smiled, as if he had never seen a woman enjoy food before. "You should try the steak," he suggested.

"Are you offering?" I joked. "You better be careful because if it's even better than this salad, you'll be left without your food."

Cutting up a small piece of his steak, his fork drifted across the table to me with it. For a fraction of a moment, I hesitated, but then my body leaned



forward of its own will. His eyes on my lips, I opened them, letting him put the steak piece in my mouth. Fire lit his gaze.

A burst of favor hit my tongue and I closed my eyes for a second, a low moan slipping through my lips.

“Next time, I want that.” I immediately realized my mistake. I assumed there would be a next time and my cheeks burned with slight embarrassment.

He didn’t seem to have noticed. If anything, he appeared pleased there’d be a next time.

“I’ll make sure you get it,” he promised. “Want another bite?” he offered, his eyes sparkling with a light amusement.

“No, thank you.” I pointed to my food. “You don’t happen to want a bite of my salad, do you?” I reciprocated the offer.

“I’m good. But thanks for the offer.”

We finished our meal fairly quickly, sticking to neutral subjects. By the time we were done with our dinner, as we walked towards the exit, it occurred to me it was the first time in years that I let a man treat me to dinner. The few dates Betty set me up on, I insisted on paying and beforehand, Jack had scoffed at the idea of dates since we were married.

Walking out of the restaurant, the fresh air brushed against my heated skin and soothed it. His hand on my back felt even better. I started to think of his palm on my lower back as his signature move, like other couples’ hand holding. Not that we were a couple.

I ignored the flutters in the pit of my stomach and the faint glow in my chest. It had no business here. Two months and I’d move on. Kristoff would keep his word and I’d get a job in a safer department. Away from him. I couldn’t afford any kind of relationship right now, especially not one with my boss who had a clause about emotional detachments.

*Don’t forget the blackmail*, I reminded myself and instantly stiffened.

My mood instantly soured.

“Is your car in the garage?” he asked. Upon my nod, he continued, “I’ll walk you to it then.”

“You don’t have to,” I protested. “Really, I can manage.”

Ignoring my protest, his arm came possessively around me, and I knew there was nothing I could say to change his mind. Reluctantly, I compared Kristoff’s gesture and attentiveness to my late husband. They were polar opposites.

The father of my children left me at a football game alone with the girls without a vehicle so he could go bar hopping while my boss insisted on walking me to the car. It was almost embarrassing that I didn't walk away years ago, but then I'd be without my little ones.

God, was it too much to ask for the same thing my parents had? It was all I wanted.

Walking quietly, side-by-side, into the garage, I pointed to my white Pilot, parked in the first spot.

"That's me," I stated as I pulled out my keys to unlock the door.

Promptly opening the door, he helped me into it while his driver was only a few parking spots away.

As I drove away, his lone figure in the rearview mirror, the whispers deep in my soul echoed that it would end this way.

We'd be worlds apart at the end.

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## CHAPTER 13

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# GENEVIEVE



The next morning, Kimberly set a cup of coffee on my table for Kristoff before I even had a chance to sit down. Glancing at the clock, I noted it was little after eight. Kristoff said working hours started at nine.

“I’m not late, right?” I asked, worried I might have misunderstood. I stayed up later than normal, googling Kristoff Baldwin. Wealthy parents. Playboy father. Kristoff served in the military - Special Forces. Huge scandal in regards to his ex-wife. Yeah, there were some surprising revelations on the internet, and it only gave me a glimpse into the man he was today.

“No, not at all,” Kimberly replied, shaking her head. “You are right on time,” she answered, the smile on her face smug. I eyed her suspiciously, wondering if maybe I did something wrong. She didn’t seem the type to gloat because of someone else’s suffering.

Rolling my shoulders back, then straightening my spine, I headed for Kristoff’s... hmm, Mr. Baldwin’s office. As I walked into it, his gaze flicked to me. Something flashed in his eyes, but he quickly covered it with his usual stare.

I sat his coffee down, sending a fleeting glance his way. He leaned back into his chair, observing me, his expression untelling.

“Morning,” I said, a slight nervous pitch to my voice.

Handing me a card, I reached for it. Lowering my gaze, I noted it was a credit card. Maybe he needed me to pick up his dry cleaning or something. Every chick flick movie I saw about this kind of scenario had a woman picking up his dry cleaning. *Or maybe he wants me to go buy him some*

boxers, I smirked silently. I could only imagine shopping for those and then handing them to him. Maybe a pair of pink boxers as a joke.

“Ah, you need me to go pick you up something?” I questioned, having a hard time keeping a straight face with my idiotic ideas.

“No, that’s for you to go buy yourself a cocktail dress. And some other clothes if you wish.”

My eyes widened, snapping to him. Then down at myself. His request was unexpected. Returning my gaze to him, I felt my cheeks redden. I didn’t have the newest styles or the most expensive clothes, but what I wore was good quality, and it was still very nice.

A frustrated breath left me and I cocked my eyebrow in challenge. I didn’t trust myself to say anything right now and not insult my boss. Something like, *What the fuck is wrong with my clothes?*

I bit into my lip to ensure no words slipped through my lips.

“If you are in the mood, buy some lingerie too. Kimberly made you an appointment at a salon. They’ll get your hair done, nails, and a wax.”

I stood still, staring at him. This man was used to getting what he wanted, but I wasn’t used to demands like that. And it suspiciously felt like a bribe. With a silent challenge in his eyes, he dared me to say something and agitation washed over me.

“What for?” I snapped. “I just had my hair done.”

Was he trying to say I didn’t look good enough? Old insecurities washed over me. Damn Jack! I should have dumped his ass the first time he spoke shit to me. I thought none of it impacted me; that I was a stronger woman, but apparently scars lingered somewhere deep.

“I thought women liked to get pampered,” he commented with a cocked eyebrow, making me focus on the situation at hand.

“We do... when it’s our choice.” My voice pitched higher. “And seriously? Wax? What’s next? You’ll tell me what I can eat. Honestly, Mr. Baldwin, I don’t remember you stipulating any of this in the contract.”

I was sure to accent *Mr. Baldwin*, emphasizing the distinction between an employer and employee.

“Unfortunately, Gemma, you *didn’t* sign that contract,” he answered calmly. You’d think we were discussing sports teams.

“So... what? This is your way of getting back at me? To what? Humiliate me?” While he remained calm through it all, I was getting more

and more worked up. “Would you also like to designate days I should shave?”

My pulse raced, my anger getting hotter with each word I uttered. Old ghosts I buried along with my husband surfaced, suffocating me. It was my own damn fault for letting him get away with it.

“Calm down,” Kristoff’s voice penetrated through the fog of old ghosts. I blinked, a painful squeeze to my chest slowly easing. He stood right in front of me, the scent of his cologne comforting. Jack wore strong cologne that overpowered all your senses and made you nauseated.

I craned my neck, meeting Kristoff’s eyes. They weren’t mocking or cruel. Just full of concern. I swallowed hard. Did I just panic?

“I have a work event we’ll be attending. They haven’t announced the date yet, but I want you to be ready. They tend to announce it at the last minute.” The explanation seemed logical and there was no deception on his face. “Humiliating you isn’t something I would ever do, Gemma. No matter what happens between us.”

Why did those comforting words make me want to cry?

“And a wax is a requirement for this work event?” I asked in a shaky tone.

He didn’t flinch, holding my gaze. I wondered what he saw in my eyes. I hoped it wasn’t the things that I felt deep down. I never needed anyone to evaluate my self-worth. Yet, somewhere along the way, my self-confidence got shaken up without me even realizing it.

He went back to his chair and sat back, observing me with those eyes that somehow saw too much.

“If you strongly object,” he started, his tone even, “you don’t have to.”

But he would prefer that I did. The unspoken words lingered in the air between us. He was my boss, after all. And it wasn’t like I didn’t like waxing. I used to do it regularly when I could afford it.

“Whatever,” I muttered, hiding myself behind an uncaring mask. “I think it’s a waste of money. But hey, if you want me to have a new hairdo, wax, and wear new clothes, fine. It’s your money. But I will not be buying lingerie.”

One heartbeat. And another. His eyes watched me with tension.

“Kimberly will give you a list of stores I prefer,” he responded, ignoring my comment about lingerie.

I shook my head, unsure what to make of this man.

“Do you have a problem with that?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“None at all,” I answered sarcastically. Not able to keep my comments to myself, I added, “Don’t you think that is a little bit too controlling? I’m quite capable of finding stores.”

It was odd. With Jack, I could never find the energy to argue. I just pretended to listen until he was done and moved on. With this man, I found that energy and need to stand up for myself.

“You can go to those stores, too,” he drawled. “As long as you visit the stores I like too.”

“Oh.”

“Good,” he concluded. I could swear his eyes were laughing at me. “It’s one of the perks of this job. You should take advantage of it. Just give all the receipts to Kimberly when you are done.”

“I don’t remember you bringing up that perk when discussing benefits,” I voiced my opinion a bit cranky.

“Nobody ever complained about this perk before, Gemma. I hope you won’t be the first.” His eyes held a challenge and somehow I got the feeling he enjoyed it.

I shrugged, leaving his office and finding Kimberly waiting for me with a wide smile.

“Excited?” she asked.

“I guess so,” I muttered. Truthfully, I wasn’t. I tended to shop only when I was in the mood and had money, and those two usually didn’t happen at the same time. And today, I really wasn’t in the mood for shopping. I hated sitting in salons, and he wanted me to have my hair, nails, and a wax done. Was it possible to get all that done in one day? “Do you buy yourself clothes on the company dime also?” I inquired curiously.

“Yes, and I love it.” Her answer made me feel slightly guilty about my reaction. Clearly, I overreacted. I took his suggestion for a new wardrobe as a critique while he was just being nice. “It definitely saves me money,” she continued, “- and he can afford it.” She winked mischievously. “There is no way I’m saying no to new stuff.”

“But waxing?” I objected. “Isn’t that a bit too much?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Just do it. Throw a facial in there, he won’t mind. Make it your pamper day on someone else’s dime,” she suggested. “You deserve it. I’m sure being a single mother, you rarely have the time to pamper yourself.”

My pampering consisted of a peaceful shower and a book afterwards before I crashed for the day.

“I guess I’ll see you in a few hours.” Kimberly was right. I couldn’t remember the last time I got pampered. Truthfully, I wasn’t excited about Kristoff paying for the pampering. It felt like I’d owe him something for it. But Kimberly did say it was part of her perk too and the way she talked about her husband yesterday, she’d never entertain sleeping with any other man.

“Take all day,” Kimberly suggested. “It’s a hard job being a woman,” she cheered behind me, her laughter traveling over the space.

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## CHAPTER 14

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# KRISTOFF



I stared at the door, Gemma long gone.

Gemma's reaction intrigued me. In all my years, no woman had ever complained about spending my money. Until now.

Something about her made me want to take care of her. Yes, I wanted to fuck her but even more, I wanted to ensure she was taken care of. I needed to know her worries, so I could squash them.

She hid her secrets in those dark eyes, but her emotions were easy to pick up on. Her arousal. Her anger. I loved when her face burned crimson, her eyes hazing with desire. She wanted me, almost as much as I wanted her. But she fought this attraction with all she had.

I didn't do relationships. I didn't fall in love. But somehow, I had started to break every single one of my rules - ever since meeting this woman. The white-hot sizzle of attraction burned strong between us.

Fuck, it could be so damn good with her. Just thinking about her got me hard. Since I laid eyes on her, she hadn't left my mind. I imagined her spread out on my desk. Bent over my couch. Even in my bed. And I never wanted any woman in my bed.

This morning I rubbed one out in the shower thinking about her. A million women on this planet and my cock zeroed in on the one that insisted on saying no, though her body sang yes.

My thoughts rolled back to mere minutes ago when a panicked expression appeared in the shadows of her dark eyes.

I pulled up my file that contained information on her and her late husband. Her husband had quite a few tickets, along with a DUI on his record. His alcohol levels were high at the time of death too. Byron was

able to dig up quite a bit of information, but it didn't disclose whether her husband was abusive when drunk or all the time.

Gemma's reaction to my suggestion of getting a make-over was taken too personally. Like she was told one too many times she wasn't good enough. My gut feeling told me he was not only physically abusive but also mentally and emotionally.

The fucker was lucky to be dead. Otherwise, I'd find him and kill him myself. How in the fuck did she even end up with someone like him?

Gemma didn't even have any speeding tickets. She was smart, beautiful, and from everything Byron was able to dig up, a well-liked and good-hearted person.

I was too much of a bastard for her. Ever since Jacqueline fucked me over, I'd avoided relationships. I never brought women home nor to the condo I had in the city. They were just a way to get a release and I gave them a lot, materially, in return. As long as it worked for both of us, we continued and, when the time came, parted ways amicably. Maybe it was the woman's eagerness that made it easier to keep her at bay. Yet, with Gemma's reluctance and her clear refusal of my wealth only drew me in further. Reluctantly, I had to admit it reflected admirably on her and not so great on me.

Goddamn it.

It was moments like this, when I was unable to let go of my fixation, that I was reminded how much like my father I was. I fucking hated it. Yet, I refused to let go of this need to own Miss Rose's every breath, every heartbeat, and every moan.

I never obsessed over a woman before, but it was catching up to me with this one.

## CHAPTER 15

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# GENEVIEVE



Like a good employee, I went to Kristoff's preferred stores. I bought a few skirts, blouses, a couple dresses, one cocktail dress in standard black, and a pair of shoes to go along with it. I didn't bother trying it on and was on my way out when the lingerie section caught my eye.

Unknown to everyone, including my late husband, lingerie was my guilty pleasure. Or nicer sleepwear. Baby doll satin pjs. Or a matching top and short set that was sexy but not overly revealing. I just loved the feel of the satin or silk against my skin. I'd wear jeans all day long, but at night, I loved my luxuries.

*So sue me.*

I started browsing items, despite the fact I wasn't going to agree to the personal contract with Kristoff. I couldn't resist the temptation. My fingers brushed over the smooth, cool material. God, I really wanted it. I could just get one piece. The cash register rang somewhere behind me and realization sunk in. I'd be turning in my receipts and both Kimberly and Kristoff would see it.

So I walked away and headed for the salon.

Four hours later, I was back in the office wearing a new outfit, new hairstyle, and waxed in places I didn't want to mention. The man had ordered a full body spa treatment with a full Brazilian wax that was far too detailed for my liking. *Anal sex*. Those two words played over and over in my mind as I avoided looking in the lady's eyes. Sweet mother of God.

I'd give that man a piece of my mind. I handed the receipts to Kimberly flushed and red to the roots of my hair, hoping nobody would read them.

Of course, Kimberly did. She wouldn't be working for Kristoff Baldwin if she let anything fly. She frowned as her gaze skimmed over the receipts.

"Ummmm... did I spend too much?" I asked, worried I may have gone overboard.

"No, not even close. I never saw a receipt so small," she complained, though I didn't understand why. Usually people complained the other way around. It was uncomfortable to spend that much money on someone else's dime, especially after going a full year without any income.

She raised her head and looked me up, noting I changed into new clothes. "You look very nice though."

I smiled. Kimberly might have been in her fifties but she liked luxury. *No harm in that*, she said. Though now, it made sense how she afforded her fancy clothes.

"Thank you." I walked over to my desk and sat down in my seat, powering on my laptop.

I checked my emails, and there were a few spreadsheets that were waiting in my inbox. I scheduled a few of Kristoff's meetings, went through his calendar, and before I knew it, the day was over.

Glancing towards Kristoff's office, I wondered if I should check on him. I wasn't sure if he knew I was back. Maybe he expected another cup of coffee. I flicked a look Kimberly's way but decided against asking. So I continued working on my spreadsheets.

The next thing I knew, Kimberly was powering down her laptop, ready to leave.

I debated whether I should just leave or check in with the boss, Kimberly spoke up, "Mr. Baldwin is not in his office, so you might as well leave too."

A smile spread across my face. "You just made my day, Kimberly. I'll be eating dinner with my kiddos."

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A WHOLE WEEK passed in the blink of an eye. I became familiar with Kristoff's requirements, his schedule, his business meetings, and many, many spreadsheets. The latter was just fine with me since I was used to it during my career in finance. Kimberly was incredibly patient when it came

to admin work. We were actually a good team and our skills complemented each other.

Friday rolled around, and Kristoff attended another business dinner, so he was out of the office early.

"I could get used to days when Mr. Baldwin is not around," Kimberly commented.

"It is slightly less tense," I agreed. "A lot less tense," I whispered silently.

Temptation to cave in to his second contract grew by the day and the minute. Each morning when I handed him the coffee, my eyes locked onto his big hands and my heart rate spiked. I had never paid much attention to men's hands, but his were sexy. So damn hot. My nipples tightened just thinking how good they would feel on me. Now that I had experienced his touch, his mouth on my skin and seen *him*, no other man compared.

I went as far as browsing Match.com. *Yeah, you won't find Mr. Kristoff Baldwin's replacement there.*

As anxious as Kristoff made me feel, I started to wonder if it was of my own doing. I had always been a good girl. Good woman. Whatever I was these days. I had never done anything reckless. I didn't have a rebellious stage in high school. Nor college. I was always responsible, put together. For Christ's sake, I never even had a one-night stand. I actively avoided taking risks in my life. I grew up under the conservative teaching to keep my legs closed and avoid anything resembling inappropriate.

And now, all of a sudden, I wanted to be reckless, experience the mind blowing, wild sex that I read about in my smut books. Kristoff Baldwin could deliver it. I was certain of it. Just the thought of his skin against mine, him exploring my body, sent me into an inferno. I was burning for a release.

And he hadn't made a move. Yes, fire burned in those fascinating eyes of deep forests when he watched me, but he hadn't attempted to touch me, or brushed his fingers across my breasts accidentally. Okay, the latter was more my fantasy.

Bottom line, I wanted him. With each passing day, I was tempted more and more to cave into this desire. But I needed a job. Desperately. And everyone knew mixing business and pleasure never ended well. Back to my reasonable, responsible and rational self.

My eyes glanced at the clock on the wall. It was six already. Like clockwork, Kimberly stood up and started packing up.

“Any weekend plans?” I asked her, smiling. I loved her predictability.

“Just watching grandchildren,” she replied. That woman was crazy about her grandchildren. “If it’s warm enough, we might go out on the boat.”

“Oh, that will be fun,” I retorted, bringing my cup of tea to my lips. “I think they are calling for mid to high sixties. Soon the humid summer weather will kick in.”

Maryland and D.C. summers were humid as heck.

She grinned. “I’ll have to convince my husband.” She winked. “Maybe some nookie will make him agree.”

I just about spit out my tea.

“Don’t stay too late,” she told me as she strode to the elevator.

“I won’t,” I promised. “I’m right behind you.”

With everybody gone, I focused on finishing up the final few tasks, determined that when I left today, there wouldn’t be hanging items waiting for me on Monday morning. And I’d take the weekend to get this lust under control.

Great plan!

An hour later, I’d finished the reports and was about to scan a few files. With the office empty, I kicked off my high heels, let my hair down, allowing the slight tension in my temples to ease, before I put my headphones on, blasting my music while I began scanning. The repetitive motions of scanning and retraction vibration of the scanning machine soothed the tension inside me.

My body relaxed, the excitement for the weekend washing over me as the music pumped into my eardrums. Sunshine beamed through the windows, a beautiful day awaited outside and my mood lightened. I had a job, good pay, roof over our heads, and food on the table. The girls and I would go hiking this weekend. Life was finally good.

I hummed the ending to the song “Diamonds” by Rhianna and scanned one document at a time, storing them into specific folders. I swayed to the music, my feet happy to be rid of high heels. I started dancing, and by the time Katy Perry’s song “Chained to the Rhythm” was in full swing, I finished up my last document.

I was totally relaxed and singing to the music, though I couldn’t carry a single tune, I turned around and ran straight into Kristoff. My hands flew to his chest, my palms pressed against his hard abs, my headphones clattered



onto the floor. My heart stopped for a mere second, then jumped into turbo drive. A sudden flush of heat coated my thighs and I had to clench them together to chase away the sensation. Except, the aching throb only intensified. Liquid fire burned through my veins.

His body oozed with power and electricity. I should move, yet I couldn't. I soaked in his strength. When I met his gaze, I was captured. The fire in them burned the frozen lakes and I wanted to drown in them.

"Kristoff." My voice came out husky, breathless. "You scared me," I rasped.

My fingers curled into his chest. God, I wanted to feel his warm skin under my fingertips. The air in the room seemed to sizzle, like a ticking time bomb that beat in rhythm with my heartbeat. The sensations and attraction I've ignored since I met him burned through me, demanding I get a taste of him.

Except, I couldn't remember the last time I actually initiated a touch with a man. I felt clumsy, inadequate, but needy.

His gaze skirted up and down my body, fanning the fire building in the pit of my stomach. The way this man watched me was igniting the flames inside me. He looked at me like he was picturing me writhing beneath him, naked and compliant.

He remained standing, silently staring. Not a word. My body screamed for him to touch me; my head screamed to step back. I ignored my reason. This attraction to him was something new and exciting. Promising something dark and delicious. I deserved just a little bit of pleasure. Something just for me.

To be touched passionately. To be given pleasure.

Although our bodies were barely brushing together, I relished the feel of his heat. I missed physical closeness, a lover's touch. I've been alone long before Jack died. We might have lived in the same home, but we might as well have lived worlds apart.

I felt like Kristoff gave me a drink of water the last time he touched me, and now I was constantly thirsty, wanting more. I wanted more of him, to erase the loneliness.

My neck and cheeks heated, my skin burning like rivers of lava washing over me.

I watched his Adam's apple bob as if he was fighting this attraction too. Except I didn't want him to. Not today. I wanted to beg him to fuck me, just

as he warned me I would. Just to think those words made my body shudder.

His mouth lowered to my ear, licking the shell of it and immediately all my thoughts disappeared.

His hands on my waist, his fingers curled into my hips for a brief second before they skimmed up my back. It wasn't enough. I wanted his hands on my bare skin, his flesh against mine. A sharp inhale sounded between us. It must have been mine because his lips trailed over my neck.

My mouth parted, my fingers clutched him closer to me, scared he'd stop this amazing sensation. I throbbed all over, aching for him. He circled his hands around me, and when those big hands covered my breasts, I moaned, arching into his touch.

*Holy shit!* My insides melted, then he pinched my nipple through the blouse and my bra, sending friction through every inch of me. Another whimper formed on my lips, but I swallowed it. His tongue lowered further down to the hollow of my throat. My core throbbed, clenching with need. This man knew what he was doing.

He pulled back and a small whimper left my throat. The flames in my belly traveled south, turning into a heated, pulsing ache between my legs.

Staring at each other for two heartbeats, there was a single question in his stormy gaze. Permission. A soft nod and his lips pressed against mine, his tongue brushing against my lower lip. It was as if he was tasting me. No. Savoring me.

My arms wrapped around his neck, my mouth parted, welcoming his intrusion. I rubbed against his hard body, his hard erection poking against my belly and his control snapped.

His hand wrapped around my nape, holding my neck as his tongue devoured me. His grip was firm, leaving me completely at his mercy. Shudders shook me to my core, the consuming need for him leaving no room for anything else.

All the while his mouth conquered me. His tongue. His hands. His scent.

Everything else in this world faded, pleasure and anticipation flowing through my veins.

"Open your legs," he rasped his demand in a deep voice.

Without a second thought, my body immediately obeyed.

He pushed my skirt up, bunching it at my waist as his hand reached my panties. Enjoying his touch, my eyes fluttered shut, and my breathing

labored. Wherever he touched, he branded my skin. When his fingers brushed over my swollen sex, I bit my lip to stop a moan from slipping through my lips.

“I can smell your arousal,” he growled, as I watched him with half-lidded eyes and a hazy mind. “I love that you’re wet for me.”

He circled my pulsing clit with the pad of his index finger, then dipped his finger inside me. His eyes never left my face, his eyes burning into mine as he brought his finger to his mouth to taste my juices.

So fucking filthy but erotic.

My heart hammered against my ribs, little sparks of fire shot down to my pussy, and I thought I’d orgasm right here and now. My panties were soaked with need.

“I’m going to taste that pussy,” he murmured against my lips. “You are going to ride my face. And my cock.”

Holding my nape with one hand, his mouth devoured me, while his other hand reached back under my dress and cupped my needy pussy.

A moan slipped through my lips and he swallowed it, his mouth demanding. All-consuming. Just as I needed it.

The moment his fingers slid inside my panties again and brushed against my core, a delightful shiver ran through my body, and I was forever gone. I started moving my hips against his hand, unable to control my body nor the burning ache building inside me.

“Ahhh... yes,” I heard a voice, and it must have been mine. I was at the point of no return. If I was given a choice to return, I wouldn’t. I didn’t want to come back to my senses. I would enjoy every minute of this.

His fingers pumped in and out of me, and my inner core clenched with greed. His fingers slid out and a whimpering complaint formed in my throat, but before I could make another sound, he thrust his fingers back in.

The sensation was amazing. So much better than my vibrator. But I wanted him inside me. His fingers were hard and merciless, and I got a distinct feeling, he’d fuck me hard and senseless.

His kiss was hard. His tongue explored my mouth, teasing. When I wrapped my legs around him, he groaned and his mouth moved to my neck. My arousal fragrancd the air, mixing with his clean, citrusy cologne.

“You are going to beg me to fuck you senseless, *Genevieve*,” he murmured against my skin. “Not today. Today I need to taste your sweet pussy.”

*Holy shit - that's hot!*

This clean cut billionaire uttering filthy words meant for me was the most erotic sound I had ever heard. His fingers rubbed and teased my sensitive clit as he trailed his mouth down my neck, nipping and licking. He pushed his fingers deeper, harder in the most delicious rhythm, I was certain I'd perish. My shaky inhales and exhales, my thundering heart, my skin on fire. It was the only thing I could feel right now as my pleasure climbed and climbed under his expert touch.

I was on the edge, my hips pumping against his hand, back and forth, his fingers in and out. His perpetual rhythm made me crazed with carnal need.

My breathing altered and the wave hit me suddenly, the crash so violent, it shattered me into a million pieces as a kaleidoscope of colors flashed before my eyes. Sounds I have never made before echoed through the room, soft and carnal.

It took me a few minutes to come down from the clouds, my vision slowly returning to normal as tremors coursed through my body. Kristoff held me secure and upright, his strong arms giving me a strange sense of comfort.

I peeked through my heavy lids to find him looking at me with an unreadable expression on his face. Like he was studying my every like and dislike, like he loved the way I orgasmed. He looked at me unlike any other man before. It was the most intense orgasm I had ever experienced and he didn't even fuck me.

"We are not done yet," he rasped. The scorching look in his eyes revealed a dark primal need, sparking another wave of lust.

Before I could even process what was happening, his finger slid out of me and he lowered himself to his knees. Kristoff Baldwin, the powerful billionaire, on his knees in front of me. "I want to taste your pussy, lick it until you are screaming my name."

*Fuck!*

My temperature spiked. The man would be the death of me.

I felt his hot lips on my inner thigh. His tongue licked my panty line, and I moaned softly. I was still sensitive. It was too much; it wasn't enough. His fingers hooked on my panties and pulled them down my legs, exposing me to his full view.

Nobody, and I mean *nobody*, had ever gone down on me before. I was thirty-five and had never experienced oral sex and this man was giving it to me on our first hook up. *Jesus fucking Christ!* I might fall in love with him.

My legs shook, but his hands held me up firmly. His rough palms on my soft thighs. I knew full well that after three children, my body was softer, curvier. *Or too skinny*, I remembered his words wryly.

Either way, I couldn't compete with the women he was probably used to having under his touch. I didn't fucking care. Right now, he was giving me pleasure and I owned it. For this fleeting moment, it was mine alone.

*He was mine.*

I felt his hot lips on the inside of my thigh and goosebumps broke over my skin in anticipation.

The second his mouth, hot and wet, touched my most sensitive flesh, a violent shudder rippled through me.

"Ohhhh," I sighed, my hands flying to his hair. And, oh my God, the sound that man made. Like I was the most delicious dessert he had ever consumed and he'd savor it until he had his fill.

His tongue flicked my clit in lazy circles, his fingers parting me, and dipping in.

"You taste better than I ever imagined," he rasped against my pussy, his breath cooling my heated flesh. Forget a throbbing clit. I was throbbing all over, needing more of his mouth on me.

Leaning against the copier, I held on to him for dear life as he sucked on my sensitive bud, making me arch into his mouth, wanting more of him as his tongue worked me harder, faster. My panting increased, low moans breaking the silence.

"Kristoff, please," I breathed.

I must have pressed against the scanning button because the machine suddenly kicked on. The sound was distant, barely registering. We were both too far gone to stop. He spread my thighs wider, his tongue swept over my clit, teasing me, nipping and sucking on my tender flesh. Every muscle in my body shuddered, my hips writhing under his ruthless mouth.

"Kristoff," I whispered, licking my lips as I ground myself harder against his mouth. As if he understood, he increased his suction, his mouth merciless on me. This could be addictive. The adrenaline. The tension continued, the pleasure built and built until I was certain I'd erupt like a volcano and turn into a languid heat, burning everything in its wake.

He began to suck harder. The pressure in my body increased, the shudders ripping through me violent and strong. Like the currents of the oceans. I was close, so damn close to that peak he promised with his beautiful mouth.

Without warning, he pushed me over the edge and an orgasm exploded through me, powerful like a hurricane over the water. I shook against his mouth, my fingers gripping his soft strands, consumed in extreme ecstasy. All the while the repetitive grinding sound of the scanning machine played somewhere in the back of my mind.

I was drunk. I had to be. My body was languid mush, limp and sated. Still on his knees, I watched him through heavy lids, his chin glistening with my arousal and his gaze on me hungry and intense. He had given me the best imaginable pleasure in the span of... what was it? Ten minutes.

"Tell me you want this," he demanded, his voice a hoarse whisper. Did I detect the need in his deep voice? Did he feel it as strongly as I did? I had never craved someone's touch as desperately as I needed his at this very moment. "Tell me you want my cock in your pussy, Genevieve."

The heat of his body lit my blood on fire.

"Yes, please," I breathed in a voice that didn't sound like my own at all.

"Say it," he rasped.

"I want your cock in my pussy." The words were out of my mouth - eager and desperate.

He stood up with the grace of a panther, his body flush with mine as he leaned in and kissed me hard on the lips. I parted my mouth, welcoming him in. Needing his complete consumption to survive this ordeal.

"You taste sweet," he murmured against my lips, letting me taste myself on his tongue. "So fucking good." I took his bottom lip between my teeth and nipped it gently. He unleashed something inside me and there was no going back. "Give me your full submission, Gemma," he whispered against my mouth, his body pressing into me.

The scanner continued running but neither one of us paid any heed to it.

I could barely think through the haze of my desire. My body was coming down from the best orgasms I'd ever experienced but I wanted more. I wanted him inside me. "Say you'll give me your full submission, Gemma. I want all of it."

*Yes, sign me up!* My mind screamed as I felt his hard length against me. If that was any indication, he was huge.

There was dark lust lurking in his eyes, making his eyes look more like molten silver than green.

“Yes, it’s yours,” I whimpered in a raspy voice.

“Turn around. Now.”

I scrambled to do as he ordered. Something raw and primal clawed at my insides. The years of unsatisfactory sex caught up and this man was giving me the ultimate pleasure back-to-back.

“Brace yourself.”

My hands curled over the edge of the scanner. The damn machine was still going, but there was no way in hell I’d delay this for even a second to turn it off.

Jingle of the belt. Sound of a zipper. His cock hot at my entrance. In one powerful thrust, he was deep inside me, filling me to the hilt. Nothing could have prepared me for him as he slammed into me. Deep and fast.

“Fuck,” he grunted at the same time that I screamed his name. He was even bigger than I imagined, and still sensitive from the previous orgasm he gave me. “Sorry, beautiful. You’re so tight.” His hot breath whispered against my ear. “You okay?”

I nodded, unable to speak, utterly full of him. I didn’t know where I ended and he began. Emotions swam through my bloodstream, intoxicating me with something powerful.

*Emotional detachment*, something screamed in the far back of my mind.

“That’s my woman,” he praised. “You can take it. Just hang on tight.”

My wild heartbeat drummed in my ears, the hint of promises of a wild ride swimming between us.

His hands snaked inside my blouse, his fingers teasing my nipples over my bra, pinching them with a delightful kind of pain. Jolts of pleasure shot down to my pussy and then his hips started pumping. His powerful, deep thrusts had my teeth grinding or I risked screaming loudly.

His one hand came to my hip, keeping me steady as he pounded deep and hard. Wetness trickled down my inner thigh, I was wet for him, ready to take all of him. Each pounding of his hips against me jolted my whole body forward.

His fingers dug into my hips, holding me steady. His grunts, my moans mixing with the sound of the scanner. He pulled out almost completely and my hand shot out behind me.

“Don’t stop,” I begged.

A dark chuckle sounded behind me, his mouth on the nape of my neck. He nipped at my sensitive flesh there, sending delightful shudders down my spine.

“Not a fucking chance,” he murmured. “Your cunt is mine now.” He thrust back in, hard. “Your moans are mine.” *Thrust*. “My name is the only name that will leave your lips when you orgasm.” *Thrust*. “Understood?”

“Y-yes.” Fuck, I’d call him God, as long as he kept giving me this sensation.

An electric shock traveled through my veins. At least it felt like it. My body was on fire, tingles shooting down my spine. His rhythm was rough, demanding, possessive. With each thrust, he was inside me deeper, harder, rougher.

We were no longer in the office but somewhere on a cloud, where only pleasure existed. His pace was out of control. The slaps of flesh against flesh, our grunts and moans were the only sounds filling the air.

I was at his complete mercy. And God, did he know what he was doing! I was reaching for another orgasm and was drunk with the sensation of him. The scanner complained with each thrust of his body against mine, my thoughts scattered as I climbed higher and higher.

His one hand pushed into my hair and pulled my head back, forcing me to face him over my shoulder. His mouth latched onto mine, his pace fast. The kiss was messy, hot, wet. I loved every second of it.

This man liked his sex rough with just the right amount of tenderness and I was drowning in it. I would have *never* thought I liked it rough. Or maybe this was just firm, I didn’t know. I didn’t care. I loved being under his control, leaving him in charge of my pleasure, because the man delivered. Oh, did he ever.

“Your pussy is tight as fuck.” His voice was rough. “Strangling my cock.” The buildup began. His relentless rhythm repeatedly hitting the sweet spot, pushing me closer and closer to the edge. “So fucking beautiful.”

He took hold of my hips, fingers digging into my flesh and gripping me hard as he began pumping into me, rougher and deeper. My heartbeat roared in my ears as a burning knot in my belly quivered. Fuck, even my legs quivered.

“Let me feel your sweet pussy explode around my cock,” he ordered.



The orgasm slammed through me like a bursting dam. My walls spasmed and constricted around his length. I squeezed my eyes shut with its intensity as my scream pierced the air. My insides clenched around him, an earthquake of maximum magnitude hammering me with pleasure.

A deep grunt echoed in the air as he fucked me harder and faster, his pace intensifying with each thrust, while my pussy convulsed, clenching his cock.

He stilled with a gasp for a breath, and his movements stopped. Then he spilled inside me, the warmth of his seed filling me.

Our labored breathing, wild heartbeats, and the sound of the scanner filled the air, the haze in my brain slowly receding. I wasn't ready to come back to reality so I kept my eyes closed just a little bit longer. My body felt limp and my mind numb from multiple orgasms.

This chemistry was like a lightning bolt, sizzling and sparking with every breath. Until today, I felt like I was a virgin because what I had experienced just now was unlike anything else.

"You alright?" His strong, deep voice penetrated through my haze. Best sex ever! It was the only thought playing in my mind. I've waited thirty-five years and it was hands down, the most amazing sex I had ever experienced. It beat the hot scenes in my books by tenfold. Hundredfold.

"Yeah." I couldn't tell him that I was delirious by what we just experienced. This kind of intensity couldn't be normal. Right?

His muscular body was still pressed against mine, his arms on each side of me, his palms placed hands down against the scanner. I realized it was still going, but I was too limp to even move a finger as I tried to calm my breathing.

I could easily get addicted to this man.

I leaned back against his hard body, hungry for tenderness after such intensity. I needed it like the air I breathed.

His hand wrapped around my upper forearm, steadying me. I assumed he thought I lost my balance and opened my mouth to ask him to hold me, when his words stopped me in my tracks.

"Let me get dressed and I'll help you get cleaned up." All the passion and possessiveness evaporated from his voice. It was like the man that just fucked me had left and in his place was a stranger. My eyes snapped to him, the tone of his voice worse than a cold shower.

I watched him put his clothes together, the traces of passion erased from his expression. I blinked my eyes, unsure whether I imagined it. He reached around me, turning off the scanner as I stared dumbfounded.

He produced a handkerchief out of his pocket, then lowered himself to his knees. He cleaned me up then grabbed my panties. He actually went to put them on me like a child. I must have been in a state of shock, because I picked up one foot, then the other, and watched him put them back on.

*What. The. Hell. Is. Happening?*

His eyes roamed over me, clinically, the molten silver completely wiped out and, in its place, a cold businessman. A piercing pain shot through me, my chest squeezing with something familiar. Or maybe unfamiliar, I wasn't sure.

"Do you want me to help you with your blouse?" he offered.

My gaze lowered to find it half unbuttoned. He reached to button it up, but I was quicker.

"No," I swallowed hard, a lump forming in my throat. "I've got it."

This felt... bad.

*Emotional detachment.* Was this what he meant? Well, it didn't work for me. I wasn't that type of woman. It made me feel cheap and used. Or maybe he didn't enjoy it as much as I did.

Insecurity slithered through my veins.

I'd never done something like this. It'd be easier to blame it all on him, but I knew it wouldn't be fair. I wanted it, fantasized about it. Well, I got a taste of it. Now, I could move on.

While the sex was amazing, the aftereffect not so much. It was like drinking too much of a fruity liquor because it tasted so sweet and good. Until the next morning.

I never lost control like I just did; the intensity of what we just shared forever tattooed on my soul. Yet, it was just sex. At least for him it was. Was it for me too? You didn't just fall for someone this fast. Regardless of the mind blowing orgasms. Besides, I didn't even know the man. Not really.

I focused on fixing my shirt in order to avoid his gaze. I couldn't quite decide if I regretted what just happened or not. Every woman should experience this pleasure. At least once in their life.

I couldn't help but to compare Kristoff to Jack. The two were nothing alike, yet somehow, I felt hurt by Kristoff's lack of affection after we shared something so intimate. I should be used to it by now. After all, Jack never

held me afterwards either. Unlike Kristoff, Jack never ensured my pleasure over his. The memories were like a cold shower, and my whole body stiffened.

*Don't go there now, Gemma.*

Kristoff's eyes bore into me, burning a hole in my skull, but I just couldn't bear to face him.

"I have to go home," I muttered, straightening my skirt though it was perfectly in place. I just didn't want to look at him.

"I'll walk you to your car, Gemma," he offered, his voice calm like nothing had happened.

I snuck a peek at him under my lashes. There were no traces of the passionate man I just gave my body to. Just a careful masked expression. He was back to being my boss, my employer.

And this was why you never mixed business and pleasure. Even though the pleasure was out of this world.

I couldn't understand how he could switch so quickly into his professional mode. And I understood even less why it bothered me so much. It hurt to think that what we just shared meant nothing to him.

"No." My voice was composed and controlled. Cold. Something took a hold of me and threatened to make me cry. Why? I had no fucking idea. But I'd be damned if I'd spill a single tear for him. I grabbed my purse, slipped my shoes back on, then let him lead me to the elevator and down to the garage in silence.

*I'm better than this, I thought to myself. I deserve better. I'm not an impulsive or wild type.*

I got a taste of the wild and reckless. We all should experience it at least once. Except now, I had to deal with the consequences of my actions. *You reap what you sow*, I could hear the voice whispering in my head.

"Gemma, let me-"

I stopped him.

"No," I repeated firmly. "I don't need you following me to my car. I don't need *you*." I'd never let another man control me - no matter how good the sex was. I didn't need another Jack.

"Have a good weekend," I told him, walking away from him without a backward glance, leaving Kristoff behind.

## CHAPTER 16

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# KRISTOFF



Staring after Gemma, I realized my mistake.

I fucked up, in more than one way. I could practically feel her rebuilding her walls with each step she took away from me.

I had returned to the office to grab a document out of my safe. I didn't expect Gemma to still be there. For a few moments, I stood watching her scanning documents, humming to some unfamiliar tune and swaying her soft hips. She had one of those timeless hourglass figures. Small, trim waist. Her tits were to die for. Not too small, not too big. Just the perfect size to cup my hands over.

Her dark hair fell down her back in loose, thick waves and I fought the urge to wrap it around my fist. Her alluring body tempted me, but it was too soon. She needed more time, but the second her small palms clutched my shirt and her lustful eyes met my gaze, I was a goner. I just needed her permission. When she gave it, I pounded her like a starved beast.

Fuck! It was better than I'd ever imagined it could be. Nobody had ever felt as good as that dark-haired beauty. Nobody! The moment she leaned back into me, I was tempted to wrap my arms around her.

Emotional detachment was my clause, yet I wanted to hug her and skim my mouth over her soft flesh. Nuzzle into her neck and inhale her delicious scent deep into my lungs.

Instead, I fucking froze.

This woman had me under a spell and she wasn't even trying. I was falling for her and the need to rein myself back in flared. After years of sex with countless women, I had found one that fucking consumed me. I knew sex with Gemma would be explosive, but this was so much more.

She disappeared from my view and regrettably my brain started working again. I hadn't worn protection. I had been so caught up in the moment that it never crossed my mind. The air in my lungs turned to ice. What the fuck was I thinking?

I wasn't thinking. Forty-five fucking years old and I acted like a goddamn teenager. I gripped the back of my neck, tension swimming through my veins.

I hurried back to my office. The sight of the fucking copier made my dick twitch, eager to taste her again. Fuck, I took her without a condom.

I recalled her words from the restaurant.

She said she couldn't have children, but women tended to lie. Look at my ex, she lied that the baby was mine. It went the other way around too. Switching on the laptop, I did a quick check of her file. It included medical history too, except when I first read it, I was more focused on her injuries.

My eyes skimmed over the information and I found my confirmation. A weakened cervix. It made the risk of miscarriages higher. Chances of a successful pregnancy - one in a billion.

Reading it over and over again, I drummed my fingers restlessly on the desk. She had three girls, she wouldn't want any more children. The fact she couldn't have children should assure me.

Then why did it fucking bother me?

## CHAPTER 17

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# GENEVIEVE



**T**hank God for small blessings!

I had the entire weekend to get myself together. Two days should be enough to find a way to come to terms with what had happened and hide all my emotions behind a neutral mask. It took Kristoff one minute; it would take me the entire weekend. Assuming I'd even pull it off.

If I didn't need the money and the job so badly, I would have resigned on the spot. Saturday morning, we went hiking to Annapolis Rock, our favorite spot, and after several hours of trekking through the woods of the Appalachian trail, we all felt tired but relaxed and happy. Seeing my kids' ruffled hair, rosy cheeks, and smiles across their faces, happiness swam in my chest.

On a whim, I decided we should have lunch out. After all, it had been a long time since I could afford that luxury.

"How about we celebrate Mommy's new job, and my first paycheck at the new company, by having lunch somewhere?" I asked in an enthusiastic tone, pushing all thoughts of my boss out of my mind.

Excited squeals echoed through the car and a fleeting glance into my review mirror showed them all grinning. "Yes, yes, yes," they all agreed as one.

"Can we have dessert first?" Saoirse asked and I couldn't help but chuckle.

"We can have lunch first," I told her. "Then a dessert if you eat well."

A small eye roll followed my answer.

"Where are we going to go?" Sienna asked, pulling my attention to my eldest.



“Let’s swing by D.C. and we’ll see what catches our eye. We’ll park in Georgetown,” I suggested and while ideas were being thrown around, I drove down Route 270 towards D.C. Sienna snapped a few selfies. For her Snapchat, she said, and I had to hold back my eyeroll.

Thirty minutes later, we were walking around the little streets in Georgetown, scouting for the best lunch place. The weather was beautiful, the gentle breeze hinting at an upcoming summer. We had another month or so before a full blown heat wave would hit us.

The chatter on the street drowned out the noises of my own daughters. Everyone was laughing and enjoying the good weather. The mood was relaxed, and it was one of those moments you wanted to bottle up. Simple happiness.

“How about that?” Sienna pointed to a small bistro with outside seating. The weather was gorgeous and we all wanted to continue enjoying the fresh air.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Saoirse and Sierra,” I addressed my youngest two, “you will pick out the best table. Deal?”

Both nodded eagerly and Saoirse jumped from excitement. That girl hated being inside. She ran left, then right, chatting in a fast tone. I could only pick up every third word, but Sierra understood her. That was all that mattered.

We made our way to the bistro, stopping every so often to glance at the store window displays. My middle one ran back and forth, unable to remain still and every so often nearly colliding with passersby.

“Saoirse, love, please pay attention to where you are walking,” I warned. “Stay close to me or Sienna.” A tug on my sleeve had me lowering my head. My youngest wanted my attention.

She pointed to the toy in the window. “My toy?”

I smiled softly. “No, baby. It belongs to the store.”

“Buy?” Her blue eyes shone with hope.

I hated to say no to them but another toy was the last thing they needed. Yes, they hadn’t gotten a new toy in a very long time, but they had a room full of toys.

“Not today,” I told her. She frowned for a fraction of a second before something else captured her interest. Sienna entertained her by snapchatting it. It looked like some bear with bunny ears.

I looked back up just in time to see Saoirse slam right into an elegantly dressed elderly lady.

“Awww, I’m so sorry,” I rushed over, apologizing to the lady. “Saoirse, take your sister’s hand and settle down.” You’d never guess we just spent hours hiking. The energy bubbled right out of her. “Now what do you say?”

“Sorr-y.” For some reason, she always broke out the single word of *sorry* into two syllables. She scrunched her eyebrows at the woman, the expression on my daughter’s face clearly saying she wasn’t sorry at all. Instead, eagerness lurked in her eyes to find a soul to listen to all the words she wanted to say. As if she’d known the woman her entire life, Saoirse began having a conversation with her. “We are going out for lunch.”

Her lips pulled into a smile at Saoirse’s enthusiasm. “That’s exciting.”

My daughter nodded seriously. “I know. We are going to sit outside. Because we are stink-y.” The elderly woman chuckled while I was mortified. “And I want to start with the dessert.” Her voice lowered as she whispered to the complete stranger, “But Mommy said no. Not fair.”

The oddest things came out of my child’s mouth. Though the woman didn’t seem to mind, her eyes were shining with amusement. I couldn’t blame her; most people found Saoirse’s enthusiasm contagious and her random words entertaining.

“Gemma,” A familiar voice called, and for a second I froze, sure that I imagined it. Slowly turning around in the direction of it, I came face-to-face with Kristoff. His towering frame forced me to crane my neck or just stare at his chest. The smile on my face turned unnatural as I stared into his deep green eyes, unable to utter a single vowel. The words he whispered as he fucked me yesterday came rushing back and my breathing slightly wavered. How could it be that my luck sucked so much that I had to run into *him* out of all the people on this planet?

“Hi, I’m Saoirse.” My daughter broke the uncomfortable silence.

My gaze lowered to her, while holding the hand of my youngest, and absently I warned in a soft tone, as I did a million times before. “Saoirse, remember what we said about talking to strangers.”

“He’s not a stranger,” she said, grabbing his sleeve while inwardly I groaned at the liberties my daughter took. “He knows my name. And he knows your name, Mommy.”

“That’s because you just told him.” Sienna was more than happy to butt in.

“C’mon, Mom. I’m hungry.”

Glancing back at Kristoff, I couldn’t help but admire his look. He wasn’t exactly dressed down, but he looked good in his black slacks and white polo shirt. I really didn’t want to be so attracted to him. Even after three orgasms yesterday, I couldn’t resist touching myself last night, thinking about him. His demand that I whisper only his name when I reached my pleasure.

Heat rushed through my veins and suddenly, the weather was too hot and frazzled. I counted on not seeing him until Monday; my mental state wasn’t prepared to handle him today.

The longing in my chest was disturbing.

“Hello, Mr. Baldwin.” This was beyond uncomfortable. Yesterday I moaned his name and today I reverted back to calling him Mr. Baldwin. But what else could you say to a boss who gave you pleasure with his mouth and the best orgasms of your life just the day before. Not one but *three* orgasms in under an hour.

*Let’s do it again*, my body demanded. *Let’s not*, my mind retorted. That man was dangerous and I didn’t need any more repeats of yesterday.

“You know each other?” The elderly woman interrupted my internal monologue.

“Yes, Mother. This is Genevieve Rose,” Kristoff answered. “Gemma, this is my mother, Lena Baldwin.”

I reached out my hand for a handshake. “Hello, nice to meet you.” My cheeks burned. I cleared out my throat uncomfortably. “I work for your son.”

I had to get out of here. I forced a smile as I shifted from one foot to another, eager to get going. Yes, I reminded myself of my girls. They must have gotten it from me. I wanted to say hi and bye, then head our own way. Maybe have lunch in another town. This was too close to this man, even if he ate across the street from us.

His mother watched me curiously with her deep brown eyes. She was about my height. Her silvery gray hair styled in an elegant short hairstyle. I couldn’t see any resemblance of Kristoff in his mother. She was thin and almost looked fragile.

Reluctantly, I recalled what I read online. Her husband ran their wealth into the ground and he caused a scandal, chasing a woman to the point of harassment. This was the reason I didn’t like to look up people.

“Nice to meet you too, my dear,” she said in a soft voice, watching me with a warm gaze. “Your children?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered proudly, glancing their way. “Sienna is my oldest.” Then I pointed to my younger two smiling. “Saoirse, you already know since she can’t resist telling everyone her name. And this is Sierra, my youngest one.”

Saoirse pulled on Kristoff’s arm again, and I cringed. She was too friendly. He knelt down, bringing him down to eye level with her and something about the sight made my chest squeeze. Why? I had no fucking idea.

“Yes?” he said softly, smiling at her. My breath got stuck in my lungs. There was something so sweet about watching him down on his knee, giving all his attention to my five year old.

*No emotional attachments.* Fuck, I hated those words.

“My mommy is taking us out to lunch,” she rumbled looking at Kristoff and his mother. “Want to come? She got a new job.” My Saoirse thought that explained it all. “You can bring your mommy too.”

I had to swallow my laugh. I couldn’t picture Kristoff ever referring to Mrs. Baldwin as Mommy.

“Thank you for the invite,” Kristoff answered, his expression relaxed while his lips curved into an amused smile. “It’s so nice of you to invite us.”

Kristoff’s mom chuckled. “It’s been a while since I was referred to as Kristoff’s mommy.” I couldn’t help but chuckle along with her. “Why don’t you all come to lunch with us?” she suggested.

“Ah, thank you,” I shifted again, looking for a polite way to refuse her. “We don’t want to impose.”

Saoirse acted like I hadn’t spoken at all. “Can we sit outside? We went hiking.” Upon Kristoff’s nod, she continued. “And can I start with the dessert?”

I sighed. Saoirse might end up pushing my buttons even more than my teenager.

“Thank you very much but we can’t join you,” I objected, softening the blow with a polite smile. “We’ll actually just do something quick. The kids will be getting tired soon, and I don’t want us to ruin your lunch.”

Avoiding Kristoff’s eyes, I gently tugged on Saoirse to get her away from him, but the kid refused to let go of him, while Sierra held onto me with a tight grip. My youngest one never liked strangers. Some days, like

today, I preferred that over too much friendliness. Saoirse was too much of a social butterfly.

“Don’t be silly, my dear,” Kristoff’s mother insisted. Her smile was inviting and warm. Of course, she had no clue what transpired between her son and me yesterday. “We would love it if you’d join us. It’s my birthday, so you would make my day. It’s been so long since I was around kids, and your little ones are so adorable.”

“Happy birthday, Mrs. Baldwin,” I said, glancing at Sienna with slight desperation. I wasn’t sure why I expected help from her. All my oldest one cared about, like most teenagers, was her phone, boys, and food. And at this moment, she was staring at her phone while the entire world around her was forgotten.

“Why don’t you just have lunch with us?” Kristoff suggested in his deep voice, his eyes piercing me. The man knew exactly why I didn’t want to have lunch with him. Damn him. “You were getting ready to have lunch anyhow, and so were we.”

I exhaled heavily, instantly regretting my suggestion to have lunch in the city. But there was no amount of convincing that would have me sitting at the table with the man that had me screaming his name yesterday.

There was only so much I could take.

“I’m sorry,” I said firmly. “We won’t be able to join you.”

I fought the urge to come up with an excuse, but I didn’t owe them one.

Least of all to my boss.

“I understand.” Mrs. Baldwin took my rejection graciously. Kristoff, not so much. Something flashed in his eyes and his jaw tightened, reflecting his displeasure with my decision.

He couldn’t expect to have it all. He wanted emotional detachment, he’d get it.

I returned my eyes to his mother and caught her curious gaze bouncing between her son and me.

“Would you make this old lady’s day and come join me for my birthday celebration at my house?” She looked at me with a speculative gleam in her eyes. This one was trouble. “It’s tonight.”

No. No. No.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Saoirse squealed in delight before I could voice another polite rejection. I groaned inwardly. “With cake?”

She nodded. "And you can help blow out all the candles. There are a lot of them when you're my age."

Sierra joined in the excitement.

"Please, Mommy," Saoirse begged. "Can we go?"

"Yes, please," Mrs. Baldwin joined in. "This could be my last one."

*Oh, she didn't.* The sweet old lady was manipulating me to get the answer she wanted. And it worked. Damn it.

"Okay," I caved.

And plans were made. Addresses exchanged. Kristoff insisted on picking me and my girls up on his way to his mother's, although my home was not even remotely on his way.

## CHAPTER 18

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# KRISTOFF



Gemma walked away with her daughters, and I realized, this was the third time in the matter of a week, I watched her leave, never looking back.

I didn't fucking like it. Especially after yesterday.

I fought the urge to stalk Gemma and change my mother's reservations to wherever my new assistant and her daughters were eating. I didn't want to leave her alone. Did it make sense? Fuck no, but I didn't want anything happening to her or her girls on my watch.

It had barely been a day but I already missed the feel of her soft body against mine. Her delicate hands. The need to keep her with me was unexpected. And her girls. It was fascinating to watch all four of them interact. Gemma was a lioness around her girls, protective and firm.

Unlike some other mothers I knew. My ex-wife.

My mood instantly darkened.

"I like her." My mother's soft voice announced, and for a fraction of a second, I thought she was talking about my ex. "And her girls are adorable."

I knew the moment they met, my mother would be enamored with Gemma. We headed towards the restaurant where our reservation was. It was our tradition to have birthday lunches there every year since I was a teenager.

"It's the kind of woman you need," Mother added and I remained quiet.

I didn't comment. Whatever I said, Mother would evaluate my words and demand answers. It didn't matter that I was forty-five, supported her financially, and was one of the richest men on this planet.



“It would be nice to have grandchildren before I die.” I resisted the urge to scoff. My mother was really working her age today. It didn’t escape me how she guilted Gemma into accepting her birthday party invitation. I didn’t interject because I wanted Gemma to accept.

My mind shifted back to yesterday. Her moans as she rubbed herself against me. Jesus fucking Christ! Just thinking about it got me hard. Her body melted against mine, her pussy ground against my mouth. And the way she came with my name on her lips. Just the way it should be.

I had my share of women and I always placed them in buckets. Shallow. Gold diggers. Liars. Social climbers. No bullshit realists.

My mother and Kimberly belonged to the latter. Gemma didn’t fit in any of them. In a world where money bought everything, that woman refused to be bought and cave in. She took the job out of desperation, or risked facing bankruptcy.

*Ah, don’t forget the blackmail*, I reminded myself. The problem was that I couldn’t quite say that I regretted it, because it landed her in my office.

She could have easily used her body to get more out of me. I would have probably paid it until I got my fill. Yet, the stubborn woman refused to surrender to this intensity between us. The heat flowing between us was enough to erupt a volcano of cosmic proportions.

Yesterday was just a window into how it could be. I fucking regretted not stripping her naked and savoring every inch of her and then feasting on her pussy. I was dying for another taste of her. I wanted her to ride my cock while I shove my finger into her tight asshole. See her lips part and her cheeks flush.

“Do you like her, Kristoff?” My mother was relentless when she wanted information. Everyone always assumed I got it from my father when in fact I got it from my mother. My father bestowed on me his physical appearance and his assholiness.

In her entire life, my mother had one weakness. My father. She let him get away with *everything*. Why? Because she loved him. He didn’t fucking deserve it, but she still loved him and remained by his side until his death.

“I hired her, didn’t I?” I answered her vaguely, thanking all the fucking saints we were approaching the restaurant. I opened the door for my mother and urged her in. I saw how shitty my father treated my mother, and I swore I’d make it up to her once I was old enough.

My mother strolled in, her gaze seeking out mine.

“I’m really looking forward to seeing her and her girls again. Please make sure they don’t cancel.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her unusual request. If Gemma changed her mind, I couldn’t force her and a bribe wouldn’t work on that woman. God knew I tried.

“Let’s enjoy your birthday lunch, Mother.”

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## CHAPTER 19

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# GENEVIEVE



**T**wice in the same day. On the very day I wanted to avoid him.

I stood in my bathroom, brushing out my hair. The girls were bathed and dressed. They were ready for Lena's birthday party, eagerly waiting for my boss to pick us up since he so graciously insisted. And Saoirse accepted with a wide grin. You'd think she won a carnival trip.

My eyes traveled over my daughters, dressed in coordinated colors. Their choice, not mine. Theme color of the day was pink. Go figure, they wanted to look like twinsies, or triplets in this case, though they looked nothing alike. Sierra, my youngest, had wild blonde curls and baby blue eyes that could break your heart if she decided to cry to get what she wanted. As fair as Sierra was, Saoirse was her contrast with her dark hair and even darker expressive eyes that were always full of spark and mischief. Unless her feelings got hurt. Sienna, on the other hand, was something in between my youngest two. She had long straight blonde hair, light olive skin and almond shaped, honey colored eyes.

Glancing at my reflection in the mirror, I stared at my face. My dark hair was shinier than usual, my complexion healthy and rosy. Even my body felt more filled out. Like those empty spaces were finally full again which made my clothes fit better.

It took only a week to transform from a desperate woman to-

What? I wasn't sure. It wasn't exactly happiness but it wasn't sadness. And definitely not desperation. The spa was nice, despite my complaints. It made me feel refreshed and kind of beautiful. After all, Kristoff only paid for the best.

Instead of going with pink, I opted for a pair of forest green pants that reminded me of my boss' eyes, a white crew boatneck top, and a pair of white dress flats. *Far from Kristoff's dress preference*, I thought for no reason. It wasn't like I was trying to please him. Weekends were mine; weekdays were his.

My phone beeped, and I reached for it to see who it was. A message. My boss was on his way. I kind of hoped for a cancellation, but I knew the chances of that happening were slim.

"Why did I let his mother guilt me into it?" I grumbled to myself. It should have been a firm *no*. Spending an evening in Kristoff's vicinity wasn't the smartest decision. If only my body would agree.

I still wanted him. The way his hands felt on my body, his mouth on my sex, his fingers pinching my nipples. And the way that man kissed. My gosh! His mouth *devoured me*.

A small shudder ghosted down my spine.

He knew how to deliver pleasure. I wanted more of it, except the aftermath felt wrong. Like it was a transaction. Maybe for him it was, but it wasn't for me. And that was where the trouble lay.

Putting all those thoughts on hold, I rushed from my bathroom and down the stairs. I grabbed the gifts we'd bought earlier for Lena, and started wrapping them. Kristoff was ten minutes away. It made no damn sense for him to pick us up considering we were out of his way. But he insisted. So apparently, the man would pass his mother's house to pick us up in Pasadena, MD, go back to it, and then repeat it all after his mother's party.

Kristoff was a stubborn man. But then I knew that when he hunted me down with his contract. The man was the worst, always insisting on getting his way.

Satisfied with my wrapping, I went into the kitchen and started emptying the dishwasher, feeling restless. Sierra came up to me and tried helping, as usual. After she put the silverware away, I lifted her up and sat her on the counter, a smile beaming on her face.

"Thank you for your help," I told her, rubbing my nose against hers. Her chubby hands came up to my cheeks and I kissed each one of them. "Love you, baby."

"You love me too?" Saoirse snuck up behind me and I picked her up. My back complained, but I ignored it.

“I love you too, love.” I pressed my lips on her forehead. “All three of you. More than anything.”

“More than chocolate?” Saoirse asked with wide eyes.

“So much more,” I rasped.

“More than sparkles?” Sierra asked.

I grinned. Despite her age, my youngest one picked up on my fascination with gems. “Yes, way more than gems.”

“More than ice cream?” Sienna asked, joining us in the kitchen.

“More than ice cream,” I answered. “More than anything or anyone.”

A car pulled up and before I could utter a word, Saoirse slid off the counter and ran to the door, opening it wide.

“Saoirse, you cannot just open the door for anyone,” I reprimanded. My words didn’t even register, she was out the door. “Sienna, please go after your sister,” I urged as I lowered my youngest off the counter and onto her feet.

Before Sienna could get out the door, Kristoff was already walking into the house, hand in hand with Saoirse. For a moment, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from them. Something about seeing them walk into the house together was unsettling. It made my chest squeeze almost painfully.

“Hello,” Sienna greeted him grumpily, then faced her sister. “Saoirse, stop running out without permission.”

Saoirse tilted her chin in challenge, daring in her dark eyes. “You are not the boss of me,” she shot back with a glare.

“Someone is going to take you,” Sienna went right back to her.

“You two, stop it right now,” I warned in an exasperated tone. Kristoff kneeled down as Saoirse pulled his sleeve. She leaned closer and whispered something into his ear, which made him laugh. He whispered back, and whatever he said put a big smile on Saoirse’s face.

My youngest added with a delayed reaction, “Top it, Sienna.” Her s in ‘stop’ silent.

“Hello, Kristoff,” I greeted him. “Let me just grab the car seats out of the garage, and we’ll be ready.”

“No rush.” Sierra waved to him and he walked over to the two of us. She took two steps towards him and offered her thumbs-up cheers sign. He lowered down and pressed his thumb against hers. “Cheers, baby.”

Another squeeze in my chest and I inhaled a shuddering breath. Seeing this scene unfold hit me right into my soul. Sierra only offered that greeting

sign to people she liked. And he played right along with it. Some people offered weird looks, but not Kristoff. God, he seemed to be good at everything.

Except emotional attachment.

“Me too. Me too,” Saoirse exclaimed, wanting to be part of the exchange. Next thing I knew, they were all cheering thumbs. I could record this moment, and play it over and over again, making my chest swell.

Was this man trying to just have me fall head over heels in love with him?

“Sienna, please come and help me with Saoirse’s booster seat,” I requested. “I’ll get Sierra’s car seat.”

We took the hallway off the kitchen and exited into the garage. Instead of grabbing car seats out of my car, I got the spare ones. They were used in the rare instances Jack would take them into his vehicle. Sienna already had the booster and left, while I reached up to the highest shelf, struggling to lower the car seat down.

A pair of hands came to my waist, startling me. I knew who it was, only one man’s touch seared my skin in that manner. Yet, as if to ensure my mind wasn’t playing tricks on me, I glanced over my shoulder and found Kristoff’s eyes on my ass.

“Let me help,” he offered, our eyes connecting. “It’ll be easier if I do it.”

My eyes looked behind him to confirm the garage was empty. The girls were still inside.

“Are you sure you just don’t want me to remain like this?” I attempted a sarcastic tone, though I suspected I failed. My heart thundered and my voice came out a tad bit too husky. “So you can just stare at my ass?”

A bad-boy smile curled up the edges of his lips and something disturbingly hot and dark flashed in his eyes. He smacked my ass, firm and much to my mortification, something hot surged through me and wetness pooled between my thighs.

I gasped, my eyes widening. I should give him an undignified look and slap him across the face. Yet, I was too busy evaluating my reaction to him smacking my ass.

“It’s a very nice ass,” he said, a hint of humor glinted in his eyes and instantly a blush crept up my neck and into my cheeks. Jesus, I acted like a crazed teenager. Not a grown-ass woman.

“Come on, beautiful,” he purred, and something in my chest rattled with satisfaction at his endearment. Nobody ever called me beautiful. “Let me help you. I like staring at your ass, but I don’t like seeing you struggle.”

A long forgotten feeling fluttered in my chest. Why couldn’t he have said something like this, anything sweet and soft, yesterday? Instead, he just shut down after something so intense and left me wondering what happened. When he was like this, it would be so easy to fall in love with him.

I stepped aside, bumping into his hard body.

“Thank you,” I murmured. No man had ever affected me this way. He was alluring, arrogant, and enticing all wrapped in one. I should keep my distance, keep my heart firmly barricaded. Yet, every breath I took around him, chipped my walls. Slowly but surely.

The images of what happened between us hung heavy in the air. The familiar ache began between my legs, as he watched me with eyes full of wicked promises.

He gave his head a slight shake as he lifted the car seat, then carried it effortlessly. I rushed to the door that led us back into the house.

God, even his back was magnificent. I could faintly see the outline of his muscles through his pristine white-collared shirt. Yesterday, I lost my head and all my senses. I barely touched him. But now, as my gaze moved down past his waist, I soaked in the sight of the most magnificent ass beneath those perfectly tailored pants. God, his ass would look even better in jeans.

I followed him to his Land Rover, gawking at his backside like a starved woman. There wasn’t a single part of him that I didn’t find attractive. It wasn’t fair to be blessed with so many attributes. I shouldn’t want him. He should be the last thing on this Earth I craved. Yet, here I was, *aching* for him. *Longing* for him.

Except for his emotional detachment. I didn’t like that at all.

As if he sensed my eyes on his ass, he slowly turned and our eyes connected.

“Gemma,” he said, his one eyebrow cocked. “Everything okay?”

This man had the ability to turn my knees to liquid. Yet, I was proud of myself as I offered him a slow smile.

“What?” I tried to sound nonchalant. “You stared at my ass. I think it’s only fair if I return the favor.”



A hint of humor glinted in his emerald eyes, sending another wave of heat through me. His lips curved into the most devastating smile and my eyes locked on them. Sweet Jesus, the things those lips could do. I had never felt such an earth shattering orgasm in my entire life. Every part of me was aware of him. And I mean *every* part.

"I don't mind you looking," he murmured. "Or touching."

I was coming apart at the seams, right in my driveway, with my children in the kitchen. *Jesus, I had to get my shit together!*

"Are you sure you want to put these car seats into your car?" I asked, intent on keeping my focus on the situation at hand. I'd be a responsible woman. "They can leave a mark on the seat," I explained.

"I'm sure, Gemma," he sounded like my worry was ridiculous before adding, "It's just a car. If it means your girls' safety and yours, I'll rip the seats out of the Rover."

I stood speechless, staring at this enigmatic man while his entire attention was on securing the car seat against the camel leather. I watched as his muscles strained, bulged, and my heart simply shuddered in my chest. A tiny lump formed in my throat, the memory of Jack and I arguing about the car seats in his truck. He didn't want them in it, claiming they were ruining his truck.

Yet this guy, a complete stranger... Damn it, I couldn't even think about it. Otherwise, I'd get all teary-eyed and this man didn't want emotions. He preferred emotional detachment.

Eyeing his installation work and seemingly satisfied, Kristoff reached next to his Rover where Sienna left the booster seat next to his car and grabbed it.

The girls came out of the house, wide smiles on their faces. A warm breeze swift off the bay, soothing sounds of the waves mixing with the happy laughter of my girls. Somewhere in the distance, someone was cutting down a tree, the buzzing chainsaw traveling through the air, and Kristoff was wrestling with car seats in my driveway. Somehow the whole scene hit me right in the chest.

Something so simple stirred up emotions. He made me crave something I buried deep down long ago. A wish for a loving husband and happy family unit. Kind of like my parents had. I couldn't even remember the last time Jack, the girls, and I attended an event together as a family before he died. In fact, Jack had barely spent time with the girls before his accident.

Loud giggles brought my attention back to the present, searching out my daughters. My lips curved into a smile, watching Sienna chase her sisters, pretending she'd eat them up. Jack voluntarily missed it all even before his death. Saoirse and Sierra barely even spoke of their dad. Jack's death was hardest on Sienna who still remembered some of the early years when our marriage was decent.

"Is this your house?" Kristoff questioned out of nowhere.

"Well, I wouldn't be living here if it wasn't," I answered, shoving my thoughts far away.

"I'm a little bit surprised."

"About what?" I asked.

"It is a beautiful house," he replied. "What business was your husband in?"

I rolled my eyes. "You know that already," I retorted dryly, remembering his background check. "Unless you are suggesting something else?"

He shrugged, straightening himself to his full length. He really was too tall for my petite size. I craned my neck, meeting his piercing gaze head on.

"I assumed he bought it for you," he casually stated. Jesus, was he trying to piss me off on purpose?

"Wow, Kristoff. This's a bit degrading. Not sure that I appreciate that kind of conclusion on your part," I sarcastically replied. "Dick move."

"I didn't mean anything by it," he stated calmly, casting me a roguish look. "The house is beautiful, and the waterfront view must be spectacular."

He didn't say anything else, and the silence stretched on. I had a sense he purposely egged me on.

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you and have a nice house," I snapped, years of anger boiling over. It was always the same, outsiders assumed it was Jack that bought the house. It was Jack that made it all happen. "Next time I'll be sure I have a shack of a house." He gave me a slightly confused look. Or was it amused? I wasn't certain. "And for your information, *I* bought the house with my own money. I worked my ass off for it. I thought your background check was detailed. You should demand a refund. And maybe next time, you should have them more focused on where your admins live versus how many dates they've been on."

He reached out and placed a gentle hand on my arm. "I know you bought the house," he drawled, his lip tugged up, while his big hand burned

my skin in the best way possible. "I wanted to hear you say it." My eyebrows furrowed with confusion. "You are an incredible woman and you should own it." What was up with this man? He confused me, rattled me, and scrambled my thoughts. A slightly sardonic smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, as if he knew exactly what he was doing to me. "As far as admins go, there will be no need for next time because I already got my admin."

There was a gleam in his eye that was slightly unsettling and the fire that burned in them threatened to swallow me whole. Yet, like a moth attracted to the flame, I couldn't look away.

I shook my head with disbelief. "I don't understand you," I muttered.

My eyes skirted to my girls as they ran around the yard, oblivious to the rollercoaster this man was taking me through.

"I thought I had spelled out my intentions clearly," he said, his voice calm and measured. "I want you, Gemma. Any way I can have you. And yesterday, was just the tip of the iceberg." All the thoughts vanished from my brain, my eyes wide on him while my entire composure cracked at his open admission.

I wanted to deny him, tell him it would never happen again. Tell him I didn't want him to have me. Except it wasn't true. Did it make me a weak woman? Absolutely. *Maybe there is a way to compromise*, I hoped. I just knew that accepting his terms and not getting the emotional part *I* needed after years of neglect would destroy me, and I couldn't allow that.

"We should probably get going," he added before I could even think of words to explain. I nodded, then turned towards my girls who were dangerously close to the sandbox, ready to get their hands and feet dirty.

"Girls, c'mon, we're ready to go." My voice carried over our yard, and I gave Kristoff a fleeting glance. "Give me a second; I'll just go get the gifts and lock the house."

I ran into the house, grabbed the wrapped boxes containing the gifts, locked the door, and went back to Kristoff's car just as he buckled Saoirse into her seat and lifted Sierra into his expensive Land Rover. I came up behind him, watching him fumble with the child seat belts for Sierra.

"Who invented this mess?" he grumbled. "I could make another billion by inventing a simplified version of this car seat."

Sierra chuckled as if she understood him, blabbing in her baby talk and her eyes on my boss, shining with delight. As if he understood her, he

nodded his head. "Sounds like a deal, little one. You'll be my subject matter expert."

"Me too," announced Saoirse. "I'm e-expert too."

Kristoff gave her an amused look. "Of course. You can be my tester."

"Ohhh." Saoirse looked impressed with a wide grin spreading across her face.

I chuckled at their full blown conversation and put my hand on Kristoff's shoulder.

"Here, let me," I said softly. Something about his interaction with my girls hit deep and hard, and I didn't care to evaluate it. "Whoever would've thought brilliant Kristoff Baldwin couldn't buckle a child into a simple car seat?" I teased him, while in my chest my heart hammered wildly. Before meeting this man, I hadn't felt so many emotions in so long and now... I was feeling too much.

He gave me a smirk, and I laughed harder as I leaned closer to Sierra.

"I'm glad there is at least one thing you can't do well," I mused.

Throwing him a glance over my shoulder, I caught that determined look in his eyes. He gave me just enough room, never stepping away and watching my movements as I buckled her up. Like he was absorbing step by step instructions so he'd learn for the next time. And somehow, I knew this man was a quick study.

I straightened up, Kristoff's body brushing against me. "Is Saoirse buckled in?" I asked him.

His eyes looked to my middle daughter who was grinning from ear to ear. "What do you think, Saoirse? Did I do a good job with your seatbelt?"

Saoirse answered, with a serious expression on her face. "Yes, you did. Only Mommy does it better."

My eldest, Kristoff, and I burst into laughter. Saoirse knew where her allegiances lay.

"You're right," he said, humor coloring his voice. "Your mom knows what she's doing."

Grinning, we took a step back and Kristoff shut the door, then opened the door to the passenger seat for me and waited for me to slide into the seat before closing my door and going around his vehicle to get into the driver seat.

*This evening kicked off rather well, I thought to myself.*

“Nice car,” Sienna said. “Mom always said if she won the Powerball, she’d get a Land Rover. Dad wouldn’t let her buy one.”

I inadvertently winced, wishing she wouldn’t have said that. Jack was against me getting a nice vehicle, calling it a stay-home-snobby-mom vehicle. I disagreed, but it didn’t seem like a battle worth fighting. Yet, his hypocrisy didn’t escape me. He didn’t mind spending a hundred grand on a truck for himself. *In which he fucked his bimbos*, I thought bitterly.

All in the past, I told myself. Not worth ruining my present over those memories.

“You play the Powerball?” Kristoff asked, cocking his eyebrow. I shook away my thoughts of the past that tended to haunt me. It led nowhere but to bitterness. “You don’t strike me as the gambling type.”

I sighed, then glanced sideways at him. Somehow despite all this man’s emotional detachment issues, he struck me as a better man than my dead husband. Before I could answer, Sienna responded in my stead.

“Nope, she very rarely buys the ticket. She thinks she’ll magically win.” Yes, my teenager perfected sarcasm somewhere along the way.

Starting the vehicle, he headed around my driveway, leaving my home behind us.

## CHAPTER 20

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# GENEVIEVE



The girls chatted amongst each other, playing word games, rhyming words, while Sienna multi-tasked texting on her phone. This felt dangerously close to a family event.

I didn't like it.

I freaking loved it. I shouldn't. He was my boss, and yet, I pictured and imagined things I shouldn't.

"Is something wrong?" Kristoff's voice startled me from my thoughts.

"No, not really," I muttered. It wasn't like I could admit my thoughts to him.

"If you say *no* one more time, I might actually believe you even less." Kristoff had a point there.

I smoothed my pants and placed my hands in my lap.

"Just kind of weird," I stated, glancing back to ensure my kids were not listening. "Going to my boss' mother's birthday party."

"Don't think of me as your boss this weekend," he retorted, his voice deep and his eyes never wavering from the road. He behaved as if we'd done this before and it was just another event. "She liked you and your girls. A lot. Regularly, she doesn't take to people as fast as she did to you."

*In a matter of a few minutes*, I wanted to ask but there was no need to be rude. Especially in front of my girls.

"Well, she is very nice as well," I commented. "You don't resemble her."

His deep chuckle filled the car. "How come I have a feeling there is a part of that sentence you left unsaid and it is not meant as a compliment to me?"

“Probably because you are too smart for your own good,” I retorted, unable to help myself and gave him a big innocent smile. He said not to think of him as my boss this weekend so I took advantage of it. He opened that door so he didn’t have anyone to blame for it but himself.

Maybe it’d give me a chance to understand him better.

“Mom,” Sienna chimed in, leaning forward and proceeded to show me some images on her phone. “Look, all my friends are dressing up and going to a party.”

Her tone was almost whiny.

I glanced at her phone, then met my daughter’s eyes. “We are going to a party too,” I smiled gently. “We could have stayed in and watched *The Hobbit*.”

Sienna found nothing amusing in it, and instantly rolled her eyes. “I swear, Mom,” she grumbled. “Sometimes you act like you’re ancient.”

“Well, thank you,” I answered. “I think I will take that as a compliment.”

I watched her as she threw herself back into her seat, a pouty look on her face. Before I could say another word, she folded her arms, then turned her head and stared stubbornly out the window.

I offered an apologetic smile to Kristoff. Until Sienna’s teenage years kicked in, I couldn’t even fathom to understand other parent’s complaints on the difficulties of their adolescent children. I finally understood, much to my regret. My teenage daughter had an uncanny way of trying my patience with a single word or a fleeting look.

The rest of the ride, Kristoff and the little ones mainly did all the talking, yammering away in gibberish. Noticing his easy way with kids, I wondered how come he had no children himself. At his age, you’d assume he’d be married and with at least one child. Yeah, his ex did a number on him, but it shouldn’t have stopped him from moving on.

Unless... unless he really loved her. A wave of something unpleasant slithered through my veins. *Envy*.

I didn’t like it. Oh my freaking God. Not only was I attracted to the man, I was jealous of his ex-wife. I groaned, wondering how I could be so damn stupid. And at my age. For Christ’s sake.

Kristoff’s eyes flickered my way, before they returned to the road. “What’s that about?”



I sighed. It wasn't as if I could tell him. This stupid envy was illogical. "Nothing, I just remembered something."

"What's that?" he asked curiously.

I waved my hand, signaling it wasn't important. Thankfully, we were at our destination and he dropped it.

Pulling into a gated community, somewhere in Bethesda, the guard opened the gate before Kristoff even stopped so he drove slowly through it. The moment we passed through the gate, it was like entering a different world. One for the rich and famous.

Beautiful estates, acres of land between each property. Exquisite manors, each more beautiful than the last. The manicured lawns, perfectly shaped gardens. You'd never catch these homeowners cutting their grass. Their lawns were perfectly shaped, even initials carved into some of their lawns. I couldn't even imagine the price tag of these homes.

At the opposite side of the community, stood the biggest estate with a huge beautiful Southern plantation style home, and even as Kristoff drove down the private driveway, the view of Patapsco River stretched in the back of it. If I didn't know better, I would have sworn this home was from *Gone with the Wind*. At any moment, a woman or a man with a ridiculously large and colorful gown would step out of the house.

Kristoff pulled up front and parked his car. Both Kristoff and I got out of the car and without prompting, Kristoff opened the back door, letting Sienna climb out and then helped unbuckle Saoirse.

*Another difference*, I thought to myself. Jack would just saunter away, leaving me to handle the girls. God, I let him get away with too much.

I unbuckled Sierra's car seat and lifted her out of it, just in time as Kristoff came around with Saoirse's hand in his and Sienna on his other side. As we walked up the grand staircase, I couldn't help but feel like a family.

One week. Multiple orgasms. And I was swooning. God help me.

"This is a beautiful home," I said, giving Kristoff an amused look. "Yours?"

"Funny," he retorted dryly.

"I thought so." I shrugged, cocking an eyebrow, but I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

"Can I ring the doorbell?" Saoirse asked excitedly. Our own doorbell had been dismantled after she and her sister repeatedly kept pushing on it to

hear Beethoven's "Symphony 3 Eroica" play. I even played it on the stereo, but apparently it wasn't as good as the doorbell. So off it went. There was only so much a mother could handle before a horrendous headache took over. I blamed it on a dead battery.

"Go for it, Princess." Kristoff lifted her up so she could reach.

The second she pressed that button, the music went off and surprise, surprise... Beethoven it was. I cringed, the girls grinned like they just got the best present ever. I shook my head, smiling while Kristoff looked at them amused and curious.

"They like doorbells," I explained, rolling my eyes. "Our doorbell... umm, died," I murmured.

"Mommy said we pressed the button too much," Saoirse complained.

Understanding crossed Kristoff's expression. "I see. Whenever you come here, you can press the doorbell," he offered.

Saoirse and Sierra shared a look, while Sienna shook her head. Before another word could be said, the door was opened by an older gentleman. A *butler*, I realized. *Jesus, people still have butlers these days?*

"Welcome," he greeted us with a smile, opening it wide to welcome us in.

"Hello." The girls and I all responded back.

He addressed Kristoff next. "Your mom and the rest of the party are in the backyard."

"Thank you, Thomas."

We walked through the vast foyer, the marble floors slick under our feet. I held Sierra's hand worried we'd bump into something fragile and break it. Every so often she'd reach out with her chubby hands, as if she wanted to brush her fingers along the fancy items. To leave her mark.

"Mine?" she asked and I shook my head. Of course, she only went for shiny stuff.

Other than a few shiny items though, my little ones were unimpressed with the house. I, on the other hand, prayed we'd reach the backyard before something broke. I glanced at my other daughters and caught Saoirse's hands trailing over the surface of the side tables. And Kristoff let her, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Saoirse," I started softly. "Please don't touch anything." Even with the salary that Kristoff was paying me, I had a suspicion I wouldn't be able to replace anything she might break. Saoirse quickly grabbed Kristoff's hand,

as if she knew he'd let her do whatever she wanted. I bit my tongue, fighting the urge to tell my daughter to drop Kristoff's hand and take her big sister's instead.

My eldest strode along to my left, her phone forgotten and her eyes darting left and right, slightly awed at the grand house. It wasn't every day you saw something like this. On our left, I caught a glimpse of a large room with portraits, while on my right a large empty hall sat open with a large crystal chandelier.

*A ballroom?* I wondered, appalled. Or maybe impressed

Before I could even ponder how to ask politely, we arrived at the oversized terrace with an enormous backyard full of people, overlooking the gorgeous Patapsco River.

Lena's *small* garden birthday party wasn't that small at all. There were about thirty people roaming around, some standing in groups talking and laughing. I didn't mind crowds, but the company of a group of people I didn't know wasn't something I particularly enjoyed. My shoulders tensed slightly, not quite sure what to expect.

"Kristoff." Instantly, Kristoff and I turned our heads in the direction of the voice. An older man headed our way with a cheerful expression, a broad smile, and Lena on his arm.

I tried to remember if she'd said she was married and failed.

"Hey, Albert." Kristoff smiled back. The two men shook hands, then Kristoff kissed his mother's cheek in greeting. Again, my mind jumped to make comparisons. Jack barely even acknowledged his mother when greeting her, never mind kissing her cheek or giving affectionate hugs.

"Is this your family?" Albert asked, looking at us curiously. *Definitely not his father.*

"Hi, I'm Saoirse," my little one jumped in, never letting go of Kristoff's hand.

"Gemma, I'm so happy you came," Lena said as she gave me a kiss on my cheek. "I was so worried you'd cancel at the last minute."

Surprised at such a familiar greeting, I tried not to let it show.

"Hello, Lena," I smiled, not bothering to deny it since it was exactly what I wanted to do. "Happy birthday." I handed her the wrapped gifts. "It's just a little something we picked up."

The way her eyes sparkled, you'd think I'd given her diamonds, and I couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. It was somehow contagious.

Unlike Kristoff's reserved appearance, Lena seemed to be warm and welcoming. It made me wonder when Kristoff became so detached.

"Ah, honey, I'm too old for gifts. I just have a party because it is a good excuse to see all my friends."

"That's an excellent reason for a party," I agreed.

"I see nobody is going to introduce me to this gorgeous young lady," Albert complained. "So I will do it myself." Before I could even say anything else, he reached out and took my hand into his. "Hello, my dear. I'm Albert, Lena's very old friend from way, way back. Are you the one that captured Kristoff's heart? I have to say when I saw you coming in, it was like a vision of a perfect family from a magazine."

Okay, this guy was direct. No beating around the bush. I could only imagine everyone's gasps if they knew the terms of my employment. Granted the contract remained unsigned, but that certainly didn't stop me from sleeping with my boss. Except, there was no sleeping going on. Good God, my cheeks were burning.

"Hello, Albert," I answered, clearing my throat. My inner thoughts would be the death of me. "We just came together. I'm actually Kristoff's admin assistant. These are my daughters... Sienna, Saoirse, and Sierra." I motioned in their directions as I introduced them.

A heartbeat of silence. Albert's eyes darted to Kristoff, then returned to me and clapped his hands, exclaiming, "That is even better. I can steal you just for myself." *Umm, okay.* I guess I had some prospects going on here. Of course, he was old enough to be my grandfather. "Tell me, dear. Are you married?"

He took my hand and pulled me away, guiding me towards a small group gathered across the way. We barely took two steps when Sierra let go of my hand, probably aware she'd have a better time staying with Saoirse and Kristoff and ran to the two of them.

"Sienna," I called out as I turned back to scan the group I arrived at, an uncomfortable look on my face. "I'll be right back, stay with your sisters."

I shot a look of help to Kristoff but he seemed all engrossed in answering Saoirse's question and just smiled with his knowing look.

"Okay, Mom," my eldest shot back.

"Or are you dating?" Albert continued his line of questioning.

"Umm, I'm a widow." *Is letting your boss fuck you considered dating?* I mused silently. I knew it wasn't, but I hoped it would make him

uncomfortable to continue his line of questioning.

“Me too,” he announced thrillingly. “We have so much in common.”

*What the heck*, I thought, glancing his way to see if he was joking. *These old people are crazy.*

Then I guess that was settled in Albert’s mind because he put all his efforts into introducing me to every person there. Unable to remember anyone’s name, I kept nodding and smiling. There was certainly something pleasant about hanging around an older group of people. They didn’t waste their time putting words into delicate, vague sentences. They just spoke their mind, and I found myself relaxing with each minute.

“After we lose our significant other, whether to death or a younger woman, it feels like starting all over again,” one of Lena’s friends announced. “Suddenly, you feel like a teenager again.” I nodded, though I wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t as if I was dating, but this thing with Kristoff made me feel like I was a virgin, going through a crush for the first time all over again.

“But Kristoff will be good to you,” another woman added, while I nodded and I realized too late what she said.

“He’s my boss,” I retorted quickly, trying to straighten the misconception.

She waved her hand, dismissing my comment. “There is a spark there.”

I glanced behind me to find my girls playing in Kristoff’s vicinity. He said something to Saoirse and Sierra, sending them into a fit of giggles. His mother sat with all three girls, while they pointed to something in the grass. *Probably a bug*, I guessed. Lena listened intently as Saoirse talked and I had to commend her, she seemed engrossed in their discussion. I knew firsthand how detailed my daughter got when talking about bugs.

I caught Sienna grinning and chiming in with some comments. In that regard, my eldest and middle daughter were very much the same. Both of them were fascinated with any kind of bug or reptile, much to my dismay.

Albert patted my hand. “Yes, it’s all over your face.” I frowned wondering what he was talking about.

Rubbing my hand over my face, I questioned, “What is?” Did I smear something all over it?

“The spark. It’s all over your face,” he clarified.

I shook my head, ready to deny it when Lena’s friend chimed in. “Don’t bother denying it, we can see it. And the way that man devours you with his

eyes-”

She fanned herself and my lips curved into a wide grin. It was comical to see an eighty-year-old woman fan herself. She peeked over her shoulder and then grinned.

“Don’t be a cougar, Elaine,” another woman scolded her. “Besides, he prefers Gemma.”

My cheeks warmed at her comment. “He’s just my boss,” I attempted to explain again.

They both waved their hands in dismissal. “No matter. The spark is stronger than your employment status.”

Like I said, they didn’t bother beating around the bush.

Fifteen minutes into Albert’s introduction, I finally excused myself, using my children as an excuse. Though somehow, I didn’t think it fooled them. Every set of elderly eyes had a knowing look on their face.

“I’m coming with you,” Albert announced.

“No need-”

“Nonsense,” he cut me off. “I have to tell Kristoff, I’m going to marry you if he doesn’t make a move.”

I eyed him suspiciously, hoping he was joking. By the time we got back to Kristoff and Lena, the expression on my face must have said it all because Lena laughed softly.

“I hope Albert didn’t scare you, my dear,” she chuckled as I sat on the empty chair next to Lena. I pushed my hand through my hair, still bewildered.

“Ah, no,” I replied, avoiding brutal honesty in this case. “Just too many introductions.”

Albert pulled another chair and brought it close to Kristoff.

“Gemma is a dream,” Albert said happily. “I had to fight off all these old, single men and tell them she is off limits.” Albert shot Kristoff a smug look. “But we all agreed, if Kristoff doesn’t make a move, I will. Or we’ll find Gemma a handsome young fellow.”

“He’s joking,” I chimed in quickly, the smile on my face stiff.

Sierra ran to me, unknowingly saving me from an uncomfortable situation, and gave me a big hug. I wanted to keep her with me and have her talk to me until it was time to go.

“Look, Mommy. Toys. All mine.”

I leaned down, kissing her on the forehead. “You can use them and share them. But not yours.”

Of course, she’d feel comfortable here. Lena had that way about her, and for the first time, I wished my children were glued to me, insisting that we go home. Maybe even a tiny bit. But nothing came, just their wide smiles, shining eyes, and laughter.

*Another crack. Another wish.* At this rate, I’d be a complete emotional rollercoaster in another week or so.

I watched Sierra offer her toy to her sisters, taking my heed about sharing seriously. Toy exchanging happened and their game continued.

“Gemma, your girls are beautiful,” Albert noted in a gentle voice, pulling my attention back to the adults. “Your husband must have been some lucky guy,” Albert added.

I thought Jack was a lucky guy too. But he didn’t. Somewhere along the way, both of us drifted far apart. So many bitter words; too many bitter memories.

“Thank you,” I uttered, my lips in a tight smile.

Even after all that time, I found that speaking about Jack caused my voice to choke, except it wasn’t in sadness but more like anguish. Pushing my sadness and memories into a dark corner became a normal occurrence. I excelled at it actually. I would have been perfectly happy to delete that chapter out of my life, except I couldn’t imagine what I’d do without my girls. Despite all of our disagreements, angry words, Jack gave me something priceless. My girls.

I raised my head determined not to go down that road, and froze, catching Kristoff’s intense gaze on me. Those green eyes drilled into me, down to my very soul. Could he see it all? He was too observant. I had to watch myself around him, no matter how much spark and attraction swirled around us.

## CHAPTER 21

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# GENEVIEVE



A few hours later, Kristoff was driving us all home. It was a late night for all of us. The girls were worn out and fell asleep before we even left Lena's neighborhood.

"Thank you for coming," Kristoff echoed his mother's parting words.

"We had a really good time," I admitted softly. "Thanks for having us. Although, I still think it is weird to go to my boss' mother's birthday party."

"Well, you could always go as my girlfriend next time," he commented back. "The job's still open."

I snorted. Yeah, like that was ever going to happen. His first mistake was thinking a girlfriend was a job position. That alone was evidence to me that he wanted someone he could boss around and control. Though sex would be-

I had to stop myself going down that road.

"I don't want to bring up business," he started, breaking up the silence.

"Please do," I answered, grateful for the neutral topic.

"Next Wednesday, there is a fundraiser ball in New York that I need you to accompany me to."

"Ah," I answered. "The reason for hair and wax?"

He laughed. "Yes, the reason for hair and wax."

"What kind of fundraiser?" I asked curiously.

"There'll be an auction." The sound of the blinker signaled he was about to switch the lanes. "All proceeds go to wounded soldiers' families."

"That's a nice cause," I commended. "How many days do we need to be away?"

"We'll be back the same evening. Probably very late."

“Got it. I’ll just arrange for a sitter.”

“You sure it’s going to be okay?”

“Kristoff, that was clearly part of your employment agreement. So yes, it’s going to be ok. Their grandma will probably come over or they’ll visit with her.”

“Speaking of employment agreement,” he started cautiously. “Are we going to talk about yesterday?”

I glanced back at my kids. They were one reason I never started dating again. And the horribly bad marriage experience was the other. That was enough reason to keep everyone at arm’s length. Yet, after experiencing that mind blowing passion, I couldn’t help but wonder if I wasn’t shorting myself.

*Emotional detachment.* It always went back to that though. Kristoff didn’t want emotional connection. I needed it.

I remained quiet, and thankfully, so did he. The drive home seemed quicker than the ride to his mother’s house. The moment he pulled up, I gently tugged Sienna awake. Yawning, she went straight to her own bedroom. Kristoff helped me by carrying a sleeping Saoirse into the house, following me with Sierra in my arms.

*Another difference from Jack.* I had to stop comparing the two.

Following me into Sierra’s room, I had him lay Saoirse next to her. I took Sierra’s shoes and socks off, and Kristoff followed my lead, doing the same to Saoirse. It was as if he studied me around the kids, almost as if he wanted to know what to do with them in case he had his own kids one day.

Covering them both up, I kissed each on their forehead as Kristoff waited at the doorway. As we headed back downstairs, I couldn’t help but think he would be an easy person to live with. He might be deceiving me, a good actor, but somehow, I didn’t think so. Despite his crazy contract, control in the business and physical aspect, I had a feeling there was more to Kristoff Baldwin than he let on.

Or there was some kind of syndrome going on that hadn’t gotten a name yet. *Baldwin Syndrome?*

“Want something to drink?” I offered. “Coffee... tea?”

“No, thank you. I’m going to get going. It’s rather late, and I still have another sixty minute drive.”

I nodded, without saying anything. I wanted to wrap my hands around him and feel him hold me, but I knew that wasn’t what he was after. So I

quietly walked him to the door, exited with him, and leaned against the column of the covered porch.

“Gemma,” he started. “About yesterday-”

“Please, don’t,” I whispered, my voice hoarse and my emotions raw. “That was a mistake. It should have never happened.”

He stared at me, his green eyes studying me. I kept my expression neutral, unwilling to show him the impact he had on me.

“We need to talk about it,” he said in his deep voice. He might be right, but it terrified me to open up. To tell him I loved his hands on me, craved them even. To admit that I had never felt such a strong attraction to anyone before. “You can’t pretend it never happened,” he added softly as his hand came up, brushing a piece of hair behind my ear. My heart thundered under my rib cage.

God, Lena’s friends were right. This felt like being a teenager all over again.

“I-I can’t do emotional detachment,” I admitted. His hand froze. In fact his entire posture did and my eyes darted away from his towering form, scared to see something in his eyes that would irrevocably shatter me. My self-esteem suffered enough during my marriage. I couldn’t just satisfy my carnal urges and keep my emotions out of it. It had only been a week of working for him and my heart already acted reckless. I couldn’t just sleep with someone for the mere physical act.

“What do you need?” My head whipped his way, his question taking me by surprise. There was a frown on his face, as if he was puzzled by my statement. Or maybe by his own question.

Gosh, he didn’t really want me to say it out loud. Did he? *I just want you to hold me after mind blowing sex.* The answer was simple, yet the words wouldn’t leave my mouth.

He bent his head and kissed me lightly on the cheek. I leaned into his kiss, closing my eyes, wanting the closeness. Slowly his soft lips found mine and deepened the kiss. I returned it. I knew I shouldn’t, but I wanted it. My body ached for him and betrayed the words I just told him when I claimed yesterday was a mistake.

“What do you need, Genevieve?” he asked again, his lips brushing against mine.

“For you to hold me after we have sex,” I blurted out.

I must have thrown him for a loop because the expression on his face was priceless. Either that or he'd start laughing his ass off at any moment. And then, I'd kill him.

Before I could blink my eyes, he scooped me up and a small squeal escaped me.

"What are you doing?" My eyes traveled around, worried we'd get caught. It was the middle of the night and most neighbors wouldn't be able to see us in the dark. He took a few steps to the right towards the porch swing. "Kristoff, what are you doing?" I questioned him again in a whisper.

He sat down, my ass on his lap and my legs swinging over the rail.

"I'm holding you," he murmured, his breath hot against my ear. His one big palm rested on my thighs, while he took my chin with his free hand. "Is this better, beautiful?"

Like he had enchanted me, I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded. Emotions thickened in my chest. He brushed his lips over mine, sending my heart rate into a fluttering mess. And I knew, right there and then. I was already falling for this man. I wouldn't be able to hold it back, any more than a weather man could hold back a hurricane.

"You have to tell me what you want," he whispered.

"Your contract said emotional detachment," I replied, thinking back to it. Only a few weeks went by, but it felt like it was months ago.

"It did," he agreed. "But contracts are negotiable. And guess what?"

"What?"

"You have the upper hand," he rasped. "I can't wait to taste every inch of you, especially your sweet pussy again. I want to feel you writhe with pleasure underneath me as I fuck you hard and deep." A soft gasp escaped my lips and my pussy clenched with need. I shifted, brushing against his hard shaft. "You want my cock inside you, Gemma?" I nodded, at a loss for words. "Tell me how much."

My mouth was dry, my heart hammered under my chest. I licked my lips. "I ache to feel your cock inside me. So much that it's consuming me." My cheeks singed and I was sure I'd perish. Such words never left my lips before.

"You are going to beg me for it," he said, licking and nipping my earlobe. A tremble rocked me with his words as he pressed his face into my neck, then inhaled deeply. "Are you wet for me now?" I nodded. "I can

smell your arousal.” He made a low sound of satisfaction in the back of his throat, his chest rumbling with approval.

“K-Kristof-” I breathed out, desperate for more. The fire in my blood matched the inferno skimming along every inch of my skin.

“Spread your legs for me.” He didn’t even finish his demand and my thighs opened. He lowered his hand, snaking it into my pants, caressing down my lower belly to my aching lips. The second his fingers brushed against my core, a moan escaped me. “So fucking hot,” he murmured. He slipped two fingers inside of me and I whimpered, completely enthralled in a sensation of pure bliss. The feel of his expert fingers delving in and out of me, pushing deeper and harder, I was ready to combust. I rubbed myself against his hand, unable to control the burning ache building in my pelvis.

“That’s right,” he rasped. “Let me see you fall apart for me.”

I throbbed under his touch, my clit swollen and sensitive. I rocked back and forth, his fingers sliding in and out of my slick entrance, the rhythm driving me crazy. I could feel his cock straining against my backside and I ground against him. His grunts, hot in my ear. His motions intensified in speed, my insides began to tremble and convulse, and my breath hitched. Colors flashed before my eyes as an orgasm shattered through every fiber of me.

I slumped against him, my heavy breathing filling the air. Tremors coursed through my body and this time, Kristoff never relinquished his hold on me, keeping me secured against his chest while his fingers remained inside my pussy.

“I’ll never tire of seeing you orgasm,” he claimed against my ear. His fingers slipped out of me and he brought them to his lips, licking them clean.

Damn it, the sight was so erotic, I wanted to grind myself against him and get off again. Scared he’d see how much it turned me on, I nuzzled my face into the crook of his neck, inhaling deeply.

“Tell me when you’ve had enough of me holding you,” he said. If he was making fun of me, I’d kill him, throw his body over my pier and let the fish feed on him. I raised my head, searching out his expression. There was nothing but honest curiosity on his face.

*I will never have enough of him,* was the answer that came to mind. “Kristoff?”

“Hmmm.” I shifted a bit, grinding against his hard shaft. He groaned, gently biting my earlobe. “Careful, Genevieve.”

“I could return the favor,” I suggested softly.

“No, this is for you,” he objected. “I want to make it up to you. For yesterday.”

My heart leapt in my chest, then quickened from his unexpected response. I tangled my fingers in his hair at the back of his nape, the dark strands soft. I didn’t understand this man, nor my reaction to him, but I knew he was slowly but surely sweeping me off my feet. If I was smart I’d stop it before it got too far, yet it was like trying to stop breathing.

“You more than made up for it,” I told him. God, his scent was addictive. His hands skimmed up and down my back, the movement soothing. I could fall asleep with him holding me. I didn’t want him to go, but I knew spending the night was out of the question. I had daughters that would question it and this was just-

Hmm, I wasn’t quite sure what it was.

“I can put an addendum in the contract,” he interrupted my thoughts.

“What is it with you and contracts?” I muttered, the mood kind of ruined. Though it did nothing to kill this lust swirling in my lower belly. I sighed, then continued. “No, I don’t want to put it in the contract,” I protested softly and slightly annoyed with him. “If you don’t want to hold me after mind blowing orgasms, then don’t. Just tell me.”

“You are a strange woman,” he said, skimming my neck with his nose.

“I’m not,” I argued back. “I want *you* to *want* to hold me. Not because your stupid contract says you have to.” I locked eyes with him. This man was brilliant and capable. What made him want to regulate a relationship via a contract. “You know, most women want to be held.”

“Maybe,” he agreed, his voice a black velvet. “But they want my status and money even more.”

His gaze met mine. *Green*. Deepest forest. The fire in his gaze sent the fire in my veins sparking with electricity. I ran my hands up his abs, curled my fingers into his chest, the heat of him soaking into me through his shirt.

A flicker of his own ghosts lurked in the light of his eyes. His gaze was the odd mixture of ice and fire. A heavy exhale slipped through my lips. A shiver rolled down my spine. That initial feeling I got when I first met him came back. This man had his own tragedies; I would stake my life on it.

I stood up off his lap, already missing his heat. Before I could say anything, he beat me to it.

“Thank you again for coming today,” he said as he stood up to his full size. I had no idea what was going through his head. He ran a thumb across my cheek, a hint of vulnerability flashed in his eyes, but he masked it quickly. Before I even realized, I leaned into him, craving his touch. It wasn’t enough. I already ached for a human touch. For *his* touch.

“You’re welcome.” My voice came out in a whisper, the need for him shaking me to the core.

He pulled away too soon. “Good night, Gemma.”

“Good night,” I uttered, remaining unmoved from my spot, till he left the driveway and I could no longer see his car.

I went back inside the house and locked the door.

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## CHAPTER 22

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# KRISTOFF



I pressed the button of the intercom on my desk, ending the call with my Australian office. They were a day ahead, and their Monday, my Sunday, was always the best day for conducting business meetings.

Leaning back in my chair, I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck, then loosened my tie. This house felt empty. Even when staff buzzed with their chores outside and inside, this home was hollow. It had never felt like that until very recently. And a certain woman with dark brown eyes was to blame.

I had long given up on the notion of a family and love. In my experience, women weren't dependable. Throw money and social status at them, they'd do anything. Yet, Gemma didn't seem to operate that way and it intrigued me.

*I can't do emotional detachment.* Her words replayed on repeat in my mind.

Until her, emotional detachment was my firm clause; it was never an option to bend that self-imposed rule. Yet, when Gemma's whispered words penetrated my brain, I knew she'd walk. Unless I gave in on that clause. So I held her in my arms and gave in to her.

I stared out my window, the large estate stretching in front of me with the perfectly manicured lawn. The house was way too large for a single person, but when I bought it, I thought I was enroute to having a family.

Memories I worked to ignore my entire adult life threatened to resurface. First my father and the way he treated my mother. Then my ex-wife. Gemma wasn't greedy like my ex-wife nor weak like my mother was

with my father. Gemma was strong, yet soft. The way she watched me with those soft brown eyes, like she wanted to save me.

The trouble was I didn't want to be saved. I kept women at arm's length, keeping emotional attachment out of the equation. Hence the contract. It kept things clear and safe for all of us. When it was time to part ways, it was easy and clean. No feelings.

Yet, I gave Gemma a way to amend the contract. Something I never allowed. *I'm bending rules for her.*

I was fully aware that she had captured me. From the moment she walked into my office, with her red lips parted and her big, wide dark eyes staring at me. Like she was contemplating running from the big, bad wolf.

And I - all I wanted to do was give chase, bend her over, and fuck her until I heard that soft voice turn high-pitched screaming my name.

I wanted her to the point of obsession, and somehow it didn't ease once I had her. Usually, once I got a taste, the woman was no longer as appealing. However, this one had gotten deeper under my skin with the first taste.

Now that I touched Gemma, I felt like it was over for me. There was no going back because she tasted like *mine*. She was better than any fantasy, any dream. All I had to do was think about her walking out of my life, and it'd stolen my fucking breath out of my lungs and set my blood on fire.

A sardonic breath left me. Maybe karma decided to play. After all, how many women begged me to keep them, and I discarded them without a second thought.

Something resembling guilt flickered in my chest at the way I forced her to agree to work for me. If I was a decent man, I'd walk away from Gemma and leave her to live her little life, happy and content.

Yet, I knew I wouldn't because I wasn't a fair man.

I'd take her. Possess her. Own her.

At any cost necessary.

## CHAPTER 23

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# GENEVIEVE



Monday morning rolled around and I walked into the office with a mixture of excitement and trepidation at seeing my boss. Flicking a gaze at his closed door, his voice already booming through it, I sat my bag down on my desk and went into the kitchen to grab Kristoff his coffee.

Once back, I glanced at Kimberly. “He’s still in there, right?”

“I think so,” she responded, all her attention on her computer screen. “I think he’s done with his call. I heard him say a few creative words when he hung up.”

My lips tugged up. Kristoff seemed too controlled of a man to curse. Except when he fucked you. Then all the filth came out and I loved it. The memory of it sent a heavy weight between my legs.

*Jesus, don’t think about that.*

I looked down at myself one last time. My black pencil skirt was wrinkle free, my light green blouse didn’t reveal anything it shouldn’t. The color reminded me of Kristoff’s eyes. I’d never admit to anyone that it was precisely the reason I chose it this morning.

I raised my free hand and knocked on his door.

“Enter.” His deep voice washed over me and instantly ignited fire inside me. He affected me even through the closed door. I pushed on the door handle and entered. I found him sitting behind his desk, without his suit jacket, his expensive, blue button-up shirt highlighting his strong shoulders and his beautiful eyes. And his forearms! My heart fluttered at seeing his sleeves rolled up, showing off his muscular arms.

He looked up, his gaze trailing from my black, three inch heels over my bare legs. By the time his gaze met mine, my heart stilled before tugging in a way I started to associate with him. There was something dark behind those eyes and it was pulling me in.

I strode towards him, my knees slightly wobbly. Betty would get a kick out of this one. This man literally made me weak in the knees. I sat the coffee on his desk, careful not to spill it.

“Morning,” I murmured, pushing strands of hair out of my face. It was a habit I could usually control; around him though, it just kept coming back.

“Morning, Gemma,” he replied in his husky voice that shouldn’t be allowed in the professional world. “I emailed you a few files that I need you to go over and organize. I have a few meetings this morning. I want you to be ready at noon. We are going shopping for more clothes and a dress for the event this Wednesday.”

I blinked. It wasn’t what I expected. I was going through something resembling hot flashes here and he was talking about shopping.

“Ummm. That’s unnecessary.” I shoved an unruly piece of hair behind my ear. “I have some dresses, and I did grab one cocktail dress last time I went shopping.”

His lips tugged up.

“I’ve never met a woman that doesn’t like to spend money,” he remarked, shaking his head. “Can’t a man treat you to a shopping spree?”

“You already have,” I reminded him.

Then his lips curved into that smile that made me weak in the knees. “It wasn’t good enough. I should have gone with you and bought out the store. So now, I’ll remedy my mistake and treat you the way you deserve.”

I gaped at this man, unsure what to make of his statement. Albeit, deep inside, I was fairly sure I melted. Just a little.

“Be ready at noon,” he dismissed me, since I was obviously at a loss for words.

He couldn’t just boss me around like that. Right?

“But-” I started, feeling silly to have him accompany me. My late husband never went shopping with me. For anything. “You don’t have to come along,” I offered him a way out. “If you don’t like what I bought and want me to get another dress, I will. I don’t need a chaperone.”

“I want to ensure you have the most beautiful dress for this event,” he said in his deep sexy voice. “And maybe I’d like to watch you try on some

lingerie for me.”

Oh my gosh! I’d totally be down for that if he watched me with that heat in his eyes. I could practically envision how he’d watch me and then take me right there in the store, his hand over my mouth, muffling my moans.

Oh, Lordy. This man was bringing an entirely different woman out of me. Or maybe this version of me was around all along, just waiting for the right man.

I took a deep breath and turned around to leave his office. Before I closed the door behind me, I glanced at him and noticed he went right back to doing his thing on his laptop.

While my emotions were all over the place, this man appeared unaffected.

---

A SHADOW FELL over my desk and I raised my head. Kristoff stood by me, his hand outstretched. “Let’s go.”

My eyes flickered to the clock on the wall. Noon.

“Still adamant about doing this, huh?” I half-joked.

No answer. Just a clear order in his eyes. I exhaled, clicked save, closed the spreadsheet I was working on, and grabbed my handbag.

I sighed, rising to my feet. “Okay, I’m not ready, but I have a feeling that’s not what matters here.”

“Sounds like you’re complaining.” Amusement passed over his face, and I rolled my eyes.

Both Kristoff and I glanced at Kimberly who watched us curiously, an odd expression in her eyes. Then her lips curved into a smile, as if she figured something out.

“Is there anything I can do for you while I’m out?” I offered. “We won’t be long, I don’t think.”

“Don’t wait for us, Kim,” he told her. “You can head out early if you want.”

Then his eyes came back to me, waiting for me to get moving, like he worried I’d change my mind, so I walked past him.

He caught up, his possessive hand found its way to my lower back, and guided me to the elevator. It was a simple gesture but I loved it.

Walking out of his building, the warm June breeze swept through the street. The faint floral scent of cherry blossoms fragrancd the air. The sounds of vehicles and the city buzzing with life surrounded us. Yet, the only thing I was aware of was my drumming heart and his firm warm palm on my back.

We walked side by side down the sidewalk, appearing like a couple more than the boss with his employee, until we arrived at a store I'd never heard of. The moment the door chimed and eyes darted our way, spotting us, a saleslady rushed towards us. Her eyes traveled clinically over me, then shifted to Kristoff. I watched as her expression transformed to one of seduction. It was like I ceased to exist, and I had a feeling if those two were alone, she'd jump his bones.

I didn't like it. I wanted to claw her eyes out, surprising myself at my own violence. I'd never been a particularly jealous type. When women chased after Jack, even before he finally cheated on me, I didn't feel the need to claim him and act possessive.

Yet at this moment, I wanted nothing more than to cling to his arm and rub myself against him so the sales lady would get a clear picture.

The old me would have brushed it off. Apparently the new me had different ideas. I reached for Kristoff's hand and slipped my fingers between his. He stilled and his gaze flicked my way, but then his fingers tightened around mine and pulled me closer to him. It was disturbing how much I liked it.

"Hello, Mr. Baldwin," the sales woman purred, not even sparing me another glance. "Lovely to see you again."

Oh, so he did this frequently. Jackass! I disliked the feeling of being ignored, and even more, I disliked that she was batting her eyelashes at him. Being jealous was definitely against the contract, not that I signed it.

He didn't seem affected by her smile, because his answer was all business. "We'll need your cocktail dress selection and business wear."

The saleslady looked me over and answered, "Of course. I'm sure I can find something that could fit her. She's not as tall and thin as our usual sizes."

I cocked my eyebrow at such brashness. *Bitch.*

“You’re right,” Kristoff agreed and my head snapped his way ready to kill him. “She’s perfect.”

A soft gasp escaped me, his words making a puddle out of me. He didn’t look my way but the look he gave the woman was clear displeasure. *I guess he put her in her place*, I gloated a tad bit too happily and childishly.

It wouldn’t be until much later I realized that my downfall had begun and my heart already belonged to him.

“Of course.” She forced a smile, glancing my way. She hated my guts.

“Will you be needing anything for yourself, Mr. Baldwin?” She returned her eyes to Kristoff, her voice suggestive. She tried too hard, her motives clear as day. I didn’t spare the woman another glance and neither did he, all his attention on me. It was so tempting to wrap my hands around his large biceps and press my body against his.

*He thinks I’m perfect*, I thought giddily.

“No, thank you.” His voice portrayed boredom and annoyance.

“Right this way then.”

She turned around and extended her hand toward the back of the store, then walked ahead of us. I just couldn’t resist letting a huff pass my lips. Glancing at Kristoff, I couldn’t resist rolling my eyes. It wasn’t Kristoff’s fault that the woman was falling all over herself to get noticed by him, but I couldn’t help it.

As we walked, my hand remained in Kristoff’s and our fingers interlocked.

“Do you need anything, Mr. Baldwin?” I whispered sarcastically under my breath, as I batted my lashes.

“Are you jealous?” he teased, humor coloring his voice and a flash of light in his eyes.

“I’m not,” I retorted too quickly. Realizing my mistake, I continued, “I’m just disgusted at that behavior from a woman.” I was totally jealous and he knew it. The feeling burned through my veins and flared in my chest. The smart woman in me fought it, the wanton thrived and wanted to lay claim.

So goddamn confusing.

We stopped in the private section in the back of the store decorated with comfortable loveseats and refreshments. The mood was relaxed with the soft tunes playing through the speakers. The lady twisted around and turned her eyes to Kristoff again.



“Can I get you anything?” she asked while looking at Kristoff only. I narrowed my eyes on her, annoyed at her rudeness. She was getting on my last nerve, the immature part of me wanting to throw a fit and demand we leave right now.

Kristoff’s eyes darted to me with a raised brow, questioning if I wanted anything.

“Nope, I’m good, thanks,” I answered politely. He shook his head at the woman.

“Okay,” she answered, her smile still on her face. “Take a seat. I’ll grab some things and you can tell me what you think.”

When she was gone, I sat down on the sofa, slightly agitated with the woman and myself. I didn’t like my reaction at all. It was easier when you just didn’t care. Apparently, I cared too much, which was alarming.

Kristoff sat down next to me, crossing his ankle over his knee, then threw his arm around my shoulder. I could feel his warmth and wanted to scoot even closer to him then lean my head on his shoulder. Thankfully I didn’t go that far, but I felt my body relaxing and enjoying his heat.

“What’s the matter?” he demanded to know.

“I’ve gotten a cocktail dress already.” *And this jealousy was killing me.* “You haven’t even seen it, so why can’t you at least give it a chance?” I answered, agitated more at myself than him. “And I’m not wearing something I don’t like. Regardless of how much you like it.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed. “I’m sure the dress you got is great, but there will be a significant number of people there and I want you to look beautiful.”

“Geez, don’t you think the wax and hair cut already took care of that?” I just couldn’t resist the jab, my lips curving into a smile.

I swear, the way his eyes sparkled, he must have been laughing at me without cracking a smile.

The saleslady came back with a beaming smile and clothes in her arms. She must have gotten an attitude adjustment while away.

“Okay, I took a guess at your size. I’d say you are a size four.” I nodded, slightly impressed she was able to tell my size just by looking at me. “Ready to try these?”

“No, not really,” I said, but got up and went into the dressing room nonetheless. I wasn’t in the mood to try on clothes.

The dress shopping marathon started, and the longer it went on, the more annoyed I grew. It wasn't enjoyable at all. Kristoff examined me with an analytical eye as I was paraded out after each dress. He noticed everything, the cut, the style, the fabric. God, you'd think he was a fashion designer, not a businessman.

When Kristoff really liked a dress, his eyes would flash, displaying desire, and my body would heat up in response. I almost wished he would cave in and take me right here. I played with fire, allowing my body to move slower and more sensual.

Then I'd remind myself, I was a responsible woman. An adult. And mentally slapped myself, hoping to gain some sense back. It didn't work.

"Turn around again," he would order, his voice deepening.

He would stand up each time he liked a dress on me, coming closer. He'd take my hand, turn me around to see the dress better. Or maybe it was to see me better, because his stare was hot on me. I wasn't sure if he actually noticed the dress.

"I like it," he drawled, his voice like smooth whiskey. "Do you like it?"

And each time I would nod, because when he was looking at me like that, I didn't care what I wore. If he'd ask me to try on lingerie now, I'd be tempted to say yes just to see that look in his eyes. Heck, when he was looking at me like that, I could barely remember my own name.

But even I had my limits. Three hours into trying on way too many dresses, I was just done, but the saleslady kept coming back with more dresses.

"I think that's enough," I said, pleading with my eyes. "I don't think I have tried so many dresses in my entire life."

"But you look fabulous in every single one of them," the saleslady beamed, as she assisted with the zip-up. She adjusted the way it clung to my body. Her attitude switched to sales mode.

"Great," I said in a dry tone.

And then I just couldn't hold my tongue anymore. "C'mon, Kris, just pick the dress you want me to wear for Wednesday's event, and let's move on."

I froze, realizing I'd assigned him a nickname. "Kris, huh?"

"It came out of nowhere," I justified myself.

"I like it," he said. "But only you can call me that."

Unsure whether this was going in the right or wrong direction, I nodded, then asked, "Can we go now?"

He chuckled, the sound doing strange things to me. "Don't you want to have more clothes? Women can never have enough clothes... or so I'm told."

"I guess I'm not like most women."

"Obviously."

I met his gaze with the challenge in my eyes. "Next time, just get me the clothes you want me to wear by yourself, since you know my size now... I'd rather have my teeth pulled without anesthesia than do this again."

He smiled and then reached out for me.

"So cranky," he teased softly. The saleslady had just returned, with another dress.

"How about this one?" the saleslady asked with a bright, suggestive smile at Kristoff.

I was just about to protest, when he asked, "Try one more." God, what that man's voice did to me. "For me, please."

And just like that, I agreed and returned into the dressing room, melting on the inside at his request. Sanity check was in order.

The moment I slipped into the dress and caught a glance of myself in the mirror, my breath caught in my throat. Despite hours spent changing and parading along with my frustration, right now as I stared at myself in this elegant gown, I couldn't help but feel beautiful. The contrast of pearl white against the black accented my figure that filled up nicely since I started working for Kristoff. Amazing what regular meals did for a woman's body.

There wasn't a woman that didn't fuss about their prom dresses or wedding dresses, hoping to achieve that princessy feel, if even for a day. Staring at myself now, it was exactly how I felt. On my wedding day, I felt like a beautiful princess until Jack ruined it.

And now-

"Let me see, Gemma," Kristoff called, his voice close and my train of thoughts came to a halt. He stood in front of the fitting room door.

*Will he like it*, I wondered. I really loved the dress and I wanted him to like it. Stupid? Yes. I didn't need his approval. But the dress was way too pricey for me to afford it, and I didn't want to give it up. *Maybe I could sell*

*my liver for it*, I mused to myself, unable to peel my eyes from the reflection staring back at me.

"I'm coming in," he warned, his voice deep. He slipped through the curtain and my eyes met his gaze in the mirror, my palms nervously smoothing across the soft material of the beautiful gown.

"Do you like this one?" I whispered. I should send him out, act appalled that he dared to enter the fitting room. I didn't; I wanted to hear him say he liked the dress and get it for me. It was so insignificant and materialistic, shallow even. I just wanted it for *myself*.

"Turn around." His tone was quiet, his hand gently snuck around my waist. "Slowly," he instructed. I followed his instruction, holding my breath. The dress brushed against his suit, his hand on my body. *Please don't ruin it for me*, my mind whispered.

"Put your arm on my shoulder," he rasped.

I did as he asked, feeling sexy. Desirable. This man managed to take my breath away every time he looked at me. Like I was priceless, and he couldn't get enough of me.

My eyes locked on his hard beautiful face, his hand running over my hip and up. When he got to my bust, his hand dipped around my back, and applied pressure, making me step closer to him. Our bodies flush, he dipped his head down, bringing his lips close to mine while my heart drummed in my chest erratically.

His lips ghosted down my neck, showering kisses down to my collarbone. I pressed my body against his, and a moan escaped my lips when I felt his gentle bite on my collarbone.

"I jerked off twice yesterday," he rasped against my skin. "Thinking about you. Knowing how soft your lips are as you moan my name. Remembering how your pussy clenches around my cock, hungry for me."

My skin ignited from the inside, my pulse beat at the maddening pace.

He unzipped the dress, gently pushing it off my shoulders and down my arms.

"I love the dress," he murmured. My lips curved with delight and he gave me his roguish smile. "I'm going to corrupt you, beautiful," he purred, his voice full of seduction.

The memory of the last time he touched me rushed through my veins and warmth hummed between my legs. He helped me out of the dress, his

eyes burning with fire that would consume me in the most delightful way. He took the dress and handed it to the sales lady waiting outside.

“We’ll take this one, and the others I put aside,” he told her. “And the lingerie I selected for my woman. Put them on my account. I’ll be up to sign in a moment.”

My heart pounded hard at his claim. I should correct him; tell him I wasn’t his. Yet, the words refused to leave my lips, my heart beating with excitement at the possibility of being his. Just *his*.

Left only in my bra and panties, his eyes roamed my body as every fiber of me quivered with need. I could hardly breathe. His stare caressed my skin sending sparks of fire down to my French manicured toes.

“K-Kristoff, we can’t do it here,” I breathed out, knowing full well I wanted to do it here. My pussy throbbed, needing him inside me.

“We can.” His voice drifted to a dark rasp, sending shivers down my spine. He took a step forward, I took a step back, the sitting bench hitting the back of my knees. “Sit down and spread those beautiful legs for me,” he demanded.

I gasped, pleasure blazing a path to my core hearing his words. My body obeyed, opening my legs wide for him. Slipping his hands down my body, over my breasts, he cupped one and squeezed over my white, lacy bra while his other continued its path down to my core. The moment his hand brushed over my pussy, the thin material of my panties the only thing in the way, I exhaled.

“You are ready for me,” he rasped. Jesus, it would seem I was always ready for him. “Your pussy is hot and wet, eager for my tongue.”

A throaty whimper escaped me, the entire world fading into a background noise that didn’t matter. He kneeled down in front of me, pulled my panties down my legs, and wrenched my thighs further apart. I watched him through heavy lids, his head dipping down. He inhaled deep, then ran his nose over my clit.

“Kristoff,” I whimpered, my hands flew to his hair. Lifting my ass with his palms, he maneuvered me as he ate my pussy, sending me into oblivion one lick at a time. In and out. My eyes rolled back in my head, my body quivering with lust.

He groaned low in his throat, sending a vibration through my core and I rolled my hips, rubbing myself against his mouth. I moaned, grabbing a

handful of his hair and moving my hips at the same time while scraping my nails over his scalp.

His mouth set my entire body on fire, the pressure building on and on as he lapped at me. I was on fire, mindless lust consuming me, making me reckless.

“Fuck,” I rasped as the pressure exploded. I came so hard, my ears rang and I struggled to catch my breath. Like I just ran the most intense marathon. My muscles burned with the most languid heat and then slowly eased, that sated feeling washing over me.

My eyes fluttered open to see his gaze on me, dark and obsessive. And soft. This man made me come. Again. While I could clearly see the bulge in his pants straining for me. I reached out and he shifted up, taking my mouth for a deep kiss.

“I want to reciprocate,” I murmured against his lips, my breathing labored.

He shook his head, then kissed my forehead. “Not yet.”

Men always wanted reciprocation. I might have not had a lot of lovers, but I knew that much.

“You don’t want to get off too?” I rasped, my heart thundering.

“I want to slide inside you. Fuck you hard so I can hear your screams for days.” My breath faltered. *He wants me.* But then why-

I frowned with confusion but before I could ask him anything else, he pressed his mouth to my lips.

“At the end of two months, Genevieve- ” His hot breath brushed against mine and I waited.

He never finished the sentence, leaving me confused.

## CHAPTER 24

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# KRISTOFF



I must have lost my mind to have eaten Gemma's pussy in the dressing room of Couture's. Did I regret it? Fuck no. Something in my chest roared at seeing her flushed from the orgasm and her lust-hazed eyes on me.

She was magnificent and all mine. Mine to fuck. Mine to protect.

The event this Wednesday was a black tie affair and I knew, without a doubt, that whatever Gemma wore, she'd be the most stunning woman there. I also knew there was a possibility that my ex would be there and knowing the bitch she was, she'd take Gemma's simple dress and turn it into Cinderella rags. Hence ensuring Gemma had the best the fashion world had to offer. Did I care whether Gemma wore the most expensive dress or not? Fuck no. She had the natural kind of beauty that captured attention. But knowing Jacqueline, she'd try to ridicule her, then I'd have to kill my fucking ex because I'd hate seeing Gemma upset.

Dangerous notion, for sure.

Hence taking Gemma shopping. That and the fact that I wanted to spoil her and give her everything her heart ever desired so after our two months were up, she'd stay. *Willingly.*

Unfortunately, I also knew Gemma was a woman I couldn't buy. So I'd show her how good we could be together. Explosive, unique, amazing. I'd treat her like my queen, because that was what she was.

A fucking queen. She has been carrying her secret and protecting her daughters. It was my turn to protect them all. I intended to take care of them. If she'd only let me.



The sales women fluttered around her while I sat on the sofa, handling business on my phone. I could tell Gemma didn't like people fussing over her. More than once I caught her glancing to the exit door, overwhelmed and annoyed at all the commotion.

Each dress looked even better than the last one. I decided I'd buy out the store. These weren't store brand clothes and each item was unique, never to be seen again. Just like this woman that consumed my every thought lately.

The woman was breathtaking and things I long thought squashed kept surfacing around her. She made me feel. I wanted to make her addicted to me, the way I was to her. I hadn't fucked her since last Friday. My dick hardened each time I thought about her, never mind when she sat on the bench, with her thighs spread open, letting me eat her pussy.

God, she'd never know how hard it was to tell her no. I wanted to shove her down to her knees and push my cock between those red lips, watch her suck me off as tears ran down her face.

Happy tears, of course. But still, I wasn't quite sure Gemma would appreciate my bedroom manners. She seemed too innocent, too vanilla. Yet, she hadn't disappointed me yet.

I wanted to call her my own and have her by my side, regardless of whether she worked for me or not.

This was bound to end badly, for both of us, because I knew there was no chance in hell I was letting her go.

## CHAPTER 25

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



Wednesday came around too quickly. Betty and her boys would sleep over at our place to watch the girls while I went to the event with Kristoff.

It was two in the afternoon by the time I showered and dried off and right on time, my doorbell rang. I quickly pulled on a robe and hurried to the front door to find a team of three ladies standing there, expectantly, with wide smiles on their faces.

“Hello, I’m Diane.” I blinked. The woman was stunning and I couldn’t stop staring, her ebony black hair and fair skin making a striking contrast. Her full lips were too big for her face, but oddly, it made her look even more exotic. “We’re here to get you ready for the event tonight,” she clarified, offering a big, warm smile.

“Kristoff never mentioned you coming,” I commented stupidly.

“He booked me a week ago. Maybe he forgot?” she remarked with a smile. “Either way, we are here to do your hair, makeup, and nails.”

I frowned, not really buying the excuse that Kristoff forgot. The man was a machine. And he thought of everything, and never forgot anything. Though surprisingly, I actually liked that he organized all the logistics for tonight, including the beauty team. I’ve always been the one to take care of it all, and this felt like a nice change. I appreciated the pampering, regardless that this was for a business purpose.

*Kristoff eating your pussy wasn’t pampering for business purposes,* my mind scoffed sarcastically.

Ignoring the whispers in my mind, I stepped aside to allow Diane and her two assistants through the doorway with all their luggage.

“You aren’t moving in, are you?” I joked.

“No, unless you’re offering,” Diane teased with a grin, as her eyes traveled over me clinically. My gaze dropped, hoping she didn’t find me lacking. Though, truthfully it didn’t matter because my boss called me perfect. “Good, I see you are already showered. Let’s make you fabulous. We’ll start with nails.”

I smiled. “You know, I actually had my nails done last week. Maybe we can save some time and-”

“Not to worry,” she cut me off with a smile. “We’ll refresh them.”

Once I led them into my living room, I watched them set up and bring over a chair from the kitchen, hoping we’d be all done before my kids got home. Otherwise, I’d have a disaster on my hands. A table unfolded with massive amounts of makeup in all colors and shades, a separate basket with hair products and tools.

Diane tilted her chin, directing me to sit down.

“Where is the dress?” she asked.

“I hung it upstairs,” I said, standing up to go grab it. She put her hand on my shoulder and gently nudged me down.

“Let’s get you started. I’ll have Leslie go grab it. You just give her directions.”

I directed her into my closet and she was back within seconds, showing the dress to Diane.

“Ah, beautiful,” she beamed while studying the dress. “Just gorgeous. You will outdo all the ladies.”

It didn’t matter whether I would outdo other women because I loved the dress. It made me feel gorgeous. The soft material I knew would hug my curves and leave an open back that revealed nothing, but left plenty to the imagination. The pearl white dress had black straps, the contrast stark and eye-catching. Truthfully, the dress was a timeless piece.

She reached for a black velvet box and handed it to me.

“This is for you,” she said. “Mr. Baldwin gave me this note with it.”

Unfolding the note, I read it and my heart fluttered wildly. It almost felt like getting a little love note. The notion was ridiculous, yet here I was acting like a young girl fanning after the first boy.

*Wear this for me. Code to open the box is messaged to your phone.*  
Unsurprisingly, short and to the point.

I went to grab my phone, while Diane selected her colors and mixed them. Once I had the phone, I returned to the living room and typed in the code Kristoff sent me. The black velvet box opened, and gasps echoed through the living room.

The box contained the most beautiful necklace I had ever seen. Elegant. Shiny. Expensive.

Raising my head, I noted the ladies' widened eyes on the box.

"Jesus," Leslie gaped. "Are those stones real?"

I suspected they were. That man did nothing half-way.

But that wasn't the reason I loved the necklace. It was classy, with a beautiful unique design. Small and medium size diamonds looped along the sides of the necklace until the diamonds became bigger all the way to the center, where lay an emerald teardrop gem that would probably feed a household for many years.

"Let's put it on you, shall we?" Diane suggested. I just nodded, unable to tear my eyes off of it.

Handing her the box, she carefully removed it.

"Geez, I think my hands are shaking," she joked half-heartedly.

"I don't think stones are that breakable," I retorted back. "Unless it's made of glass." And I'd stake my life on it that Kristoff didn't care for anything fake. His cufflinks were made of real metal - whether gold or platinum - and the stones in them were real diamonds.

Lifting my hair, I turned around. She put it around my neck, then reached for something else. I followed her movement to a matching tennis bracelet and a pair of diamond stud earrings. I was so awed by the necklace, I completely missed those.

"Okay," Diane announced, getting back to business. "Now that we know the dress and jewelry, I'm thinking we'll have your beautiful dark hair with those natural auburn highlights up with a few curly strands falling down. That way you will look natural and the necklace and earrings will be visible, accenting your beauty even more."

"Okay," I agreed, feeling like I was getting ready for the biggest day of my life.

Getting right to work, she moved quickly and efficiently. While she worked on styling my hair, her assistants worked on my nails, first

manicure and then pedicure. After hair, Diane moved on to makeup with the same efficiency. Diane and her team expertly took care of everything, which left me nothing to do but think.

“You are a knockout!” An exclamation startled me out of my dark thoughts. I found her studying me with satisfaction in her eyes, then bringing a hand mirror up.

My reflection stared back at me.

“Thanks to your expert hands,” I whispered, my fingers lightly tracing my hair.

“No, my dear. You are a natural knockout, inside and out. And nowadays, that is rare. Now go put that dress on.”

Grabbing the dress, I went upstairs and slipped it on in the master bathroom. The woman in the mirror looked amazing. As I looked myself over in the mirror, turning back and forth, I almost didn’t recognize myself. Diane did a fabulous job. I worried she’d put on too much makeup, but all she did was enhance my best features. The jewelry complimented the dress perfectly. Slipping on the shoes Kristoff bought and with a last look in the mirror, I strode out of the bedroom and the hallway, then climbed down the stairs just in time to hear Betty and all of the kids enter the house.

Instantly, the house buzzed with energy and voices as the little ones rushed through the house. It was like a tornado sweeping through the entire first floor in the form of little feet. The moment they saw me, a heartbeat of silence followed, immediately followed by loud squealing by my daughters. Betty’s boys just rolled their eyes but remained watching too.

“Mom!” Saoirse beamed, clapping her hands. “You look like a princess!”

I smiled. We all loved the princess theme.

“Aww, thank you, baby,” I crooned. “Come and give Mamma a kiss. How was your day?”

“It was good,” Saoirse waved her hand dismissively, her eyes zeroing in on my jewelry. I couldn’t hold back my grin. “Can I have a dress like that too? And the shiny necklace?”

I laughed. So typical of my Saoirse to want the most beautiful and expensive thing there is. I glanced at Betty. Her eyes glistened with tears.

“Oh, Gemma,” she murmured softly. “You look beautiful!”

“Don’t cry,” I said, smiling. “It’s making me feel awkward. Like you are my mother and I’m getting ready to go down the aisle.” Giggles and

laughter filled the house.

Sierra came up to me, her hands tugging on my dress. I lowered myself to my knees and pulled her into a hug. Her little chubby hands wrapped around me and she gave me a big kiss. My little lovebug. “Love you, baby.”

“Love you, Mommy.” She tugged on my necklace. “Pretty.”

I chuckled softly. “Thank you, love. Let’s not pull on it, so it doesn’t break. It’s not mine.”

“Mine?” Her big blue eyes shone hopefully.

“No, but your jewelry is even prettier,” I told her gently.

“Mom, you look great.” Sienna chimed in, a surprised look on her face. I couldn’t blame her; I rarely got dolled up anymore. “Actually, you look better than great! You look beautiful!”

“Thank you, honey.” I stood back up, then leaned over to kiss my eldest’s cheek. She was growing up too fast, turning into a young lady.

My eyes traveled to the living room to find Saoirse already by Diane’s side, asking her a bunch of questions.

“I’m sorry, Diane,” I apologized. “She likes everything new.”

Diane gave me an amused look.

“Don’t we all,” she cracked, eyeing Saoirse. “This one is going to be a knockout when she gets older! Look at those beautiful exotic dark eyes! Her mother’s eyes.” She knelt down and listened to Saoirse who was enthusiastically pointing to the makeup and all her products.

The house buzzed with life and laughter, Betty handing glasses of champagne to Diane, her assistants, and myself.

“Here’s to a night out for Mommy,” she cheered brightly. This was even better than a wedding day.

We clinked our glasses gently and took a sip. The smooth liquid trickled down my throat. Saoirse stood up on the couch, so she could stand next to her big sister. Both leaned closer to me, admiring the necklace, while Sierra wrapped her hands around my legs, burying her face into the dress.

“Mom, is this necklace real?” Sienna asked.

I shrugged. “I think so.”

“I want one too, Mommy,” Saoirse whined. “Can I have one just like yours?” she begged.

“It’s not mine,” I told her. “You have beautiful princess jewelry. Go get it and show us one of your beautiful pieces.”

She shook her head, her fingers brushing over the emerald over and over again.

“The necklace suits you perfectly, Gemma.” Kristoff’s deep voice interrupted the chatter and I whirled around. None of us noticed Kristoff had let himself in. His stride towards us was effortless and sure. My heart sped up, drumming against my ribs. “I knew it’d look beautiful on you.”

He stood tall, handsome. His broad shoulders filled his custom tailored tux perfectly and his emerald cufflinks stark against the dark material matched the stone on my necklace. The look in his eyes coasted down my body, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. God, this man really had a way of making my knees shake.

“The emeralds match your eyes,” I rasped. Those eyes that could burn with ice and fire, sending me into the most amazing heights. While my one hand remained on Sierra still wrapped around my leg, my other went to the necklace. “I won’t lose it,” I promised in a shuddering voice.

“The necklace is yours. You can do whatever you’d like with it, even trash it.” The women around us gasped. “Though, I’d love for you to keep it.” He smiled, his posture relaxed.

One breath. Two breaths.

“Absolutely not. You can’t gift me these,” I stammered. “They must have cost a fortune.” His eyes never wavered from me. The moment of thick tension filled the air and Saoirse broke it, striding to him. She took his big hand and tugged on it. His eyes lowered to her.

“If Mommy won’t take it, don’t worry, I’ll take it,” she assured him with a big smile. “It will go with my dress-ups. I’ll take good care of it.”

Laughter filled the room while she beamed at him, so satisfied to be helping and her eyes shining with hope.

He squatted down, meeting her gaze. “We’ll get you one similar to Mommy’s. Ok?” I heard him promise softly, and Saoirse swooned. I hoped he was joking, though I couldn’t tell for sure.

“Umm, you remember Betty,” I interrupted their exchange. “And these are her boys, David and Jeremy.”

“Nice to see you again, Betty,” he acknowledged her. “And nice to meet you, boys.”

They stuck to their mom, slightly shy. “Hello.”

Diane came to me with a black silk wrap and put it over my shoulders.



“Have a great time, Mom.” Sienna kissed me on the cheek. “If Saoirse is getting the necklace, I want the dress for my prom.” She grinned and her eyes fled to Kristoff. “Deal?”

I chuckled. “We’ll get you your own dress, even better than this one,” I promised. Sierra still held on to my leg so I knelt down to her eye level, although it was difficult in this dress.

“Sierra, sweetheart. Remember how we said Mommy has to go somewhere tonight?” I asked gently. Her baby blue eyes locked on me, the clear skies staring at me. She nodded.

“Betty will stay with you,” I continued. “And Sienna will read you a bedtime story tonight. To you and Saoirse together. I’ll come back late, but before I go to bed, I’ll come to your room and give you a kiss. I promise. When you wake up in the morning, I’ll be here.”

She watched me for a few moments silently, then wrapped her chubby arms around me.

Sienna took her hand gently and Saoirse came over, giving me a big hug. “Love you, Mommy. Will you come and give me a kiss too when you come back?”

“Always,” I murmured, kissing her on the cheek. “I’ll come and give all three of you a good night kiss.” Betty looked at me and mouthed *Go*.

Saoirse went to join Sienna and Sierra. As I started to get up, Kristoff took my hand and helped me.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” I smiled, my heart fluttering. With a final nod and a smile to the group, we strode to the door, his hand on my lower back as we walked outside.

A limo waited for us with a driver. It would be so easy to pretend this was a date with a gorgeous man that made my heart flutter and my body burn.

The driver opened the door.

“I got it, Charles,” Kristoff told him. “Thank you.”

Kristoff took my hand and helped me in. Shutting the door, he came around to the other door and slid next to me. His eyes found mine, shining with something dark and feral, and a shuddering breath escaped through my lips trying to calm my racing heart.

Good God, my boss would be the death of me. In the best possible way. *What that man can do with his mouth!* Yet, insecurity plagued me. Why

didn't he want me to reciprocate? Not that I was much for giving a blow job. Though somehow, I was certain with him, it would be a completely different experience.

"You look stunning." His deep voice penetrated down to my soul.

"Thank you," I said in a breathy voice. "It is all thanks to your team and this dress you bought. You really thought of everything."

His eyes locked on my neck, my pulse visibly pounding.

"No, it's you. Just you," he drawled, his voice like black silk.

"You don't look so shabby yourself," I retorted back. God, he looked hot. Like sin dressed in a suit, tempting you to do wicked things.

He poured a glass of champagne and handed it to me. As I took it, our fingers brushed, sending sparks through my skin. I brought it to my lips, taking a sip. I watched him pour himself a glass of scotch, then bring it to his own lips. This man rattled me to my core. Temptation to lean forward and press my lips against his was strong. I fought the urge to taste the alcohol directly from him.

The silence was heavy as the limo drifted down the highway. Looking out the window, I couldn't help but ponder the irony of life. I was broke just a few weeks ago, contemplating how to buy groceries. And here I was now, riding in a limo with a billionaire, wearing an expensive dress and jewelry that was worth more than my whole year's salary.

I exhaled a deep breath. With my free hand, I smoothed my dress, the silky material soft under my palm. I thought back to Jack and the first piece of jewelry he gave me. It was a ring from the bubble gum machine. We were so broke. Yet, I thought it was such a sweet, romantic gesture. I still had the ring, though the sweet memories turned bitter and uncertainty followed.

Until *that* day.

"I have never met a woman that is as comfortable with silence as you are," Kristoff interrupted my thoughts and my first interview with him came to mind, when silence with him made *me* anxious. My eyes traveled to him. His whole presence screamed money, lots and lots of money. And confidence. So unlike me.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Nothing," I answered, forcing a smile to my lips. He might have compromised on holding me after sex, but I was certain he wouldn't appreciate hearing about my troubled past.

Leaning towards me, he pulled me to him. His lips traced lightly over my bare shoulder and up my neck.

“One day, I hope you will trust me and share your secrets with me,” he whispered against my skin, right below my ear.

I closed my eyes, relishing his hot breath on my skin. I loved his hands on me, his expert touch branding me as his. Maybe if I signed his contract, I’d have him as mine for a little while too. But I knew I’d never trust him enough to share my secret with him. Nobody knew it, not even Rick and Betty.

Yet, sometimes the urge to unburden myself was strong. Just to get it off my chest. The risk was too great and outweighed the benefits. It would cost me my girls.

I shook my head, chasing my thoughts away. I couldn’t let myself fall prey to my dreams and desires. Once the girls were grown, I’d pay for my sins, but not while my girls needed me. I needed to behave responsibly and my body reacted too wildly around him. And signing the contract with this man wasn’t an option, which meant after two months I would no longer be around him.

Despite all the odds against us, I wanted him badly. I enjoyed his company as much as his touch. His interaction with my girls surprised me and made me wish for things I gave up long ago. It was dangerous to go down that same road again; it could only lead to heartbreak. Wishing for his heart and soul was foolish; giving him mine even more so. Wanting this man to share my happiness and sorrows with would be disastrous. He was clear on what he wanted and needed. He just wanted me at his disposal, and I had no intention of being at someone’s disposal like that.

*Except, he held me.* My mind scoffed at that notion. *Crumbs.* Just because he held me, it didn’t mean anything.

With the battle raging inside me, his lips found mine. His kiss was soft, gentle, and the first flicker of devotion settled in my chest. *Stop it,* I thought to myself. It was just loneliness. Kristoff was the first man that touched me like I was the most precious thing in the world.

On one hand, I almost wished the two months were behind me, so I wouldn’t see him again. My self-preservation crumbled around him. Even with Jack, I was always able to keep part of me separate. Kristoff, on the other hand, was consuming each fiber of me effortlessly.

The limo stopped, but Kristoff didn't stop, my hands gripping his tuxedo jacket. Whether to pull him close or push him away, I wasn't certain.

"The door will open any second," I murmured against his lips, my breathing slightly hitched. He pulled away just in time, the door opening the next second.

He got out of the limo, then reached his hand for me, helping me step out.

*So different from Jack who never helped me out of the car,* I compared silently and I hated that I kept doing it. Comparing everything to Jack.

Glancing around, I spotted a plane waiting a few feet away from us with the name Baldwin emblazoned on its side. The busy commotion of the usual airport was non-existent here.

"You have your own plane?" I asked. The question was unnecessary since it was plain as day.

"Yes. It will be much faster this way," he answered.

*Of course, it will be.*

"You should offer your plane to your mom and her friends for their Croatian trip," I suggested, because really what could a person say to someone that owned their own airplane. Back at her birthday party, my heritage came up and long story short, I offered them my parent's place. Lena and her friends would stay there during their visit.

"I did."

With his hand on my lower back, he urged me up the stairs. Once inside, my eyes darted around curiously. My brows furrowed as my eyes bounced around the elegant space. The luxurious and stylish cabin was decorated with comfort in mind. I made my way towards the soft, leather seat in the middle of the cabin while Kristoff took the seat across from me.

The powerful jet engines started up and we softly taxied forward and then came to a stop, prepared for takeoff. Glancing out the window as we sped down the runway, I turned my eyes back to Kristoff.

Whatever '*what ifs*' I had until that moment flew out the window. I didn't belong in his world, and he sure as hell didn't belong in mine. Even if I took my secret out of the equation, his life was so different from mine. We couldn't even compare.

"Is everything alright?" Kristoff's eyes were pensive on me.

I put a smile on my face and looked at those beautiful emerald eyes.

"Never better."

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## CHAPTER 26

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



By the time we arrived, the fundraiser was in full swing. The beautiful estate stretched over roughly five waterfront acres with a large mansion in the center of it.

A large tent stood in the middle of the property, overlooking New York Bay and the city lights on the other side, visible from any location in the tent. Soft classical tunes drifted through the early summer breeze creating a relaxing atmosphere.

Tall cocktail tables scattered to the right of the tent with a large bar set up staffed by four bartenders. Waitresses discreetly conversed, offering drinks to attendees who barely spared them a glance. On the left side of the tent was formal seating, leaving the center of the tent open for mingling, and a few groups already formed into their circles.

And dancing.

Women literally glittered with diamonds and elaborate gowns. Thank God Kristoff ensured my beautiful dress and jewelry because I would have stood out in a bad way if I opted for my simple cocktail dress.

Instead, I felt like a princess.

"I guess we could say we are fashionably late," I whispered, both of us at the entrance, the entire tent stretching in front of us.

"Don't worry," he assured me as he took my hand. "Nothing important starts without us." I side eyed him, a little smirk on his face.

"You're that important, huh?" I teased.

"We are," he drawled. "Be prepared for both men and women to be curious about you. They'll try to be nosy."

“Oh, joy.” *I’ll be on guard.* “I can already see this is going to be a great party,” I murmured softly, slipping my fingers between his as nervous energy rolled down my back. Then I froze, realizing what I’d done.

Kristoff’s fingers tightened around mine as he leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Don’t be nervous,” he rasped. His scent penetrated my lungs, the cologne I would forever associate with him. “Nobody at this party compares to you,” he whispered.

*Nor you,* I wanted to say but remained quiet.

We strode in and heads turned our way. I felt those eyes on us, burning through me and my nerves rattled. Kristoff’s big hand squeezed mine reassuringly and I squeezed back.

An older man with silvery white hair approached us and boasted cheerfully, “Kristoff, welcome!” His eyes flickered my way, then returned to Kristoff. “Thank you for coming. I’m so happy you made it.”

The men shook hands. “Senator Ashford. Nice to see you.” Kristoff’s hand wrapped around my waist. “This is Genevieve Rose.”

“Miss Rose. So happy to have you.”

“Thank you,” I said simply.

He didn’t even bother to spare me a glance. I didn’t care but tension rolled off Kristoff in waves.

“We’ll see you at the D.C. fundraiser, right?” he questioned Kristoff. “Last time you were my biggest donor.”

“I needed a tax write-off,” Kristoff said icily then steered me away from him.

“He’s an ass,” he grumbled. “I shouldn’t have donated to his fucked up campaign. No tax write off is worth it.”

“Why did you then?” I asked him curiously.

His eyes glanced my way. “He’s my friend’s father. I did it mainly for Byron.”

Before I could ponder on it, Kristoff took my shawl from my shoulders and draped it across one of the chairs. My eyes traveled over the people, though I knew Kristoff would be the only familiar face I’d see.

“Want to leave your clutch here?” Kristoff asked in a low voice. I nodded but didn’t put it down yet. Glancing around, I opened it, wanting to check my messages, but I didn’t pull my phone out, unsure how to check it tactfully.



“Why don’t you check your phone to make sure everything is okay?” he suggested and instantly, relief washed over me. For someone that wanted no emotional parts to this contract, he was thoughtful and his care hit me right into my chest. Resisting him would be so much easier if I didn’t like him so much.

If I didn’t *crave* him so much.

Ignoring all the feelings swelling inside me, I quickly pulled out my phone, checked for messages, and saw one from Sienna. Hurriedly, I unlocked it, my shoulders tense. Kristoff’s hand slid down my lower back.

“All good?” he questioned.

A sigh left me as I read the message. “Yes, thank you. Sienna just sent a picture showing they’re all having a good time, and another one of them sleeping.” I smiled, typing a quick love you response. Then I put it away, turning my focus on Kristoff.

Another man approached us with a woman on his arm, I assumed his wife. Introductions were made, and discussions started.

“Ugh, when these men start talking business,” the woman uttered annoyingly, “I just glaze over. Want me to show you around?”

Glancing at Kristoff, our eyes locked and he nodded, then leaned over, pressing a kiss on my cheek.

“Don’t be long,” he whispered softly in my ear.

“I won’t,” I promised.

The next fifteen minutes had to be the longest tour of nothing. Nodding, smiling, and nodding some more. By the time we got back to the men, my cheeks hurt from all the fake smiles.

Kristoff’s arm wrapped around me and my body leaned into him, enjoying the feel of his fingers brushing over the exposed skin of my back and drawing circles in light feathered touches. I leaned back into his touch, the heat of him cocooning me in as the group of men discussed changes in the stock market and the upcoming campaigns.

Their wives didn’t bother commenting on the topic, focusing on the latest fashion shows and upcoming social events that would require a new gown or new jewelry. Their entire life consisted of looking fabulous. And the men watched them as if they were their trophies. I, on the other hand, wasn’t sure if I felt like I was the trophy or if I had a trophy.

A man caught my eye as he approached us. The way he strode towards us, from the black polished shoes, a well-fitted and impeccably tailored

three-piece suit, and all the way to his face and thick, dark hair, spoke of power, money and control. And ruthlessness.

Something about him struck me as familiar and I shifted closer to Kristoff. "Who's that?"

He followed my gaze and his lips tugged up slightly. "A friend. Byron Ashford."

"Ah, no wonder he looked familiar," I muttered. "Betty shared their school pictures once or twice."

His features became clearer as he got closer - beautiful lips, a jawline that spoke of determination, thick, dark hair that was kept short.

"Kristoff," he greeted him, his voice deep and raspy. His eyes glanced my way, giving me a slight nod in acknowledgement. The man was freaking gorgeous; everything about him screamed class, wealth, and superiority. Much like Kristoff, though my heart didn't flutter at all around this guy.

"Byron." Kristoff's arm was still around my waist. "This is Gemma Rose," he introduced me. "Gemma, this is the friend I told you about. Byron Ashford."

"I hope you didn't tell her the bad shit about me," Byron joked as he stretched out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Miss Rose."

I swallowed, despite the fact that he seemed to go out of his way to make me comfortable. Something about the way his eyes locked on me had my stomach clenching. Almost as if he could see my dark secret and had many more himself.

"Thank you," I rasped, accepting his handshake.

His grip was firm, although not too tight to hurt. "We have a mutual friend," he continued, since it would seem I couldn't find anything smart to say. "I've heard so much about you."

Shifting uncomfortably, my eyes flickered to Kristoff. He regarded me with a cautious expression.

I smiled, though I didn't need a mirror to know it was my reserved smile. "Yeah, Betty's great."

"How are you enjoying the party so far?" he asked, nodding to the men that kept greeting him. But his eyes never wavered from me and I found myself taking a step closer to Kristoff. The move didn't go unnoticed by his friend.

"Fine, thank you," I murmured, unsure what it was about this man that made me feel slightly on edge. It was as if he knew all of my secrets and

wouldn't hesitate to use them against me. Kristoff's vibe wasn't quite as ruthless. There was no mistake that he went after what he wanted, but somehow, I didn't get the feeling he'd crush someone along the way. Byron Ashford's vibe... not so much.

"Your father is here," Kristoff interrupted the uncomfortable exchange. "In all his usual glory."

Byron's eyes barely flickered, but a hard gleam entered them before it was gone.

"Will we see you at his D.C. fundraiser coming up?" he questioned both of us.

I tilted my head in Kristoff's direction who just nodded, then answered, "We'll be there. Your sister good?"

It was then that Byron's face transformed and I'd bet everything I owned, he was a protective brother. Without a doubt, I knew he'd move heaven and earth to keep his sister safe and that suddenly made him approachable.

"Yes, thank you. She's working a case in New Orleans. But she's going to get herself in trouble digging too deep," he grumbled. Kristoff cocked his eyebrow in surprise. "I'd get her fired if I didn't think she'd hang me upside down by my balls and then force me to get her re-hired."

I couldn't help a chuckle that escaped me and Byron's eyes met mine, an amused expression in them.

"Do you think I deserve such torture, Gemma?" he inquired, his deep voice stern with a hint of amusement behind it.

I stifled a grin. "Of course not. Unless, you've done something to deserve it."

A smirk formed on his face. I could see how women would be falling all over themselves for this guy. He didn't do it for me, but maybe it was because my time with Kristoff has already burned all my fuses. One hot man in my life was quite enough.

"Kristoff, better keep Gemma away from Aurora. She'll be a bad influence and they'll gang up on us."

There was a commanding presence about this man that reminded me of Kristoff. Though I couldn't quite pinpoint the reason behind it.

"Have you two known each other for a long time?" I asked curiously, my eyes darting back and forth, then finally staying on Kristoff.

"We served a tour in the Middle East together," Kristoff answered.

“Kristoff was my commanding officer when I joined,” Byron chimed in.

I recalled reading about Kristoff’s service in the military. “Special Forces, right?” Surprise flashed across both their expressions. “What?” I asked defensively, meeting Kristoff’s eyes. “Ignorance is not bliss. And after our one conversation, it was only fair. You know everything about me, so I might as well know *something* about you.”

Kristoff’s one eyebrow rose, his eyes studying me as if deciding whether he was happy or not about this new revelation.

“How long ago?” Kristoff asked casually, though I could sense tension rolling off him and a hint of vulnerability lingered in those green depths.

“Umm, after the first dinner,” I admitted. He instantly relaxed and realization struck me. He worried my rejection came because of what I found out about him. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and tell him no public opinion would ever make me change my mind about him.

But there were too many people around here to be open like that, and I wasn’t sure that he’d accept it.

The rest of the group turned their attention to us and the conversation shifted to business. I took comfort in Kristoff’s hand around my waist and his soothing touch, as I observed the men interact. The majority of them looked to Kristoff and Byron for business advice, the two of them commanding attention. Not only with their height and strength, but their presence.

“Do you play the stock market, Miss...” One of the men addressed me and I flicked a surprised look his way. So far, the men avoided speaking to me with the exception of Byron.

I shook my head. “It’s Gemma. And no, I don’t play the stock market. It is too close to gambling for my taste.” Besides, you needed money to play the stock market, but I kept the words to myself.

“Ah, right you are, Gemma.” The men chuckled, their eyes on Kristoff and I. “Smart woman. That’s rare these days, beauty and brains,” he commended, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. My face flushed at the compliment.

“Of course, it would be Kristoff that would find that,” Senator Ashford drawled, his eyes cold on me.

“He didn’t find me,” I retorted, my body shifting slightly toward Kristoff. I didn’t like Senator Ashford at all. “I found him.”

While the men seemed amused, it didn't escape me how they watched both of us like hawks. As if they were looking for any hints of deceit or something they could hold against him.

"How about a dance?" Kristoff suggested.

Nodding, I let him lead me to the little dance floor. The soft tunes of a country song played and a few couples slow-danced. Kristoff's hand wrapped around my waist and I followed his lead, our bodies moving together. Maybe it was the song or maybe it was the setting, but as we swayed together to tunes of Gabby Barrett "The Good One", something deep down in my soul whispered the words and attached them to this man.

The breeze swept off the bay, cooling my heated skin. I focused on the sounds of the waves in the distance, the soft sounds in perfect tune with the music, while sounds of voices faded in the background. All I could hear was the song and the sound of the water softly lapping against the shoreline.

"Thank you for coming with me." I raised my head to meet Kristoff's eyes. Was he one of the good ones? My heart thought so but I couldn't be sure.

"You're welcome." I didn't bother pointing out that it was my job. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that Kristoff *wanted* me here.

"You're a good dancer," I complimented him.

"Only when I have a good partner," he retorted as his mouth brushed against my cheek and I had to bite the inside of my cheek or risk a moan slipping through my lips. "The most beautiful dance partner."

God, he might be one of the good ones. At least on the dance floor and with his attentiveness that I loved.

The song ended and changed into another one. But my body buzzed with different kinds of adrenaline. The only thing I could feel and hear was this man.

"Every man's eyes are on you," he rasped. "But your eyes are only on me."

I couldn't look away from him. Everything about him captivated me in the best way possible. It scared me and thrilled me at the same time. I feared it would be so effortless to fall for this man who had ghosts of his own and certainly didn't need mine.

So instead of saying anything else, I pressed my face against his chest and inhaled his scent deep into my lungs. *It will all be alright*, my heart

whispered.

Then why did I already sense pain on the horizon?

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## CHAPTER 27

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# KRISTOFF



Gemma smiled at Byron, miming vividly with her hands and whatever she was explaining had my friend throwing his head back and laughing out loud.

I didn't exaggerate when I told her every man watched her. Hungry, curious glances. I watched the entire evening. She didn't attempt to flirt with anyone. Her smiles were reserved and her posture cautious. Though with Byron she was a bit more relaxed.

Yes, I was fucking jealous.

Considering my past, I was probably way beyond jealous. Obsessively so. I wanted to go to Byron and punch him in the face so his face wouldn't be so fucking pretty. The only thing stopping me was that Gemma kept glancing my way.

She was seated opposite of me and it pissed me off that she wasn't seated next to me. She was too far away from me. I wanted her leg pressed against mine.

"You look like you're ready to murder Byron for making your girl smile." My jaw tightened at the familiar voice behind me. I barely spared Jonathan, my old friend, a glance.

"I'm going to murder you, unless you are at least hundred feet away from my date." My voice was cold, but dark around the edges.

Jonathan sucked his teeth, as if annoyed. He'd be less annoyed when he was dead.

"She's a pretty little thing," he remarked pensively. "I wouldn't take her for your type, but clearly she is since you've barely kept your eyes off her."



My hand twitched, the fucking silverware so fucking close to my fingers. I could just stab him *accidentally*. Killing him out in the open wouldn't be acceptable.

"Get fucking lost, Jonathan," I warned, as I stood up. I had enough seeing Gemma smile at Byron. I'd end up punching two men tonight.

"I think I'm going to bid on her," he drawled, eyeing her like she was a piece of candy.

Anger burned in my throat and worked its way down my chest. I was too fucking old for this shit. I turned to leave, but... *fuck it*. I wanted to see if I still got it.

"Jonathan?"

"Yeah?"

I turned to face him and punched the fucker's face, wiping his smirk off.

"She won't be up for bid," I gritted as shocked gasps filled the table.

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GEMMA'S soft eyes watched me, though she had yet to comment on my behavior. Jesus, it had been decades since I threw a punch. Actually, come to think of it, it was Jonathan who I punched the last time too.

For betraying me.

I suspected my ex-wife was cheating, but I never expected it was with my best friend.

Most of society knew about the history between Jonathan and me so they went about as if nothing had happened. Before he could say another word that would get him beaten senseless, I strode around the table to snatch my date out of Byron's spell.

The shock on Gemma's face was plain as day.

"Are you okay?" Escaped wisps of Gemma's dark strands framed her face. Fuck, she was beautiful. So fucking beautiful that it stole my breath.

We danced to some corny song I didn't recognize. It had too much beat to it. I preferred the country song earlier to this pop song.

"Yes." My answer was too clipped. Too cold.

Her dark brows furrowed before she nodded without saying anything else. I wasn't sure if I liked it or not. Somehow, I got the sense that Gemma

learned how not to argue and let things go. I didn't want her to let anything go - no matter how small or big.

"Who was that guy you-" she searched for the right word, "-that you had the disagreement with?"

That was a delicate way to put it. "A weasel. I don't want him anywhere near you."

"Oh."

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer came through the speakers. "Let's put the dancing on pause. Our auction will start momentarily."

Gemma turned towards the announcer. She didn't step away, but she felt so fucking far away. I wanted to pull her into me and keep her glued to me. But I settled for putting my hand around her waist and pulled her an inch closer to me. Thankfully, she didn't resist it.

"We made a small change," the speaker said. I didn't give a shit what they had to auction. I'd write them a check on my way out. I didn't need their junk. "We will have certain ladies for you to bid on for a dance or two for the rest of the night." He chuckled, the sound grating on my nerves. "As you all know, all proceeds go to returning wounded soldiers and their families."

A round of applause filled the air. Fuck, I was ready to get the hell out of here. My eyes traveled over the room, everyone focused on the announcer. Except for one pair of eyes. Jonathan's. Those were on me.

Before I had a chance to ponder on it, the speaker continued.

"Our first lady that you all can bid on is Genevieve Rose."

The spotlight flashed on her and me, since I held onto her like I was scared someone would take her away from me.

Gemma's head whipped up, her eyes widening, then darting to me. Her confusion must have mirrored my own. I'd never put my woman up for a bid.

"There she is, ladies and gentlemen. We'll start the bid at-"

"A million." Jonathan cut him off.

Over my dead goddamn body.

"Two million," I said, shooting Jonathan a try-to-take-her-and-I'll-kill-you look.

"Three million." I'd kill that goddamn man and make it look like an accident.

"Five million," I gritted.

“What’s going on?” Gemma whispered, her smile frozen on her lips as her eyes ping-ponged between Jonathan and I.

“Six million.” Byron joined in the bid. Are you fucking kidding me?

“Ten million.” I’d win this bid at all costs. Nobody would touch this woman but me.

“Eleven million.” I narrowed my eyes on Byron who would find himself dead unless he backed the fuck off.

“Twelve million.” Some other miserable fucker decided to play too. This was not my idea of how this evening should have gone. My date would remain with me, and if any of them tried to take her, I’d beat them senseless.

“Thirteen million.” Byron would pay for this shit. If he came up with this shit auction idea, I’d drop him in the fucking desert and leave him there to sunbathe.

“Fourteen million.” Gasps sounded around the room, Gemma’s eyes widened as her head swiveled from me to Byron and back to me. I didn’t even think she realized her hand was clutching my suit, her knuckles turning white. Goddamn Jonathan. I’d kill him. No reason to give him a chance to survive a desert. Fuck!

To hell with all of them. “Twenty-five million.”

This created a frenzy with the audience. But at least these fuckers stopped bidding on Gemma. She watched me wide-eyed and I drowned in her soft brown gaze as the auctioneer closed out the bid for her. He moved onto the bid for the next woman starting at a hundred thousand, but I tuned it all out. Gemma was the only one I’d ever bid on.

“What? How?” Gemma struggled to find the words. “Please tell me that’s not twenty-five million dollars for real.”

God, the way her eyes glittered, pulling me under her spell. You could get lost in her dark whiskey gaze.

“It’s just money.”

She paled. “Just money?” she whispered, shocked. “It’s a buttload of money.”

I pulled her closer to me, her breasts brushing against my suit. It wasn’t close enough. I needed so much more from her.

“It’s for a good cause,” I rasped, skimming my mouth over her soft skin. “And I won’t tolerate someone else dancing with you. I want your every dance.” *For the rest of your life.*

The words slammed into my brain and fucking shocked me. I let out a sardonic breath, hating that it had finally happened to me. I wanted one thing that had been refused to me my entire life. A real fucking family. My parents' marriage was a joke. Fighting and screaming. Cheating. Scenes and scandals.

And then I got a taste of my own disaster with my ex. Cheating. Scandal. Destruction.

Until one good thing came out of it. Or I thought.

Turns out, that good thing belonged to someone else. My best friend. Fucking bastard.

Yet, here it was, the woman that felt better than heaven. She felt like home. Like family. She was everything I had ever wanted. And ironically, she held herself back. All my wealth didn't seem to tempt her.

Maybe I'd blackmail her into signing that contract. Blackmail her into staying with me. Keep her with me until she could see the same thing I could. For her and her girls, I'd burn down the world. I'd do anything to make her *mine*.

"Kristoff." Gemma's soft voice penetrated through the revelation and obsession.

"Hmmm."

"Should we dance?" Her eyes darted around us and I realized the auction had finished. They probably raised more than ever before with the first bid. The dance floor slowly filled and music played. "Since you paid twenty-five million for a dance."

My lips curved. "I'd love to."

If she only knew, I'd pay double for her. Triple. I'd give her anything. The whole goddamn world. As long as she was mine. *Forever*.

Our bodies moved together, her small form fitting against my big one perfectly. The song sounded vaguely familiar but I couldn't fucking concentrate on anything but this woman. The way she smelled. The way she felt against me. The way her breasts brushed against me with each breath she took.

"Are you upset?" Her voice had me lowering my head to meet her gaze. Fuck, those lips tempted me. I leaned down, nibbling her lips.

"Never," I murmured softly. "As long you're dancing with me," *and fucking me*, "I could never be upset." *As long as you're mine*.

She chuckled softly. “For all that money, you deserve all my dances for the rest of our lives.” Her cheeks flushed, as if she just realized how that sounded. I fucking loved it when she blushed and I loved the insinuation even more. “Umm, I love this song.”

I didn’t even fucking notice the song. Just her. I lived and breathed this woman. A single taste of her and I was hooked for life. Now I just had to ensure she was too.

Listening to the lyrics, I recognized the Jason Aldean song “Got What I Got,” and fuck if it didn’t describe me with this woman. With her, there was no wishing to turn back time and have someone else. I didn’t miss anyone and anything before her. She was everything I’d ever need and want.

In a matter of weeks, she had inched herself into my heart. Reluctantly, but firmly.

I buried my face in the crook of her neck, inhaling her scent. It was so uniquely her. My one hand wrapped around her, my palm on the small of her back, we moved together. Slow. Just the two of us and nobody else in this whole fucking place mattered.

Just her.

*I’ll give her and her girls the world, I vowed. I’ll make her mine. I’ll make her happy.*

“I do too,” I murmured into her ear. I felt her body shudder under my palm and she leaned into me, tilting her neck slightly to allow me better access. It made me want to pound my chest and shout to the entire world ‘*Mine.*’ “Because I’ve got you.”

Everyone’s eyes were on us, but I couldn’t peel my eyes from the beautiful woman in my arms.

Because I had all I had right here. In my arms.

## CHAPTER 28

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# GENEVIEVE



This man. This song. This dance.

The past drifted away, leaving me with the man who could fill my heart or tear it apart. And still, I let myself feel. Feel him and the song. Goosebumps danced over my skin and I raised my eyes to meet his and drowned in his gaze. At this very moment, I felt like I had it all while in his arms. The way he looked at me.

Jesus.

He paid twenty-five million dollars to ensure I danced only with him. I didn't know whether I should think him crazy or fall at his feet and see where this would take us. If only it wasn't so scary to feel something so strong. Deep down, I sensed this man could shatter me.

Kristoff's lips brushed against mine and a shiver ghosted down my spine. Would it be wrong to have him? Just for a few moments that would be mine forever. He'd forget me eventually, but I'd never forget him.

"All your dances are mine," he murmured, his lips moving against mine, and like in daze, and I nodded. I wanted to give him everything, but it scared me that I wanted to take everything from him too. "Yes, I like that. You're *mine*."

Love. Affection. Attachments. His everything.

The song ended and it was like waking up from a dream. My brain was still lost in a haze of hopes and dreams when a voice came from behind me.

"Miss Rose, you have outdone all our previous fundraisers and I have a feeling none of our future auctions will compare." I turned my head to find Byron's eyes on us, his hands casually in the pockets of his impeccable suit.

“Thank you for not refusing. One of our other guests entered you at the last minute without permission.”

Byron’s cold gaze flicked to the man Kristoff had punched earlier and then returned to Kristoff whose expression darkened.

“No worries.” My eyes darted back to the man that seemed to have pissed off Byron Ashford, but nothing about him seemed familiar. A few other couples joined to congratulate us, although I wasn’t sure on what. So I just nodded and smiled, as Kristoff’s hand remained possessively on my waist.

These fluttering, fragile feelings made no sense, yet I loved them. Women threw greedy, hungry gazes his way but he never even acknowledged them. If he even noticed them. Instead, his eyes always came back to me, as if he wanted to ensure I was still his. This was so damn confusing, especially at my age.

“I’m going to use the ladies’ room,” I told him softly, excusing myself. I needed to think. Breathe. When I was around Kristoff, he took all my oxygen and became my sustenance.

As I caught my reflection in the mirror, it felt like someone else was staring back at me. When I first tried on the dress, I felt like a princess. But here, I felt like an imposter. I didn’t belong in this world, among the rich and elusive.

I had never compared myself to this high-class society before. Before Kristoff. But after entertaining the idea of Kristoff and me, letting the what-ifs brew inside me, self-doubt and uncertainty curled in my chest.

My experience with Jack left deeper scars than I realized.

I couldn’t be more different than these people. Money, power, and wealth was all that mattered here. I had none of it. Truthfully, I didn’t want any of it, just enough to survive. But somehow Kristoff was inching his way into my soul. I *ached* for him, to feel him against me, his reassuring palm on the small of my back. This couldn’t end well, yet I didn’t know how to stop it.

Scratch that. I knew how to stop it, but I wasn’t certain that I wanted to. The idea of going back to just surviving, without his touch, made me feel hollow. Empty. I had my girls and they were my life, but the touches he offered, they were just for me. Then there was the fact that my girls liked Kristoff a lot and grew closer to him each time they saw him. They’ve barely met him and he’d already left an impression.



I sighed heavily and finished washing my hands, then stepped out of the bathroom. I decided to walk back to our table, not really in the mood for socializing. As I walked towards our table, a woman cut in front of me. A gorgeous woman. Her long, golden mane fell in waves down her back. Her body was slim and toned; tall like a model. My eyes connected with her face, not a single imperfection on it. Except her eyes. They were the coldest blue, almost cruel.

I couldn't shake the feeling there was something familiar about her as I attempted to sidestep her but she followed the movement, blocking my way.

"Excuse me," I muttered, annoyed.

She stepped closer and I fought the urge to take a step back. Another step, and my eyes flared to her. She was so close now that I could see faint wrinkles around her eyes. She was not as young as I'd originally thought. Probably in her early to late forties, although whatever she was using helped to slow her aging.

"So, you're here with Kristoff, huh?" The venom and hatred in her voice was unmistakable. "I see he's lowered his standards."

My eyebrows cocked, taken aback by her comment. Her breath smelled of alcohol and memories slammed to the forefront of my mind.

"Get out of my way," I hissed, the memories of Jack raw, as I attempted to sidestep her again. Memories of my last encounter with Jack hit me like a tsunami.

*Not now*, I told myself. *Don't think about it now*. Taking deep breaths, I tried to calm my racing heart.

She mirrored my movement, her hand grabbing my arm and her fingernails digging into my flesh. I yanked on my arm, but she clutched it so hard, pain shot through it.

"Do you know who I am?" she questioned. I glared at her, searching for the memory that would reveal her identity and then it hit me. Kristoff's ex-wife. "I'm his ex-wife," she spat out at the same time recognition washed over me. "If you think he's into you, you are dead wrong. He just wants you to suck his dick." Her voice rose two notches, drawing attention to us. "He'll be tired of you very soon, bitch!"

I snatched my arm out of her grip. She might have been drunk, but she was surprisingly coordinated.

I straightened and met her eyes head on. "Maybe. Maybe not," I retorted coolly. "But he's done with you either way. So I would suggest you move

on. After the scandal you created, I'm sure you don't want another one."

Oh my gosh! I was mentally high-fiving myself, proud I've kept my cool and for such an awesome comeback.

Rendered speechless, she gaped and I enjoyed my triumph, however short-lived. Then she grimaced, the smile on her face cruel and gleeful.

"We'll see how brave you are when he ties you up, gags you, and fucks you raw. He likes that kind of shit. Dominating women." I frowned. That didn't sound anything like Kristoff. Yeah, he wasn't exactly gentle, but it was a far cry from dominating me. She must have seen confusion on my face, because she latched onto it. "You'll find out soon enough how rough he likes it. You seem like the vanilla type."

Her breath invaded my nostrils. It smelled like cheap, bitter alcohol. Almost like the newfound knowledge about my boss. Though I couldn't quite decide how I felt about it. It wasn't exactly off-putting.

"It doesn't matter either way," I told her, maintaining my composure and even smiled sweetly. I only hoped she could see how much she lost. "He's not yours anymore, and I happen to enjoy whatever we do." Then just to ensure she understood clearly, I added, "In and out of the bedroom."

My mind cheered and applauded while my heart pounded and my hands trembled, but I kept them clutched together, hiding my nervousness.

People's gazes darted our ways, more than a few gasps traveled over the room, like the waves of the bay crashing against the shore. But I kept my eyes on the threat in front of me. I wouldn't back down. Regardless if Kristoff and I didn't have a future, he wasn't hers and I refused to let her win.

"Are you good on your knees?" she sneered.

"That's only for Kristoff to know," I told her calmly, while on the inside I shook with fury. "Last warning," I gritted through clenched teeth. I'd be damned if I let another person manhandle me. Woman or man. "Get out of my way or you won't like what comes next."

Before she could react, a familiar palm pressed against my lower back.

"Step away from Gemma, Jacqueline." Kristoff's cold voice came from behind me, his arm protectively around me. Fury brimmed underneath his calm demeanor, the threat in his eyes clear.

She instantly took a step back. "You are just a pussy for him to stick his dick into," she said venomously, slurring her words.

Kristoff stiffened, leaning forward and towering over his ex-wife, the look in his eyes colder than the polar ice caps. I took his hand into mine and smiled at him.

“That’s really none of your concern,” I told her, keeping my composure. “And don’t worry, I’ll be sure to enjoy every second of it.” The look she gave me promised retribution, but with Kristoff by my side, I felt brave. “Gagging, domination, and all.”

If looks could kill, I’d be dead right now. The woman was green with jealousy.

“You must be good on your knees,” his ex-wife spat out. *Ignore her... ignore her.* “He’ll dump you as soon as he’s finished with you.”

Anger simmered through my blood. I heard Kristoff hiss words under his breath, causing her to flinch. My hands shook slightly, and I clutched the material of my dress.

Ignoring Kristoff, she glared at me, her eyes full of jealousy.

“He’ll be rid of you soon,” she spat, laughing hysterically.

“Maybe,” I retorted dryly. “But he still won’t take you back.”

Jacqueline’s eyes darted to Kristoff, locking on him adoringly and full of desire, before she shouted, “You’re just a whore, Gemma Rose.”

Her comment steered everyone’s attention on us, and every single pair of eyes was on us now. At least it was how it felt.

I had enough. I took a step towards her, narrowing my eyes on her. “Maybe, but I’m *his* whore. That’s what’s bothering you, isn’t it?” I said in a low voice so only she could hear it. Though Kristoff heard it too and the way his grip tightened around my waist, I wasn’t sure whether he liked it or not. “You had your shot, you fucked it up. He’s moved on and so should you.”

Before I could process her actions, Kristoff’s hand wrapped around Jacqueline’s wrist, only inches away from my face. The woman was about to hit me. That-

“You lay a single finger on her,” Kristoff growled at his ex-wife, “-and it will be the last thing you do on this fucking Earth. Don’t look at Gemma, don’t talk to her, and don’t say a fucking word about her. Clear?”

The cold fury rolling off Kristoff had people backing away from us, even though he was solely focused on his ex-wife. There was only disgust and threat in his expression. It had the desired impact because she whirled around and stormed off.

Kristoff's hands shifted me around so we stood face-to-face and his hands cupped my face.

"Are you okay?" His eyes penetrated me, as if he hoped to read my thoughts.

"Yes," I assured him. "I'm fine. I'm going to step outside for a bit."

"I'm coming with you," Kristoff said right away, wrapping his arms around me.

"No," I stopped him. "Please don't worry," I murmured quietly. "You take care of your stuff. I'll be waiting."

"I'll go grab your wrap and clutch. I'll be right out." His voice was firm, and I knew there was no arguing with him.

I didn't bother looking back as I walked toward the exit, everyone's eyes were on my back until I disappeared around the corner. As I exited the tent, the cool night air hit my face and I released the breath I wasn't aware I was holding. The cool air felt good against my fury-heated skin and tension slowly eased off my shoulders. The bay fragrancd the night air and each inhale brought another wave of peace.

The words exchanged earlier in the tent played on repeat in my mind. I couldn't decide whether I should congratulate myself on how I handled myself or be slightly mortified.

*Kristoff's whore*, I pondered the words from earlier. I should be appalled and disgusted. Yet, I gave zero fucks. In fact, anything with Kristoff had my pulse quickening and my insides clenching. My body's response to him was extraordinary, but it was more than just that. I wanted *him* and I feared my words earlier revealed to anyone listening just how much.

But I didn't regret my words to his ex-wife. She missed her shot. That woman didn't deserve him, and if me admitting to being Kristoff's whore would get her off his back, so be it.

Walking slowly over to a lone tree sitting in the middle of the property, I decided to wait for Kristoff here. Memories of Jack came rushing in. Infidelities, violent behavior, his drinking - everything I worked hard to move past.

My eyes lowered down my arm, bruises already forming in the shape of Jacqueline's fingerprints, instantly taking me back to the past.

Nausea roiled in my stomach and I took a slow, deep breath as tears pricked my eyes. The old pain radiated throughout my chest and squeezed, taking my breath away. Disgust and disappointment washed over me. I

should have left Jack a decade ago, but then I wouldn't have had my girls. It was a catch-22.

I shook the memories off. I've moved on. Jack didn't deserve my future too. He had taken enough. He gave me my girls, but I refused to dwell on him. Or give up any chance of a happy life - whether alone with my girls or with someone worthy by my side.

I welcomed the quiet, enjoying the breeze and the cool night.

"Well, well, well... what do we have here?" A male voice interrupted my thoughts and stepped forward with an outstretched hand. He was handsome, tall, about six feet two, blonde hair, and brown eyes. And the man Kristoff punched earlier.

Instinctively, I took a step backwards.

"I'm Jonathan," he introduced.

I glanced around, wondering where he came from. He wore a suit, like most men at this party but Kristoff's earlier words had me keeping my guard up.

My eyes flickered at his extended hand, I pondered how to avoid shaking it without being downright rude.

"I don't bite," he added.

"Gemma," I said curtly, briefly shaking his hand then snatching it back.

I wrapped my arms around my waist and threw a glance over my shoulder. Still nobody around, leaving me alone in the dark with him.

I observed him cautiously. He appeared relaxed, his blonde hair slightly ruffled by the breeze. Although it was dark out, the moon outlined his facial features. He had a distinctive face with a patrician nose and tortured eyes. And a fresh bruise marring his cheek, thanks to Kristoff.

His body was nonchalant and relaxed like he didn't have a care in the world, but his eyes spoke of pain. Looking at him like this, I had an odd relatable feeling. Despite Kristoff's warning, I felt sorry for this man.

"You're the woman with Kristoff," he remarked, his voice scratchy. "He's been watching you like a hawk all night. He must be worried someone will snatch you away."

An arrogant smirk followed, but it didn't quite match the pain in his eyes.

I smiled tightly, refusing to elaborate on his comment. One confrontation was quite enough for the night. Two heartbeats of silence and he spoke again.

“You’re pretty.”

“Thank you.” I really wished Kristoff would come on already.

“I can understand his obsession with you now that I see you up close,” he remarked pensively. I had no idea what he meant by it, and I certainly wouldn’t ask. “Yeah, I bet that pouty mouth of yours moans his name just the way he likes it.”

My cheeks singed at his comment and annoyance shot through my bloodstream. What was it with the people here? It had to be the worst party I had ever attended.

I held his gaze, refusing to appear embarrassed or weak.

“Do you know Kristoff and I used to be best friends?” he drawled.

*No, I didn’t know that, you moron.* But all I said was, “Hmmm.”

“His treatment of women might be questionable,” he purred, his voice smooth. He appeared satisfied with himself. “That’s why his ex-wife ended up having someone else’s baby.”

I flinched, remembering the scandalous tabloid articles I read. His wife having someone else’s baby wasn’t in it. Only that his friend and wife betrayed him. This had to be *the friend*.

Yeah, maybe I mistook the pain in his eyes for gloating. Or something worse. My lips thinned, refusing to acknowledge his comments.

He reached out, tracing his finger down my arm, the touch feather light. But it was all wrong. After Kristoff, I suspected every man’s touch would feel wrong. I took a step back away from him, and pulled my arm out of his reach.

*I’m staying up late, way past my fucking bedtime for shitty conversations like this,* I grumbled silently.

“Jonathan,” I gritted. My calm seeped out and disappeared with the breeze. “Don’t ever touch me again. If you do, I’ll break your arm.” The words came out through my clenched teeth. This fucking night was too much. “And secondly, his ex-wife is stupid to have cheated on him. His friend, even more so for betraying a friendship. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

I walked away with my head held high and angry. On Kristoff’s behalf.

My steps rushed, I walked towards the parking lot where we left the limo, hoping it would be there. I couldn’t blame Kristoff for having a contract in place of a normal relationship. He had been burned and emotional distance was his protection mechanism.

I heard someone calling my name, but I ignored it. I wasn't in the mood for any more of this shit.

"Gemma." A deep voice called out right behind me and I glanced over my shoulder.

Kristoff's hand grabbed my arm from behind. He held my clutch in his hands. His dark hair ruffled gently against the breeze, and for a second, I forgot everything but him. Broad shoulders. Green gaze, burning hot and bright.

"I asked you to wait for me." Kristoff slipped his jacket off and put it on my shoulders. The familiar scent and warmth of him immediately enveloped me and I pulled it tighter around me.

"The limo is on its way," he said, his voice quiet.

Pulling me into him, my body melted into his embrace. Then he took my face between his hands, his eyes studying me with deep concern in those depths and searching for any sign of distress. Satisfied that I wasn't falling apart, he leaned against the closest vehicle and pulled me along, keeping me in his arms.

"I heard what you said to Jonathan," he murmured softly, his lips brushing against mine. "You defended me."

My hand reached up to his face and I gently placed my palm on his cheek. He watched my every move with intensity. Kristoff's controlling ways in business and his personal life seemed to be the result of a deep betrayal. Maybe we weren't so different after all.

"Kristoff," I whispered softly. "You are so much better than those people. I hope you know that."

A deep noise vibrated through his chest. Before I could say anything else, his mouth sealed over mine, plunging his tongue between my lips. A throaty moan erupted from my lips as he slid his hand into my hair, his kiss desperate and needy. Just the way I needed him. My thighs shuddered as he sucked and licked. A panty melting kind of kiss that we all fantasize about. Arousal drenched my panties and emotions swirled in my chest with the intensity of our kiss. By the time he pulled back, I was left panting, my mind a blurred mess.

"*You* are better than those people," he murmured against my lips. "I'm probably worse."

I opened my mouth to object, when his phone vibrated. He took it out of his pocket and read the screen. "C'mon, let's get you home."

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## CHAPTER 29

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# GENEVIEVE



Silence was heavy in the back of the limo as we made our way back to the plane. I checked my phone for messages and found one from my eldest. A selfie of herself going to sleep and some of my tension seeped out of me. There was another message from Betty saying all was well, everyone was asleep, and she was headed to bed too.

Absentmindedly, I rubbed my arm when Kristoff's hand came to mine, stopping my movements. Kristoff took my arm into his hands and examined the light bruises forming from his ex-wife's grip.

"Does it hurt?" he asked softly.

"No," I assured him. "It will be fine."

He examined it as he turned my arm over, his expression full of regret. "It's starting to bruise. Fuck, I'm so sorry," he murmured, pressing a kiss on the bruised skin, sending shivers down my spine.

"It's not your fault. It will be gone in a few days," I reassured him, watching with fascination his tenderness. "I'm not made of glass."

*And I had experienced much worse, I thought to myself.*

I glanced down and the bruises were like déjà vu, taking me back to memories of Jack. As if by some unspoken rule, he always left bruises on me where I could hide them. Except for that last night. I shook my head to chase the memories away.

Kristoff's lips trailed the purplish-red marks on my arm. "I think you are the strongest woman I've ever met."

He was wrong. So wrong, but I didn't bother correcting him.

*My eyes locked on my folded hands, praying. Except, I didn't pray for him. I didn't cry. I wouldn't miss him.*

*I prayed for my daughters. I prayed for myself. To stay out of jail.*

*Church bells rang in the distance. Whimpers and cries filled the cool air that smelled of flowers and death. And all the while, my heart felt relieved. Goddamn relief.*

*The priest's voice spoke of the resting place and eternal peace. I stood in my black dress, black sun hat, and dark sunglasses all hiding my bruises. With a broken arm and my hands still folded in prayer, I prayed he'd burn in hell. It was where the cruel bastard belonged.*

*"Repeat after me," the priest recited.*

*The vibrations of hundreds of voices like a background of white noise, everyone chanted, wishing Jack eternal peace. My lips didn't move. I wished him eternal hell.*

***We commit this body to the ground. Earth to earth. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.***

*Emptiness. It was all I felt. I had nothing left but my girls. The fear had a chokehold on me and had my chest constricting with pain. It had my hands trembling and my soul shaking. I prayed to God - not to take my girls away. For them, if not for me.*

*Condolences came. I barely acknowledged them with a terse nod and my eyes locked on Jack's casket in the ground. The top of it was covered with red roses, reminding me of the blood on my hands.*

*My life. My sin. My secret.*

*Everyone was gone. I remained. A shadow of the person I used to be. It was Jack's fault. It was mine.*

*Thunder rolled and my eyes flickered to the gray sky. A raindrop followed by another. And another. I wondered if it was God's way of telling me he'd wash my sin away. Or maybe the almighty Lord was disappointed at my fall from grace.*

*My dress slowly soaked, the pain in my arm throbbing. It was a welcomed cold. It was a welcomed pain.*

*"Mommy, are you sad?" Saoirse's voice pulled me back. My eyes lowered to my youngest two in matching black dresses, holding hands. Sierra didn't know what was happening. Neither did Saoirse. "You want a hug?" she added.*

*I swallowed the lump in my throat. Slowly, my eyes found my eldest daughter, her face smeared with tears. It was then that the first tear rolled*

*down my cheek, the saltiness of it stinging. Just like this pain in my heart. For her.*

*"Sure," I choked out. "I'd love a hug."*

*Gently, I pulled all three of them into a hug. Sienna's face buried in my chest, while my youngest two buried their faces in my skirt.*

*"I love you all," I rasped.*

*"Me too," Saoirse whispered, though she was unsure what was happening.*

*"Everything okay?" Rick's voice had the four of us raising our heads in the direction of his voice at the same time. Our eyes connected and I wondered whether he knew. He'd known me for a long time. Could he read it in my eyes? That I was the first step in his cousin's death.*

*I nodded. "Want me to take the girls in the car with us?"*

*It'd be good for the girls to be distracted with Rick and Betty, and their boys. I nodded again, and watched my girls walk away from me.*

*I turned back to the lone grave and picked a red rose from the flower arrangement next to me. Staring at it, I felt nothing.*

*No regret. No sorrow. Just relief.*

*"You hit me for the last time," I whispered under my breath, as I threw a single red rose on his grave.*

*"We're here." Kristoff's voice broke through the bitter memory and my arm was still in his firm grip. I met his eyes, colors of cool moss, something about it calming. Despite this man's blackmail, he evoked a sense of safety.*

*The limo stopped right at that moment, and I gently tugged on my arm. Kristoff released it, almost reluctantly, before the door opened. We got out of the limo and right onto the plane.*

*As we boarded, I walked towards the middle of the cabin, eyeing the comfortable couch, trying to decide whether it would be proper to take a short nap. Though napping was the furthest thing from my mind when this man was around me.*

*Kristoff's voice came right behind me, his heat at my back. "Are you going to ask me about my ex-wife?"*

*Slowly turning around, I faced him and our gazes locked. He looked tense, as if he anticipated something that would hurt him. Placing my hands against his chest, I stepped closer to him. Something about him tugged at my heart.*

“So you looked me up, huh?” he retorted, referring to our earlier conversation, his mouth skimming over my jaw.

“I did,” I breathed my admission, tilting my head to the side so he’d continue trailing his mouth down my neck. He stopped too soon, lifting his head. His eyes searched my face, searching for something. “Are you upset about it?” I asked.

“No,” he replied. His expression was hard to read. “After all, it’s only fair.”

“I’m sorry for what happened to you,” I murmured. “Nobody deserves that.”

“Ditto.” I didn’t want to ask him what he meant by that.

The tip of our noses brushed together. Maybe it was his tragic past that spoke to me. Or maybe I tried to find logic in something completely illogical.

“Eskimo kiss,” I said for no particular reason as our noses brushed again. He raised his eyebrow, question clear in his eyes, so I explained. “My girls and I call rubbing our noses together an eskimo kiss.” *Because we love each other.*

Did I love him?

I didn’t know. I longed for him, craved him. But love? It was too scary to go down that road.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked gently.

“No, not really,” he clipped, though his tone wasn’t harsh. I suspected he didn’t care thinking about that part of his past. I could relate.

“Then let’s not talk about it,” I concluded with a smile. “I think we had plenty of excitement for one day.”

I turned from him, kicked the shoes off my feet, and unbound my hair, ruining Diane’s hard work. My hair cascaded down my back, easing the tension in my temples. I sat down on one end of the couch, folding my legs underneath me.

Finally feeling comfortable, I glanced up and noted Kristoff still standing in the same spot, staring at me.

“What?” I asked with a mischievous smile. “I think we can relax now. No?”

He shook his head, then smiled as he took the seat opposite of me. I sighed, wishing he’d take a spot next to me, but I didn’t voice it.

“You deserve a medal after tonight.” A flicker of amusement passed his expression. “Relaxation is the least I can guarantee you after everything.”

“I think we both deserve a medal,” I replied, laying my head back against the headrest and closing my eyes. “Did you accomplish what you wanted by coming to this party? Besides spending an obnoxious amount of money.”

My voice sounded tired. It’d been a while since I felt this fatigued.

“Yes,” he answered.

With my eyes still closed, I mumbled, “Good.”

“Gemma,” he called out. Something about the tone of his voice prompted me to open my eyes meeting his gaze. I stared at him, a wide range of emotions passing through those eyes. Now, I wasn’t certain why I ever thought them cold. I could see so much in them. A man that was worth loving. Except, I didn’t think he believed it. “We should probably talk about what happened tonight.”

Unsure of what he wanted to share, I remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

Just when I thought he wouldn’t say anything, he finally added, “Ask me what you want to know.”

Several heartbeats of silence followed. Did I want to know? I did; and I didn’t. I wanted to ease his pain, but as our eyes held each other’s, the feelings brewed deep inside me and I worried they would consume me, then pull me under.

Besides, if I asked those questions about his ex-wife, it would give him the right to ask about my past and I couldn’t go there.

“You are my boss,” I said softly. “You don’t owe anyone an explanation. Least of all me.”

The urge to close the distance, to feel him against me overwhelmed all my senses.

“You were hurt because of me tonight. I owe you an explanation.”

He seemed tired. Exhausted. His eyes bore into me, watching my every move, like he couldn’t read me and needed to figure me out. I inhaled deeply.

“Ok, one question,” I said on an exhale. His jaw tightened. “What’s up with the kinky, domination stuff your ex-wife mentioned?”

Tension dissipated. His baritone laugh filled the cabin, and the sound of it made me melt. I loved seeing him like this. Smiling with a gleam of

amusement shining in his eyes.

“Of all the questions, that’s the first one that comes to mind?”

I shrugged my shoulders, a playful smile on my lips. “Yep. Although, not the most appropriate one for my boss. What’s that saying, curiosity killed the cat?”

“One of my previous admins hated Jacqueline,” he answered, humor coloring his voice. “When she found out from her friend that Jacqueline got into BDSM, she spread rumors that we were into kinky stuff, ensuring it reached Jacqueline.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Geez, I feel let down,” I feigned disappointment. “And here I was imagining all kinds of kinky sex with you,” I responded with a mischievous smile.

Maybe it was the wrong thing to say because Kristoff’s gaze turned hot, something consuming and heavy shifted between us. The blood in my veins heated, my nipples tightened and his gaze ignited flames snaking through my body.

*Or maybe it was exactly the right thing to say,* I mused.

“We can do kinky,” he drawled, his tone seductive. “We can do it all, just say the word.” His words were like a gentle caress over my overheated skin. He held himself back on my account, and I had a distinct feeling that I needed this tonight. I needed him. To hell with everyone and everything. I’d do this for him. For me.

For us.

“Anything in particular you want to do?” I breathed.

“I don’t think you want to hear what I want to do,” he rasped seriously.

My heart thundered under my breastbone as I took a shuddering breath. The way he watched me sent the familiar rush of heat to my lower stomach.

He had given me the most beautiful pleasure each time. I knew our time was limited, but so was life. With my mind made up, I stood up, taking a brave step towards him. He sat still, watching me like a lion watches his lioness.

“I want to hear it. But if you want me to go first, I’m okay with that too,” I murmured with a shiver rolling down my spine. Each second of this moment felt like a turning point. There would be no going back after my next words. “I want to make you feel good,” I breathed out, my voice hoarse. “The way you make me feel good.”

Surprise flashed in his hot gaze. He took a step towards me, coming chest-to-chest with me. Inhaling deeply, his masculine clean scent penetrated my lungs.

“I can’t decide whether I want to savor you,” he whispered hoarsely, his one hand coming around my waist. “Or make your sweet little cunt take me hard.”

My breathing shallow, his words sent a rush of fire down to my lower belly. With his free hand, he rubbed his thumb over my lower lip.

My arms locked around his nape and he bent his head down, bringing his lips closer to mine. “Should we lock the door to our cabin?” I breathed.

A smile touched his lips. “Already locked.” I raised my eyebrow surprised. “I hoped,” he added, his voice hoarse.

I was playing with fire; I knew it and loved every minute of it. We needed this.

My fingers at his nape, a groan resounded in his chest, and then his warm lips pressed against mine. He kissed me, deep and hard. He slipped his tongue into my mouth, pulling my bottom lip between his teeth. A moan escaped me and he swallowed it greedily. Our kiss was urgent as he reached behind me to undo the dress zipper. Our tongues danced, our hands greedy on each other. The dress slipped off my shoulders and pooled at my feet.

His gaze slid down my body, his hands branding my skin everywhere he touched me. My heart was pounding so hard watching his every move through my heavy eyelids.

He stepped forward, I inched backward, the back of my knees hitting the couch. My skin tingled; an inferno bloomed inside me. He let out a rough breath, watching me as I roamed my hands over his body. His vest was in the way so I pushed it off his shoulder and let it join my dress on the floor.

“Sit down,” he growled, his voice dark. The steady pools of green lakes on me were feral and possessive. I sat down and he lowered himself in front of me. A hazy rush of lust pooled in my lower stomach, a throbbing ache between my thighs. “I’ve been thinking about this,” he ran a thumb over my damp panty line, his voice hoarse, “every day and night.”

His rough palms skated over my skin, leaving a blaze of fire in its wake. His touch wasn’t soft. It was firm, rough, and commanding. I never wanted him to stop touching me, needing his hands. My skin burned everywhere; his hands skimmed over my body.



He slid his hand into my hair and yanked it back, pressing a hard kiss onto my lips. "I want you to know," he whispered rough against my lips, "I respect you. The words I speak after this moment might not reflect it, but I respect you so fucking much."

I inhaled a harsh breath as he stared at me with an intensity that licked at my skin.

"Okay?" he rasped.

He teetered on the edge of control. I felt it as if it was my own, his frozen ice melting with the hot air sizzling between us. He waited for my permission, holding back and that alone told me what a good man he was.

I nodded and his hand released my hair to squeeze one breast. When he captured a nipple in his mouth and gently bit, I saw white lights behind my eyelids.

I arched into his mouth, his lips fastened on to my nipple. He licked and sucked, then switched to the other one. My hands fisted his hair and my eyes rolled back into my head with intense pleasure. His crisp white shirt and his suit pants were still on, while I sat here in nothing but my heels and panties, my legs spread wide.

He rubbed his thumb over my lips. "This mouth is mine," he rasped, pushing his finger between my lips. I closed my mouth over it, sucking on it and licking like it was his cock. A satisfied grumble sounded in his chest. Then his hand trailed down my neck to my chest and pinched my nipples. "Your breasts are mine." His hand drifted lower. "Your ass is mine."

My eyes, half-lidded and hazy, watched as he slowly pulled my panties down my legs, then spread my thighs wider.

"This cunt is mine," he grunted, hooking my legs over his broad shoulders. His face stopped inches from my throbbing ache, then inhaled deeply. "I'm going to fuck every hole and you are going to scream my name as you fall apart."

His thumb rubbed over my clit and my body shivered with anticipation.

"You are all mine now. Every single inch." My heart thundered in my ears. "Another man touches you, he's dead." Fuck, why did that turn me on so much? "I'm going to tie you to my bed," he purred, slipping his fingers inside my pussy. "Spank this gorgeous ass and make sure my name is the only one you remember for the rest of your life."

I clenched around his fingers as he slid them out. *In and out*. "You are drenched," he growled, loud panting moans vibrating through the cabin.

“You like the dirty talk?”

“Yes,” I panted, languid heat rushing through my veins. I arched my hip, grinding against his hand, desperate for his mouth. His fingers. Anything. Everything.

“I’m going to lick your pussy until you scream my name,” he vowed, his voice guttural.

A gasp escaped me, my hands clutching his thick hair. I needed him closer, his mouth on me. “Maybe I should finger your tight asshole, while you ride my face. Because you’re my whore.”

“P-please,” I pleaded moaning. I had lost my mind. The talk was degrading, yet I loved it. Maybe because he gave me a forewarning. Or maybe because it was *this* man.

He pushed me back against the back of the couch, my breathing erratic and my heart thundering.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, sucking my inner thigh. I licked my lips holding his gaze as he dipped his head down to lick my folds, our eyes locked, and the moment his tongue swept between my legs, I bucked against his face.

We’d been circling each other from the moment we met. We knew we’d end up here and at this moment, I didn’t want to be anywhere else. But here. With him.

He groaned low in his throat, my nails scraping his scalp. He licked me from entrance to clit, and his growl vibrated straight to my core. His hands held my thighs, as his tongue pushed inside me. In and out. In and out. He felt so good; my eyes rolled back in my head and my spine arched, moving my hips in rhythm with his tongue fucking me. His two fingers parted me to him as his tongue expertly sucked my clit into his mouth.

“Kristoff.” His name left my lips on a breathless whisper. With my hands in his hair, I pressed myself further into his mouth, rocking my hips to his tongue without an ounce of shame.

He growled against my skin, causing vibrations to run through my senses. He sucked my clit harder, teasing my opening with his fingers. His tongue swirled over every part of me like he was hungry for the taste of me.

Delirious with the pleasure, my breaths came out shallow, ragged as I surrendered to his expert mouth, riding his face. Sparks ignited hotter than ever, my muscles taut.

“Please don’t stop,” I panted, so close to the edge. “Oh, oh, oh.”

I felt his finger enter me. His movement slowed. I squirmed under his expert touch, wanting more. In tune with my body, he plunged hard and fast, while his tongue kept working my clit.

“Kristoff,” I screamed his name as fireworks of color burst behind my eyelids, sparks burned hotter and the pressure exploded, consuming me. I closed my eyes, struggling to catch my breath as my body shuddered and a sated sensation washed over me.

My eyes opened to find him watching me, his breathing uneven and his gaze hungry and dark on me. This man was so different from anyone else I had ever known. Not because he was rich, but because he made me feel alive. His touch woke up every fiber of me and made me feel amazing.

I wanted to make him feel good, like he did me. Sitting up, I reached out for his tie and worked at loosening it. I pressed my lips on his neck, tasting him, from his ear down to the crisp white collar of his shirt. He inhaled a sharp breath, his hand settling in my hair, wrapping my locks around his fingers.

My fingers fumbled frantically with each button down his crisp white shirt. When finally done with the last button, I pushed the shirt off his broad shoulders, tossing it to the side. He stood up and my hands roamed his hard, warm chest, enjoying the feel of his skin under my fingers as I trailed my mouth down his stomach, kissing his abs.

I reached for his belt buckle and the sound of the buckle and pants falling followed, and my heart thumped wildly as his clothes joined mine on the floor. I ached to feel him inside me. I was sensitive everywhere and my body melted into his touch. His hands were everywhere on me, his touch greedy just as I was.

His hard cock pressing against my belly, I kept rubbing myself against him.

“Yes?” My last chance to stop him.

My heart in my throat, I didn’t delay my answer and nodded. “Yes,” I confirmed, just to ensure it was clear.

There wasn’t an ounce of doubt in my voice or my heart at this moment. Maybe it was my orgasmic bliss or I was just plain stupid, I didn’t care right now. My sweet spot ached, the throbbing emptiness pulsing with need for him.

“Turn around and brace your hands on the headrest of the couch,” he ordered, his voice thick with gravel. “Now.”

My body obeyed without hesitation. He came up behind me, spreading my thighs with his hands.

“So wet. Your sweet pussy is ready for me,” he praised. He pushed a finger inside my slick folds and a soft whimper escaped me. I pushed my ass back, grinding against him. My body shook with need. “Next time you’ll grind that ass on my face,” he whispered into my ear from behind, then nipped my earlobe.

Rubbing the head of his cock against my drenched folds, he lined us up. His hard cock poised at my entrance, I gasped, the heat of him burning my insides. His hand wrapped around my throat and in one powerful move, he slammed into me, filling me to the hilt.

“Fuck,” he growled, gripping my throat. He pulled out, then thrust back in with full force. “My slut,” he gritted, fucking me hard.

“Yes,” I moaned breathlessly. This had to be heaven. The friction of our bodies, our hearts beating wildly, pulsed in my ears. Each hard pound into me had me flying higher and higher.

*Thrust.* “Whose slut are you?” he grunted. Another powerful thrust.

“Y-yours,” I panted, another violent thrust tore a gasp from my throat. He was so deep and hard inside me, each thrust sending a wave of heat through my veins. His hand around my throat constricted my breathing. His lips at the back of my neck sent shivers down my spine and unraveled something warm in my chest.

“Look at me,” he demanded, his breathing hard. The order barely registered and I glanced over my shoulder, our mouths connected in a messy, hot kiss as he slammed into me, sending a wave of heat searing through every fiber of me.

I felt every inch of his hardness stretching me. Filling me. Shattering me. His face tensed up, his thrusts turned deeper, harder and faster, his fingers digging into my hips. The orgasm hit me hard, stealing the breath from my lungs and shooting stars behind my eyelids.

My hands tightened on the headrest of the couch, my body trembling. My pussy clenched around his cock. He continued moving at a maddening speed, his one arm wrapped around my waist holding me up as he pounded into me, the friction increasing. Like we had done this a million times before, my body welcomed each violent thrust. Anticipated it.

My moans and his grunts filled the cabin. A wave of heat built up again and I leaned my head further back. His teeth bit the sensitive flesh over my

collarbone. His hands held my hips possessively, not allowing me to move.

"You feel so good," he grunted, his praise setting me on fire. "You're doing so well. Taking all of me."

"Oh, Kristoff," I moaned, clutching the seat. The pleasure ran through my body, and I was so close. "Please don't stop," I panted. "*Oh my God.*"

He was rough, yet it felt so deliciously good. His hands lowered down my body, touching me with reverence. He slid his one palm lower to grab a handful of my ass, then slapped it, sending a shock through my body.

He thrust in again, powerful and consuming. Another slap against my ass cheek. A low moan traveled up my throat as my insides shook with need. The need for release was clawing at my insides, I couldn't hold off much longer. My insides clenched around his length, as he pounded into me.

"Come for me, Genevieve," he groaned, his breath hot in my ear. Just like that, I broke apart, as another orgasm shattered through me.

A groan escaped his lips as he muttered a tortured, "Fuck."

And we came apart together. My body sizzled, the intensity of my orgasm making it hard to breathe. With a rough noise and his teeth on my neck, he spilled inside me as I watched him over my shoulder through heavy eyelids. It was the most magnificent sight. It made me feel powerful and vulnerable at the same time.

His cock twitched inside me and he softly nipped the back of my neck as our heavy breaths filled the silence of the cabin.

A feather light touch sent goosebumps down my spine, and I peeked over my shoulder to see Kristoff's mouth lightly brushing over the spot where he marked me.

We stayed standing like that for a while, him holding me gently and still inside me, his hard body against my back. His hand skimmed down my spine, his scent enveloping me into our private cocoon. I loved the smell of him all around me, like it was my own aphrodisiac.

The cabin slowly came into focus. Our heavy breathing mixed with the sound of the airplane engine. My body reeled from the pleasure he just gave me. Kristoff must have been in better shape than I because his breathing slowed faster than mine. He smoothed a hand over my lower back, his fingers tracing my skin.

"Tell me you are okay," he rumbled in his deep voice, his breath hot against my ear.

I turned my head around, seeking out his green eyes.

"I'm better than okay," I admitted, my voice slightly raspy. The intensity in his eyes burned with the brush of vulnerability. Looking for signs of distress, I assumed. "Why?"

He nuzzled his face into the back of my neck. "God, you are beautiful," he murmured against my skin, ignoring my question. He showered my neck with small kisses, his lips alternating between licks and kisses and I tilted my head to allow him better access.

Something thick and wet slid down my thigh and I froze. Fuck, we had unprotected sex again. I wasn't worried about getting pregnant, but it wasn't as if I knew Kristoff's sexual history.

"What?" he demanded to know.

"We had unprotected sex." I swallowed hard. "Again."

"I'm clean." He pulled out of me and turned me around. "I can show you, and I know you're clean."

We touched on this back in the restaurant. The day he blackmailed me into taking this position.

A shaky breath slipped through my lips. "You know my medical history," I repeated. I should feel outraged, accuse him of violating a million privacy laws. Yet, all I found the energy for was comfort in his assurance.

A loud beep suddenly boomed and made me jump.

"What was that?" I asked, looking around.

"Shit," he cursed at the same time. "It's just the pilot."

He grabbed the device from the table next to our couch.

"Yes?" he said. I tried to shift, but his arms tightened around my waist. Then he hung up the next second.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, straightening up.

"Yes," he answered, reaching for the napkins on the side table and then using them to wipe the come from my thighs. "We'll be landing at Dulles instead of Baltimore. Nothing to worry about. We have ten minutes."

He picked up my underwear, then helped me put them on. The dress followed. With the dress zipped up, he laid one more kiss on my shoulder.

I sat down on the same couch I used to brace myself as he fucked me and watched him get dressed quickly. Once dressed, he sat next to me and wrapped his arm around me. My chest warmed at the signs of affection, knowing he was doing it for me. Just for me.

I took a deep breath and leaned closer to Kristoff, determined to prove myself wrong. In the silence that followed, my thoughts were loud in my head. My boss was a beast when it came to sex.

Yet, it was his attempt to go out of his comfort zone and give me what I needed that had me falling for this man.

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## CHAPTER 30

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# GENEVIEVE



Buzzing in the cabin interrupted my thoughts. I looked around to determine where the sound was coming from, then looked at Kristoff with the question in my eyes.

“I hear it too,” he commented. “Where is your phone?”

“It’s in my clutch,” I looked around trying to remember where I left it. “Ah, here it is.”

I grabbed it and pulled the phone out of it. Sure enough, it was my phone buzzing. Glancing at the caller ID, I noted it was Rick, Betty’s husband and my cousin-in-law. I slid the answer button, worry instantly squeezing my chest.

“Rick, is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything is fine,” he quickly assured. “I wanted to check on you and make sure you’re good.” I smiled into the phone.

“Yes, all good,” I told him. It wasn’t like I would tell him I just had mind blowing sex with my boss, while he called me his slut. I cleared my throat, my cheeks warming up. “I’ll be home soon. You shouldn’t be up so late.”

“I’m getting ready to head to bed,” he assured me.

My eyes landed on Kristoff, and his cold gaze wiped the smile off my face. What happened? “I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I said into the phone, my eyes worriedly on my boss. “Okay?”

“Okay, let me know when you’re home,” Rick responded.

“Yep, I’ll text you.” I ended the call.

Kristoff and I watched each other, something feral in his eyes, while silence stretched. Something shifted, and I wasn’t sure what. But I refused

to be the one to break the silence. I hadn't done anything wrong. So I just stared back, stubbornness and challenge in my eyes. We just had amazing, mind blowing sex, and he was certainly ruining the moment.

"Rick often calls you in the middle of the night?" he asked in a cold voice. From all the questions or comments, it wasn't the one I expected. Confusion washed over me, and I felt like I missed something important.

"When I'm out at night, yes he does." I answered, raising my chin. "Is there a problem?"

"You tell me, Gemma." I could hear a cold tenor in his voice and a shiver ran through me. "Is there?"

"I don't have a problem," I retorted dryly. "But obviously you do. Because you are acting like a jackass right now." Old insecurities came back to haunt me, my chest squeezing with worry at the backlash. "Whatever your problem is, your timing sucks considering we just had mind blowing sex."

Something in his eyes softened and he stood up, pulling me into his embrace. His lips pressed against my forehead and I closed my eyes, the tightness in my chest slowly easing.

"You are right," he said, his lips brushing against my forehead. "I'm sorry."

I had a feeling this man rarely, if ever, apologized.

"What's the matter?" I asked him, my hands smoothing over his tie.

One heartbeat of silence, the purring of the engine too loud between us.

"I don't want another man calling you in the middle of the night."

I scrunched my eyebrows in confusion.

"I'm jealous," he explained simply and shockingly. "Let's not spoil the night though."

I leaned my forehead against his chest, but couldn't help the uneasy feelings swirling inside me. He didn't seem the jealous type, more like the *'I take what I want and you're going to like it'* type. Though considering what his ex-wife had done to him, I could understand his possessiveness.

"Kris, I-"

"Landing in five minutes." The pilot's voice filled the cabin, cutting me off.

After a smooth landing, the limo was already waiting for us at Dulles airport. Traveling like this was a luxury. No wonder the rich and famous didn't cringe every time they headed to the airport

Sliding into the limo, I leaned back against the soft seats. The sweetest exhaustion lingered throughout every ounce of my body. Kristoff slid in beside me, his big hands lifted me and sat me on his lap. A soft gasp escaped me at the unexpected move. My hands flew to his neck, holding on.

I watched him through heavy lids. He didn't do affection after sex, but the fact that he went through all these lengths for me made me want to keep him. Forever. As mine.

"Kristoff," I started softly, meeting his green gaze. "Rick is a friend. Family through my late husband. Nothing else."

I didn't know if he'd believe me but there was nothing else I could tell him to make him trust my words. I'd never go behind my friend's back and sleep with her husband. And I wouldn't do something like that to Kristoff either - contract or not.

"Get some sleep," he rasped against my hair, his arms tightening around me. No comment but I said my peace.

"I might." I yawned against his chest, his scent ingrained in my lungs. This man managed to confuse me. Because he made me *feel* something so raw and intense. Yes, the sex was amazing but the little telltales of his protectiveness and obsession were what captured me more.

The limo started down the highway and before I could ponder more on that feeling around him, my eyelids grew heavy, my breaths slowed and sleep pulled me under.

*"Get off of me," I screamed, my lungs burning and my throat raw. I kicked and bucked, it was to no avail. He was stronger. His knee locked between my thighs, limiting my ability to kick him where it would count.*

*"You do this, I'll never forgive you, Jack." He didn't budge, not even paused. A high-pitched scream left my mouth, so loud even my ears rang from it.*

*A hard slap across my face had my head flying to the left. The whole right side of my face throbbed. Warm liquid trickled down my chin. The metallic taste of blood on my tongue.*

*And all I could think about was that it was **me** who let it get this far. Each time, Jack's outbursts had gotten worse. Yet, I kept trying to fix it. Fix us and this dysfunctional marriage. This was by far the worst he had done but the first push or squeeze of my arm when he left bruises behind should have been my clue.*

*He laughed, but there was no humor in his voice nor his face. "You are going to leave me anyhow," he spat out, bitterness in his voice.*

*Fucking right I am, I thought silently. But I wasn't stupid. He didn't need more egging on. My whole face ached. Besides, with his hands around my neck, cutting my air supply, I couldn't utter those words even if I wanted to.*

"Wake up," a deep voice whispered. He was too far away though, he couldn't save me. I had to save myself. "Gemma," a light shake. "Wake up."

I shot up abruptly, almost sliding onto the limo floor when a pair of strong hands caught me around my waist. I couldn't breathe, panic tearing through my chest. My throat tightened, the lump in it making it hard to breathe. I tried to hide it, desperate for just one deep breath so the knot in my chest would loosen.

"Hey," Kristoff spoke softly, pulling me back to his chest. "It's ok," he murmured. "Deep breaths." His palm rubbed my back. Up and down, his touch warm and his voice soothing. One knot loosened and I was finally able to inhale a deep breath, my lungs swelling with oxygen.

"It was just a bad dream," he whispered, his movements over my back never ceased, comforting, and slowly my heartbeat leveled. Another lungful of oxygen and I straightened up, shoving the vulnerability that still lingered in my chest somewhere deep down.

"Are you alright?" he asked, concern lacing his voice.

I forced a smile on. "Yes, fine," My voice sounded raspy. Shaky. My hands trembled, smoothing the material on my lap. "What time is it?"

"Two in the morning," he answered, his eyes boring into me. Seeing too much. Not seeing enough. "Gemma, did I hurt you?"

My eyes snapped to him. His eyebrows were furrowed, a line edged between them, anguish lingering in the depths of his emerald eyes.

"No," I told him, then cleared my throat to ensure he understood I meant it. "You didn't hurt me." My hand came to his chest, my palm right above his heart. "Just a dream." I leaned and pressed my lips against his, then my lips curved into a smile. His concern warmed my chest, knowing he'd care. "I promise you, if you would have, I'd have made it known."

I'd never let anyone hurt me again. I'd never let it get so far where I'd be forced to resort to repeating the past.

“Good. If I ever hurt you, I want you to fight back,” he said, his voice firm. “Kick me, scratch me, anything. I’d rather cut my dick off than hurt you.”

He was nothing like my late husband. He’d never be like Jack. It wasn’t in him.

“Aren’t you tired?” I questioned softly, changing the subject. I didn’t want to ruin what had happened between us by bringing up my past. There was no room for either one of our pasts to rear their ugly heads.

My eyes roamed his face. He looked refreshed, like he had ten hours of sleep behind him.

“I don’t sleep much,” he answered. “Insomnia.”

My heartbeat was back to normal and I found myself relaxing. “That’s not good,” I leaned against him, his arms around me. I pressed my cheek against his chest, his steady, strong heartbeat thumping under my ear and I found it oddly soothing. “You should try some relaxing techniques,” I murmured against his chest. “Maybe yoga.”

My breaths slowed and I stifled a yawn. “I get cranky and mean if I don’t get at least eight hours of sleep,” I remarked. “So better avoid me when I haven’t had my beauty sleep.”

“That’s good to know,” he remarked in a teasing tone.

I glanced out the car window and recognized the road. Another block, we’d turn left and go down a few roads into my neighborhood.

“Almost home,” he said softly, as if reading my mind. Something about the way he said home felt strangely familiar, intimate. Like he was part of my home. The notion was ridiculous. Stupid. Made no sense. Yet, I couldn’t shake it.

The limo came to a stop and so did the deep, disturbing revelation inside me that wished for Kris in my home, with me. Those thoughts and wishes were a recipe for disaster, especially knowing how he operated with that contract. I was setting myself up for a world of disappointments and hurt. I didn’t need that; neither did he.

The limo door opened and I exited, Kristoff right at my back. Despite being June, the cool night sent a shiver down my body and his arm came around me as he walked me to my door, both of us lost to our own thoughts.

I stopped, my hand lingering over the door handle. His hands came to my waist and turned me to face him. I tilted my head up so I could see him

better. His eyes were soft and dark, the pools of deep forest inviting me to drown in them.

“Any regrets?” His voice slightly strained.

His fingers reached for strands of my hair, wrapping them around his fingers, as if he wanted to touch any piece of me.

I knew what he meant. Yet, I couldn’t find an ounce of regret in me. Every time with him was hot, consuming, and raw. Even now, thinking about his touch on my skin, made me all hot and bothered. It was hard to regret something so intense. Damn it, my body wanted more. More of him; all of him. My reason was losing the battle against the feelings that bloomed somewhere deep. But the sense lingered on the edge of my mind. It would hurt like hell when it was over.

Kristoff had his own demons. We both had our own crosses to bear but resisting this was fruitless. So I drowned in those gorgeous eyes of his, willingly. Raising up on my toes, I pressed a fleeting kiss onto his lips.

“No regrets,” I whispered against his lips. “I’ll never regret it.” *No matter how much it hurts.*

I reached behind me to unclip the necklace. “Kristoff, I really want to...”

I didn’t get to finish. He covered my hands with his and stilled them. “Please don’t. Keep it.” I opened my mouth to object, but he stopped me. “Do it for me.”

The longing on his face matched my own, sending my heart into a shuddering mess. As he leaned in, I closed our distance with a soft kiss on his mouth.

“It’s too much,” I objected softly. “It’s not a normal gift.”

His lip tugged up. “Nothing about the two of us is kind of normal,” he reasoned. He was right. “It’ll make me happy knowing you have it.” His lips brushed against the sensitive spot below my ear, sending shivers down my spine. “One of these days, I’m going to fuck you wearing nothing but that necklace and your heels, and have those gorgeous legs wrapped around me.”

I gasped, my eyes widening, the erotic images playing in my mind. Gosh, despite my fatigue, I wanted to do it now.

“Please keep it,” he repeated again, tearing down my resolve. “No jewels compare to you and your heart.”

Warmth spread from my chest, out to every piece of me. The intensity of feelings this man rattled me to my bones.

“Kris-” He didn’t let me finish.

“For me,” he whispered against my lips. God, when he asked me to do something for him, I worried how far I’d go. This kind of behavior was characteristic in a twenty-some-year-old but not in a responsible adult.

“Okay,” I caved, as always around him. He brushed his nose against mine, then placed a soft kiss on my lips and my heart trembled with delight. “Good night,” I rasped.

“Good night.” One more kiss on my cheek. He inhaled deeply and then straightened.

“Don’t come in tomorrow until after twelve. Sleep in.” He softened his demand with a smile. “I don’t want you to be cranky.”

I chuckled. “I’ll be in at nine,” I told him. “I have to get the girls to day care.”

“Drop them off and come back to take a nap.” I rolled my eyes, but a smile played around my lips. Then I walked in, shutting the door behind me with a soft click. I looked back through the glass door, just in time to see his gaze darting back to me before he slid into his limo.

Our gazes locked, time stilled. His beautiful lips curved up into a smile and I had a strange premonition that I had already fallen in too deep with this man.

The limo drove off but the realization haunted me long after I kissed my sleeping girls goodnight and laid in bed, staring at the dark ceiling.

Dark green eyes had taken me down a path I wouldn’t come back from. I was certain of it.

Together we’re a blazing inferno. I shouldn’t give in. And yet, the sound of him - every touch - made me crave him even more.

## CHAPTER 31

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# KRISTOFF



Possessiveness tightened its grip on me over Gemma Rose. Until tonight, I fooled myself into thinking I had some control over it. I had none.

Seeing men eye her all evening, I had to fight the urge not to smash in all their heads. Including Byron's, and the man always had my back. It would be frowned upon, even with all my wealth to back me up. Though seeing that motherfucker Jonathan, my ex-best friend who fucked my ex-wife and got her pregnant, touch my woman caused pure rage.

*Hell to the motherfucking no!* When Gemma strode away from him, her head held high, I strode to Jonathan, calm and cold. Then my fist connected with his jaw, again, sending him stumbling onto his ass.

"What the fuck?" Jonathan hissed, rubbing his jaw. "You already punched me once."

"For touching Gemma," I growled. "And for bringing that unhinged woman around."

No other words were needed.

I left him without a backward glance as I went after Gemma.

The fact that I lost my cool around Gemma should have been my sign I was in too deep. I had always been the one to use my brain, rather than my strength, in all my battles. It was why Jacqueline got nothing out of our divorce. Not a single penny that didn't belong to her before her marriage to me.

But around Gemma, my brain went into overdrive. Or underdrive, depending on how you looked at it. And all I wanted to do was murder men that even dared to shake her hand.

She held her own in conversations, with both men and women. And against Jacqueline. She cared enough about me to defend me to Jonathan and to claim me as hers to Jacqueline.

*Jesus Christ!*

She made me so fucking proud, I wanted to pound my chest. I gave Gemma no reason to defend me, yet she did. Without a second thought.

*I'm his whore.* Her words played over and over in my mind. Gemma was so much more. She was everything a man could want. Unselfish, warm, so fucking sexy. Her soft eyes as she watched me, sometimes with concern or with a lust-filled haze while I fucked her. I loved all of it.

As I sat in the back seat of the limo, images of Gemma consumed my mind. The way she looked at me over her shoulder, her lips parted while her sweet body shuddered while trying to take all of me. Her eagerness to please me had a protective urge well in my chest.

God, I wanted her. So goddamn much that a cold sweat broke out beneath my clothes. It was an addiction that I feared I couldn't cure no matter what. She was the perfect mixture of delicate and strong. But just for me.

Heat ran to my groin and my chest burned with the need to go back to her.

Fuck.

This had never happened to me before. Obsessing over a woman after I had her. The need for her grew with every taste she allowed me. It even went as far as wishing I'd knock her up because that'd keep her with me, contract or not.

I ran a hand across my jaw. *Jesus Christ.*

For fuck's sake, that woman deserved better. So much better than me, especially after the shit she went through with her ex-husband. Sometimes ghosts flashed in her dark eyes and it felt like a stab to my chest. I didn't fucking like it.

*Let her go,* my mind whispered.

My chest burned, rejecting the tiny part of me that contemplated doing the right thing. *Never!*

I'd keep her. I'd make her sign that contract, and when she realized how good we were together, she'd be mine forever, giving me forever willingly.

Forcing her would bring her pain and that was the last thing I wanted. Pain in Gemma's eyes would fucking kill me.

So I'd show her slowly how good we were. I'd have to convince her to sign the contract. It would buy me time to convince her. We could have forever. I'd take care of her and her daughters. We could be a family. They'd be in my home; she'd be in my bed. I'd give her anything she wanted and make her happy.

Money, homes, jewelry, anything and everything.

*Good plan*, I scoffed.

My gut feeling warned Gemma wasn't the woman to be happy with only material things.

My instinct warned me she wasn't the kind of woman to allow a man to control her. Especially not after what happened with her late husband. The question was whether I could give her my heart - my past, present, and future.

It was my only chance at winning her.

My instinct told me she was the faithful type. Loyal even. She didn't flirt with other men, not even Byron and women fell all over that fucker. But the terrifying part was that my reason had no room around her.

Then there was her friendship with Rick. The two were close.

The jealous rage burned hot inside me. *Fucking wonderful!* I turned into a jealous, hot-headed teenager. Damn dream come true! It had always been my goal to become an idiot.

It couldn't be helped though. That woman was *perfection*. In every sense of the word. Her soft, curvy body. Her smile. Her eyes shone with the same desire that coursed through my veins.

She loved my filthy talk. And I loved infecting her with my filth. Except when vulnerability or softness would pass her expression, my chest squeezed in response every single time.

The fraction of me that was still decent warned all along. To keep her away from me. To protect her from my fucked up ways.

But I was too far gone to stop now.

## CHAPTER 32

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# GENEVIEVE



Morning came too soon. With less than eight hours of sleep, I fixed extra strong coffee and rushed through getting everyone ready, including Betty's boys. Betty offered to take the children to school, but I objected. It was my turn to give her a break. I loaded all the kids into my car, and we waved goodbye to Betty.

At nine, I walked into Kristoff's office with his cup of coffee and my own. I was not ready to stop sipping on my caffeine.

"Morning," I said as I set down his cup. He raised his head, and his gaze turned hot.

Not sure how he had the energy to be turned on, because he got even less sleep than me.

"Why didn't you sleep in?" he growled.

I raised my eyebrows. "Why, good morning," I said, then leaned back against his desk. His gaze watched my every move. I placed my palms against the smooth surface of his desk. "And how are you this fine morning?" I mused.

"Gemma," he warned softly.

"What?" I feigned a pout.

He wasn't amused. "I don't have to ask you how you are. You're tired. I can see it. Why didn't you sleep in?"

"Why didn't *you* sleep in?" I challenged. He watched me with a dry, half-lidded stare that burned with something hot. He refused to respond, so I sighed. He was incorrigible. "I have to get the kids to school regardless of what time I go to sleep," I said.

“Betty couldn’t have taken them?” Of course, he was probably used to having people to take care of things for him.

“Betty has done enough, and I wanted to take the kids to school. It’s our special time.”

“I see,” he answered.

“So what is on the agenda today?” I asked, switching the subject to work mode.

He listed the projects that needed focus today. With a nod, I went back to my desk and got started. The day flew by, and before I realized, it was four in the afternoon and Kristoff stood in front of my desk.

I looked up and couldn’t believe how fresh and rested he looked.

“What did you do, take a nap in there?” I grumbled crankily. Kimberly chuckled in the background but said nothing.

His eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t take naps. Why do you ask?”

“You look rested,” I announced, annoyed. “While I look and feel like a bus ran me over.” Lack of sleep brought out the worst in me.

He barked out a laugh. “You weren’t lying when you said you get cranky with little sleep. C’mon, let’s go have an early dinner.”

I groaned. “I’m too tired to eat,” I complained.

“Did you eat lunch?”

I didn’t have to answer because Kimberly jumped in. “No, she did not. She refused to take a lunch break.”

I narrowed my eyes on her. *Traitor*, I mouthed. She grinned and winked, prompting me to roll my eyes.

“Alright then,” Kristoff resolved, his mind made up. “Let’s go feed you real quick and then you’re going home.”

I could argue, but I had no energy for it so I stood up, grabbed my purse, and followed like a puppy. His hand landed on my lower back, guiding me to the elevator. Once we stepped into it and the door closed behind us, he pulled me into his arms. We stood facing each other and he cupped my cheeks with his hands. Placing a kiss on my lips, his tongue swiped over my bottom lip and a soft sigh escaped me as I melted into him, parting my lips in invitation. My heart forgot about fatigue and thundered under my ribs while butterflies fluttered in my lower belly.

With a rough sound from deep in his chest, he sucked on my tongue. I was burning up.

“Better?” he murmured against my lips.

“Mmmm,” was all that came out. The lines between us blurred. I felt like Alice when she fell down the rabbit hole. I was falling and falling, until the longing for this man shattered me into a million pieces. I had already strayed too deep, too far. Maybe just a few weeks for me, then he’d be a memory as I took another position in his company. Away from him.

Warning bells ignored, my head against his chest, I enjoyed his warmth and his strong heartbeat. It would be mine, for however long this lasted. The beep sounded, signaling the elevator door was about to open and I put distance between us.

Displeasure flickered in his gaze, but he remained silent. Instead, he took my hand and threaded our fingers together. This was far from appropriate boss and assistant behavior but nobody seemed to notice us.

We found ourselves back at the same restaurant and table where we ate on my first day. Somehow in my mind this became our place.

I peered at Kristoff under my lashes.

*His ex was an idiot to cheat on a man like this. Unless he hid some terrible traits that I couldn’t see yet.*

After Jack’s flip from a nice and easy going college guy to a violent husband, my self-preservation made me slightly paranoid. Trust in my ability to spot unworthy men wavered, but my instinct told me Kristoff was nothing like my late husband.

“Penny for your thoughts.” I startled at Kristoff’s voice.

I watched him pensively. There were two sides to every story. I knew that to be the case in my own past relationship. I was certain it was true for Kristoff’s former marriage. And while little bits and pieces unraveled, I still felt like I didn’t know Kristoff.

My boss. My lover.

Well, not exactly. This was what he wanted when he offered me that contract. Like a butterfly to the flame, I yearned to learn more about him. To get to know him, the real him.

*Eventually it’s going to burn me.* I was certain of it, yet deeper I went.

“Sleeping with my eyes open,” I said, smiling, keeping all emotions to myself. He offered comfort after sex, but there hadn’t been discussion on sharing feelings and concerns.

The waiter showed up to take our order.

“Glass of water,” I ordered. “And for the entree, I’ll have something quick. Surprise me.”

Kristoff grumbled and took charge.

"Filet mignon with spinach salad and asparagus," he ordered in my stead. His eyes flicked my way, asking for consent and I nodded. It wasn't like he was taking over my life by placing a simple order for me. Besides, it was thoughtful.

After Kristoff placed his own order, the waiter left us to it.

Both of our hands were on the table, and Kristoff trailed his thumb over my knuckles.

"It's important to have meat with your dinner," Kristoff indicated.

"Too much food at this stage of tiredness," I muttered.

"So, what were you thinking about?" I should have known distracting this man would be hard.

"Nothing special," I answered. Technically, it was not a lie. His ex-wife nor Jack were special.

The waiter returned with our drinks, then left again.

"Do you often have nightmares?" His question caught me off guard and my eyes connected with his.

"No," I replied, holding my breath.

Kristoff leaned closer to me, then raised my hand to his mouth, brushing his mouth over my fingers. "Don't you trust me?"

*Yes. No. I don't know.* Maybe it was me that I didn't trust.

"What makes you think I don't trust you?" Answering questions with a question. *He'll never see through that one,* I mocked myself.

His gaze drilled into me before he spoke up. "Because you are holding back." *So are you.* "Tell me," he demanded. "Please."

*I shouldn't open that door.* He would be history when my two months were up. Though I knew Kristoff wouldn't be a man I'd forget easily. Or at all.

"There is nothing to tell," I replied in a low voice. Hurt flashed in his eyes, but it was gone so fast, I couldn't be positive. It was, however, enough to make me feel bad, and I reached out with my other hand and covered his. "I'm sorry. I was just thinking how little I know about you." I cleared my throat. "We really don't know each other at all and here we are-"

*Having mind blowing sex.*

My need for him terrified me. I wanted more than this incredible physical connection. Eventually he'd get tired of my body and then there would be nothing left.



Dinner arrived at that moment, and the interruption was welcome. As soon as the waiter left, I started cutting up my food. I took a bite of my steak and Kristoff began speaking.

"I apologize about last night. I should have warned you about the possibility of my ex-wife being there."

I finished chewing before I replied, trying to add some humor to it.

"That's alright. It wasn't your fault."

"You made me so proud yesterday," Kristoff said, his eyes full of admiration. God, the way he watched me, like I was something precious, had me quivering on the inside. It sent a raw wave of warmth through my chest. "You're the strongest and most beautiful woman I know."

When he watched me like that, I felt like the strongest and most beautiful woman. His hand reached out and his knuckles brushed across my cheek, the touch feather light. My attachment to him grew by the second under the heat of his stare.

"Have you thought any more about the contract?" he asked, running a thumb across my bottom lip. "I'll make any amendments you want."

My chest tightened. "Isn't my word good enough?" I breathed.

He didn't answer and despite everything and going into this with eyes wide open, it still fucking hurt. I was falling for him and he thought of me as a business arrangement. God, was it too much to ask just for a normal relationship?

"How long were you married?" I asked instead.

A frown formed between his brows, as if he detested thinking about it. "Barely two years." Silence filled the air. "It didn't end well."

I'd imagine not, if she ended up pregnant with someone else's child.

"I'm sorry." No matter what, it sucked to go through it. It was obvious, to me at least, that his ex-wife still had feelings for him. Kristoff wasn't an easy man to read, but I'd bet that beautiful necklace of his that it left a mark on him.

Why did it bother me to think of him with any woman? Especially one that held his heart at one point and then destroyed it.

"And your marriage?" he questioned.

*Where do I even start?*

I didn't want to lie to him. Yet, I didn't want to admit to letting Jack abuse me for years. First verbally, then mentally, and finally physically.

“Let’s just say that if my daughters decided to get married young,” I started, “I’d be very against it.”

He remained silent, observing me. Waiting for me to elaborate. Maybe he saw too much. Or his background check gave him more information. Maybe Kristoff knew about Jack’s infidelities. But he wouldn’t know what I had done the day he almost raped me. Nobody knew about that one, not even my best friends.

I exhaled a shuddering breath. “It wasn’t the best marriage,” I admitted, lowering my eyes onto my plate. That was the fucking understatement of the century. Though I guess I should be grateful, Jack didn’t hook up with my best friend, like his ex. I pushed the food around my plate, my appetite suddenly gone. “Jack’s eye had a tendency to wander,” I elaborated, shame filling me.

It was the fact that I allowed him to get away with it that made me ashamed. His infidelity wasn’t my sin but playing blind to it allowed escalations. I saw that now.

Lifting my eyes, I met his gaze and it felt like he saw too much.

“He was an idiot,” he growled. “He deserved to die for what he did to you.”

I stilled. That almost sounded like he knew what happened that fateful day. Like he knew what I had done to my husband before I ran out the door, leaving him bleeding on the bed.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and forced a smile. “Too heavy of a topic for today,” I rasped out. “I’ll need at least two days of sleep before going there.”

The rest of the dinner we ate in silence, ghosts of the past plaguing both of us. Once done, we walked out onto the pavement.

“My driver will take you home,” he insisted, his tone firm and nonnegotiable. I had started to pick up on his little traits.

“Kristoff,” I protested. “That’s silly. I can drive. Plus, I need the car for tomorrow to take the kids to school.”

“I’ll have a driver come to you in the morning, and he’ll take care of you and the girls. It’s not smart to drive while you’re exhausted.”

“Fine,” I caved, admitting defeat. Besides, it made no sense to complain when the man just had my well-being in mind.

Once home, my evening was spent outside with the girls, soaking up the sunshine while I messed around in the garden and my girls squealed with

delight, running through the sprinkler and chasing each other.

After our outside adventure and everyone's bath, my girls were tucked in with a story and lots of kisses. After my own shower, I finally crawled into bed and the second my body hit that soft mattress, a deep sigh left me. Today was a good day. Yes, I was crushing on my boss. Who didn't? I mean, it was on every woman's 'must experience' list.

My bills were paid. My girls were happy. We had a roof over our heads. Yeah, old ghosts peeked their heads through the cracked door but I slammed it in their face.

I glanced at my nightstand where my phone sat. I reached for it and saw an unread message from Kristoff and quickly slid it open.

***\*Take off tomorrow. I'm flying out of town for business. Kimberly is off too. Driver will drop off your car before school. K.B.\****

So short and to the point. You'd never even guess we had sex. A little ache panged my chest, but I chose to ignore it. Instead, I typed a quick reply.

***\*Ok, thanks. See you Monday.\****

And I clicked off send. Before I put my phone down, it buzzed again. Kristoff replied.

***\*Are you still awake?\****

My lips curved into a playful smile. ***\*No, it's my personal assistant. I haven't made an employment contract for him yet.\****

So silly. Yet, it sent a thrill down my spine. My phone rang next. Seeing his name flash, it made me feel giddy and I giggled like a little schoolgirl. I laid back against my pillows, so satisfied with myself.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Are you trying to be funny?" Kristoff's deep voice sent tingles down my body.

I chuckled. "I thought it was pretty funny."

"How come you're still awake?" he asked. I wondered if he called just to chitchat. I foolishly hoped so.

"The girls and I were outside for a bit enjoying the sunshine. It gave me just enough boost to stay awake. I guess it is waaaay before your bedtime?" I said jokingly.

"Yes." I could hear a smile in his voice. "Unlike you, I get cranky when I don't get food."

“Oh gosh; I hope we are not in the same room when I’m tired and you are hungry,” I teased and his baritone laugh echoed through the headset. “Thanks for giving me the day off tomorrow. I’m looking forward to it,” I added, loving the sound of his laugh. He should laugh more.

“You’re welcome,” he answered. “You deserve it. Doing anything fun?”

“I’m going to surprise the girls and take them hiking. Sienna has a big test tomorrow, so we’ll do it right after.”

“She hasn’t been skipping classes anymore?” he asked teasingly. “No more boys?”

“Very funny,” I retorted dryly. “Wait until you have girls. They shed years off your life.” Then realizing how insensitive that sounded, considering his past, I continued, “I’m sorry, that was tactless.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“She hasn’t been skipping classes,” I answered his original question. “I think serving her thirty days of punishment opened her eyes, and she realized the boy she likes wasn’t that great after all.”

“I’m glad she is doing better,” he said. “I’m sure losing her father was harder on her than her younger sisters.”

He was right; it was hardest on her. Except that not a single day went by where I didn’t worry whether Jack’s shitty attitude wouldn’t give my daughters the wrong impression of what a good relationship was. My parents adored each other, never raising their voices. Yes, they had disagreements, but they talked through them. I strayed so far away from what they had shown me; I wasn’t even sure how I got here.

“Yes, it was.” The silence stretched on.

How could I explain the relief and guilt I felt about Jack’s death? The relief that he’d never hurt me again. I always worried that he’d eventually transfer that anger from me to my girls. Or if it continued to escalate what impact it would have on them. On the other hand, the tremendous guilt for not ending our marriage years ago also weighed on me. If I had, maybe it wouldn’t have led us to the point where I had to resort to violence to survive him.

But here we were, and there was no turning back time.

“Kids will like the hike for sure,” Kristoff interrupted my morbid thoughts by switching the subject. “Is that how you stay in shape?”

“I wouldn’t quite say I’m in shape,” I replied.

“I saw you naked,” his voice sounded raspy. “And I loved what I saw.”

A simple statement. Yet it ignited an inferno within me. A throbbing ache pulsed between my thighs, and I hungered for *his* touch. I hesitantly parted my legs, reached between my thighs and brushed my fingers against my folds. I bit into my lower lip to keep a whimper from slipping through my lips.

My panties were soaked. Another brush and a sharp inhale left my lips. As if I burned myself, I quickly removed my hand.

I blushed, glad he couldn't see me. His voice alone turned me into a wanton woman I didn't recognize.

"Gemma," he said hoarsely.

I cleared my throat. "Yes?"

"Are you touching yourself?" Fuck! Lava snaked through my veins, burning everything in its wake. I was in over my head with this man. I couldn't even control my own desire over him, let alone emotions.

"No," I lied. His deep, dark chuckle traveled over the line. *Bastard*. "Are you touching yourself?" I blurted out bravely. Or maybe shamelessly.

"I totally would if I was home," he drawled. "But I can help you if you want to get off."

My heart thundered wildly, I was convinced it would give out at any moment. I wanted to get off. God, how I wanted to! My skin pulled taut, my heart beating wildly, and languid heat swimming through my veins.

I swallowed hard. "No thank you." *Chicken*, my body screamed, while my pussy ached in protest. "Besides," I reasoned out loud, trying to make his words backfire. "I'd rather feel your cock inside me than my fingers."

Holy fucking shit! Those words really left my mouth. This man was making me horny. And my mouth filthy. I'd end up working just to put money into the curse jar.

"Filthy mouth," he groaned, his breathing slightly harder than when our conversation started. And I'd lie if I didn't silently gloat over it. "This definitely backfired." He cleared his throat, while I smiled stupidly. Like some horny teenager that realized for the first time that she had power over her boyfriend. I was playing with fire. "Hiking was a safer topic."

I chuckled. "I agree."

"Now tell me why you like hiking," he commented. "Or when this car comes to a stop, I'll have a hard time hiding the bulge in my pants."

I grinned into the phone, happy that I could affect this man

“It is peaceful,” I answered his question. No sense in getting us both worked up. “It relaxes us. It always seems like we are thousands of miles away, from the hustle and problems. Helps me clear my mind.”

“How did you get into it?”

“Jack got me into it. We would hike together.” We enjoyed doing it together, but only in the beginning. Before children. “He gave up on it after Sienna was born. Said it was too stressful with the baby. But I loved it too much to give it up. Once in a blue moon, he’d join us,” I muttered.

Gosh, the signs that Jack didn’t want a family were there all along. I was just too blind to see them; too determined to make it work. Like my parents taught me.

Silence followed, and I wondered whether I made a mistake sharing my past with him. The few dates I went on, guys always asked me about my late husband, and I’d tell them I didn’t want to talk about it. They assumed it was too painful. And it was, just not for the reasons they guessed. I didn’t think I’d ever be ready to go down that road. Yet somehow, around Kristoff, I felt like I could.

“What do you do for fun, Kristoff?” I urged the conversation back to him, wanting to break the silence. When he didn’t answer, I added, “You do have fun, right?”

“Besides having fun with you?” he teased and I chuckled. “I don’t really have much free time. For the last twenty years, I’ve been consumed with saving the company my father brought to the brink of bankruptcy and starting my companies to ensure they succeed. When I don’t work, I relax,” he replied.

“Were you close to your father?” I inquired.

One heartbeat. “No.” I could hear tension in that one word. “He made a fool out of my mother and brought scandal to our family. And then there was the fact that he wasted my mother’s inheritance.”

Bitterness in his voice was unmistakable.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, sorry to bring up a sore subject. “Your mom is lucky to have you. And you’re very successful.”

His reply was a grumble. “How about your parents?” he asked instead.

“I was close to both of my parents,” I told him in a soft voice. “I miss them a lot. They didn’t have a lot but they had a good marriage. They were happy and that was all that mattered.”

“That’s a rarity,” he murmured.

“I’ve come to the same conclusion,” I agreed, then changed subjects to something lighter. “Have you ever gone hiking?”

“In my military days, yes. These days, I camp in remote mountain spots when I have time. I take a chopper to them. It takes too much time to hike, which I don’t have.” His answer was matter-of-fact and somehow I wasn’t surprised.

“You should give it another try,” I suggested. “To hell with time.”

“I will, if you invite me on one of your hiking trips.” I couldn’t quite tell whether he was serious or not. He must have sensed my hesitation. “No, I’m not joking.”

“What about your lack of time?” I questioned.

“I’ll always make time for you. It will be well spent with you and your girls.” I leaned back against my pillows, a wide grin on my face. Kristoff Baldwin took my heart, right there and then. I just didn’t realize it yet.

“It’s a deal then,” I chuckled quietly. “Since you are traveling tomorrow, I’ll invite you on our next one.”

Silence stretched for two heartbeats. “I’m counting on it.” My heart fluttered. “I better let you get to sleep,” he rasped softly. “Good night!”

“Good night,” I murmured and the line went dead.

## CHAPTER 33

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# GENEVIEVE



Friday and Saturday passed in a blur and steeped in delight. The sunny weather, my daughters' laughter, and a feeling blooming in my chest made me happier than I've been in a long time.

Sunday came around and with it Betty's party. A celebration of her fortieth birthday. As I drove toward her house with our windows down, I couldn't help but wonder where the time went. Life was short. Too damn short and I had wasted a lot of it already.

When we arrived, her party was already in full swing. My second party in a week. *My social skills are improving*, I thought wryly.

Just as I got the girls out of the car and headed for the garden gate in the back of the house, I ran into Kristoff.

"Hello, Gemma," he greeted me casually, while I tried to process whether my imagination was playing tricks on me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Saoirse ran to him, like they were best friends and she had known him forever.

"Hi, Kristoff," Saoirse chirped. "So nice to see you."

"Now that is a greeting," Kristoff said smiling. "It's so nice to see you too, Saoirse."

"I glad too," Sierra said shyly in her baby talk.

Kristoff knelt down to her eye level, unconcerned that his expensive suit was on the blacktop. "I'm so happy you said that," he replied with a smile. "I was hoping to see you all here."

She offered him her greeting of thumbs up cheer and he played along, pressing his thumb gently against hers.

“I’m glad to see you too,” Sienna chimed in. “I guess that only leaves Mom not being glad to see you.”

Kristoff rose from his kneeling position, a bag in his hand. His eyes were on me, a small smile on his lips but his eyes burned hot.

“I’m happy too,” I told him. “Just surprised to see you here.” He leaned over, bending his head down and pressed a kiss on my cheek. Such a simple greeting, yet so complicated. His cologne entered my lungs and my blood heated.

“I thought you were traveling on business,” I said, my voice breathy. “When did you get here?”

“Just now. I happened to notice you getting the kids out of the car so I came over. We can go in together.”

It made the impression like we were a couple and we came together. But what to say? *You wait here and come in after us*, that would be rude. Besides, I kind of liked the notion of being together.

We strode through the garden gate, and I could have sworn that the noise of the party lowered by a few notches.

Eyes and attention turned our way. Kristoff seemed unperturbed, while I squirmed a bit under all of it. Betty rushed to us with a wide smile.

“Hello, you guys,” she beamed. “Hello, girls.” She greeted my daughters. “I’m so glad you made it. I was worried you’d ditch me,” she teased, hugging me. “And thank you,” she addressed Kristoff, “for accepting the last minute invitation.”

I stepped back.

“I wouldn’t miss your big birthday. And here is your gift,” I told her, smiling, and handed her a wrapped box. “Open it when you are alone,” I suggested with a wink.

She asked for a set of exotic, erotic oils. So she could experiment with Rick. It was definitely too much information, but she begged for that and only that. I added a surprise, something more appropriate for a birthday.

“Is it-” she cleared her throat, her eyes fleeting Kristoff’s way then back to me. “What I asked for?”

I grinned, my cheeks slightly flushed. “Yes. And you owe me for walking into that store alone.”

She giggled. “We can go together next time.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s wait until they forget my face.”

Kristoff cocked his eyebrow, curiosity on his face but he said nothing. Instead, he handed Betty her gift. It looked like a card with probably a hefty check in it. Surprised, I realized he didn't hand her the gift bag he held in his hand.

"Ah, you shouldn't have," she purred, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Okay, you guys go mingle. I'm going to put these in a safe place."

She pretty much skipped away, grinning. My guess was that she was having a great time. I turned my attention to my girls.

"You want to go play with your friends?"

"I wish it was my birthday," Saoirse complained. "I want gifts," she pouted.

"Ah, baby, it will be here before you know it," I said, hugging her. "We'll get you one of those special cakes you like on my Pinterest page."

"Oh, yes Mommy! That would be a perfect cake," she jumped but then frowned. "What about a gift?"

Kristoff lowered himself down to Saoirse's eye level.

"Actually, I have a little present for you girls," Kristoff chimed in, smiling. I narrowed my eyes on him suspiciously as he reached into his bag. He handed a box that looked suspiciously like jewelry to each of the girls.

"Kristoff," I warned. "I sure hope toys are in there."

He grinned, suddenly looking ten years younger. I drooled over him as my girls eagerly worked their little fingers, excited to see what's in their boxes.

The second Saoirse opened her box, her whole face lit up.

"No!" I scolded him in a hushed tone while she squealed from joy. Sierra followed her sister's antics although she wasn't exactly sure why.

"Mommy, the jewelry matches yours!" Saoirse raved, her eyes shining like black diamonds. "Now I have my own. And Sierra has her own!" She turned to see her oldest sister. "And look! Sienna has her own too!"

Saoirse beamed as she threw herself at Kristoff, smiling. She showed him excitedly how beautiful it was, not realizing that he knew exactly how it looked since he bought it. He smiled, his deep green eyes twinkling with mischief and delight.

Something about him around my girls made my chest squeeze. But I couldn't let my girls have such an expensive gift. Not to mention, they were bound to lose it.

“Kristoff,” I hummed my disapproval softly. “You shouldn’t have done that. I can’t let them have it.” Saoirse, hearing my statement, immediately stepped back and clutched her necklace. The look in her eyes told me she’d throw a fit if I tried to take it away.

“Calm down,” Kristoff drawled. “They match yours but are not real diamonds or real stones. It is just an imitation,” he assured me.

“Oh.” My eyes flicked to the necklaces and then back to him. He nodded and both of our gazes returned to the girls. Sierra wrapped the necklace around her wrist and made it a bracelet. Saoirse put hers around her neck with the help of my eldest, then put both their hands over it so I couldn’t take it.

Sienna eyed hers, still in the box, unsure what to do with it.

“Sienna’s is real, but it is a very miniature version of the one I gifted you,” he added quietly. “Let her have it,” he whispered in my ear. “For me.”

My eldest daughter’s eyes ping-ponged between the two of us, unsure whether she could keep the beautiful necklace. She wanted it, I could tell by her expression. She hesitated for a second, and then slowly handed him the box with the necklace.

“Sienna, it is yours. And you will keep it,” Kristoff said firmly. Her eyes lit up, but she still looked to me for approval. Well, more like begging for approval.

“It’s a gift freely given.” He took my hands into his and gently squeezed. “It makes me happy, and I like doing it for you and your daughters. Trust me, I can afford it.”

I nodded, though I didn’t like it. All three girls went off together as if in tune and in fear I’d change my mind.

“Don’t do that again,” I warned, slightly agitated.

“Why not?” he questioned. “I want to spoil you. And them.”

“The gifts are too expensive. I don’t want them to think that it’s normal. And I can’t give you stuff like that, so it makes me feel inadequate and uncomfortable.”

He held my eyes, the emotions thick between us.

“Next time, I’ll check with you,” he remarked softly, pressing his mouth close to my ear. “And you have already given me more than all of my money could buy,” he murmured softly.

I shook my head. “I haven’t even bought you a cup of coffee,” I muttered.

“You gave me something my money can’t buy,” he said gently. “You. I’m rich and old.” I scoffed at that.

“You’re not old,” I retorted back.

He kissed my lips. “But I’m rich.” I rolled my eyes, though a smile tugged at my lips. Our fingers interlocked and his eyes lowered to them. “At least indulge me sometimes.”

“I’m indulging you all the time,” I protested softly, my chest glowing.

“Good, then wear this for me.” He pulled out one last box out of his bag. “Indulge me.”

Damn it, when he acted like that, I’d do anything he asked. I looked over to my kids to ensure they were within sight. They stuck together and played with Betty’s boys and a few other kids. So I returned my attention to Kristoff. His eyes sparkled like emeralds under the sun.

He opened the box for me, a beautiful necklace in there with a single tear shaped diamond. A simple, everyday necklace that looked very expensive. An exasperated sigh left me.

“Kristoff,” I protested weakly. “I don’t want nor need gifts.”

An expression passed his eyes, resembling vulnerability. Or maybe he readied himself for a rejection and was unaccustomed to it. Either way, I didn’t have it in me to reject him.

A deep breath of resignation slipped through my lips.

“I really don’t understand you,” I rasped, closing the distance between us. “It’s beautiful. Just the kind that I would have picked. Although mine would be much cheaper, and probably fake.”

He bent his head and his lips brushed over mine.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Oh, Kristoff.” He gifted *me* a necklace and he thanked me. “Thank *you* for the beautiful necklace.” I pressed my palms against his chest. “No more gifts though,” I warned.

“You must be the only woman that doesn’t want gifts,” he teased, the look in his eyes giving me butterflies. I couldn’t even imagine how it would feel to fully belong to him. Yes, he had some skewed morals with his contract, but he was a good man. Maybe broken a little; but aren’t we all. “Can I put it on you?”

“Yes,” I breathed out.

I longed for him. Ached for him. The scent of his cologne and his heat were quickly becoming something I craved. I watched him take the

necklace out of the box, and I shifted around, lifting up my hair. He stood behind me and placed it around my neck. I held my breath as his fingers brushed against my skin as he clipped it on. His lips were soft on my skin, the kiss fleeting. A light shudder ran down my spine, goosebumps rose on my skin.

“Well, hello again.” A familiar voice I couldn’t quite place came from behind us. “Two lovebirds.” I turned around and came face to face with Jonathan. He sported a bruise on his left cheek, a reminder of the other night. Kristoff’s hand wrapped around me possessively, his body tense.

Silence stretched, the two men staring each other down, but it was clear neither one of them would say another word. Kristoff wore his pristine, Armani suit, looking dark and sharp, while Jonathan wore khaki pants and a casual polo shirt, his blond hair ruffled. Two opposites.

I cleared my throat. “Hello. How are you?” I broke the tense silence.

Jonathan smiled tightly. “Can’t complain. Unless the jackass tries to punch me again.” I cocked my eyebrow, while he glared at Kristoff. My eyes darted between the two men.

“I didn’t realize you knew Betty?” I said for no reason at all.

“I don’t,” he stated, his eyes never wavering from Kristoff. “I work with her husband.”

“Oh.” That was unexpected.

Kristoff’s ex-wife strode towards us, her smile fake and eyes full of daggers on me. A teenage boy of about sixteen walked along with her, steadying her every so often. God, she was drunk again.

“Well, well. Look who we have here.” Kristoff’s ex-wife’s tone was full of venom.

“Gemma, I believe you’ve met my wife,” Jonathan said coldly, his eyes on Jacqueline. If my husband looked at me that way, I’d hide and lock the doors. Jonathan hated his wife.

Kristoff pulled me closer to him, and it felt like an extra layer of security. She took another step but stumbled and her son caught her. He gave us an embarrassed look. Poor kid.

“Leave her,” Jonathan gritted.

The boy held on to his mother and only let go once she was stable on her legs. Kristoff looked completely bored, his expression cold. He ignored Jonathan and his ex-wife, his eyes traveling over their heads, like they didn’t even exist.

Taking Kristoff's cue, I ignored the woman. But I couldn't ignore the boy. He looked Sienna's age, although a bit shy and reserved.

I extended my arm to the boy, smiling. "Hi, I'm Gemma," I introduced myself. "What's your name?"

"It's Kai, ma'am." He had manners.

"You must be about sixteen?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered.

"Gemma, this is my son," Jonathan chimed in. The resemblance between the two was strong.

Beneath Kristoff's cold, confident exterior was a man. Starving, possessive, and angry. Because he was cheated by the people closest to him. My heart hurt for him, the need to wrap my arms around his waist and offer comfort strong.

My husband's infidelities hurt, but those women were strangers to me. Kristoff lost a wife and a best friend at the same time. He was such a proud and strong man, no wonder he took it to heart.

A cry traveled over the backyard and my attention shifted to it. Saoirse ran towards us, crying, her sisters trailing behind her. Alarmed, I immediately lowered to her eye level.

"Mommy," Saoirse cried out. "Sienna is being mean to me."

"What happened, Saoirse?" Kristoff knelt down, offering her his handkerchief. The man was a perfect gentleman.

She sniffed, holding back her tears, eyeing the handkerchief. When she didn't move, Kristoff patted her face dry. His hand slightly clumsy; too big on her face. Yet, I hadn't seen a sweeter sight in a very long time.

"She won't let me wear her necklace," she complained on a hiccup

"Saoirse, you have yours," I reasoned. "That's hers."

"But I want it," she pouted.

Sierra jumped in. "I want too."

Kristoff's attention turned to my youngest and he smiled. "You don't like the one I got you?"

Sierra's big blue eyes darted to her necklace, wrapped around her chubby wrist, then returned to look at Kristoff. "I like it."

He smiled. "I'm happy to hear that. Are you going to keep it?"

My youngest nodded, her eyes shining. "Yes."

"Good, that makes me very happy," he commended.

“Saoirse, do you want to keep your gift or give it to your sister?” I tried Kristoff’s approach.

“No,” she grumbled. “That’s mine.”

I smiled, sharing an amusing glance with Kristoff.

“That’s right. And Sienna’s necklace is hers.”

“Okay,” she agreed. I hugged her, then stood up with Kristoff’s help. A smile played around his lips, his eyes glinting with humor. I rolled my eyes. “See what jewelry does to women,” I teased.

“Are these your kids?” Jonathan asked in surprise, his eyes darting over my three girls.

“Yes,” I answered with a proud smile. I pointed to my baby. “This is my youngest, Sierra. Saoirse is my five-year-old. And my oldest Sienna,” I said motioning towards my fifteen-year-old.

“Hello,” all three greeted in unison, their eyes curiously on Kai.

“I didn’t know you had children,” Jacqueline snickered. “You don’t seem the kid type.”

I had to keep myself from snapping at her.

“It turns out I’m the type,” I replied. “All three are mine.”

Sienna reached out her hand to Kai, unconcerned with tension among adults.

“Hi there,” she smiled at Kai. “Want to play volleyball? We need one more to play the game.”

He shook her hand and I chimed in to introduce them. “Sienna, this is Kai.”

“Sure, I would love to play,” he answered Sienna. “Fair warning though. I’m not good at volleyball.”

Saoirse gave him a big smile. “That’s ok. We’ll help you. I like you.” Sierra grinned and nodded in agreement. She took his one hand, Sierra his other and the three dragged him away along.

“Where is their dad?” Jacqueline inquired, her speech slightly slurry. God, the woman had no tact at all. “Ditched him to be Kristoff’s whore.”

Kristoff growled, taking a warning step towards her, but I took his hand and tugged him backwards.

“He passed away,” I answered tightly.

“And where did Kristoff find you?” she spat out, the insinuation in her voice didn’t escape me.

“At Starbucks,” I retorted sarcastically. It wasn’t strictly a lie.



“Your girls took Kai under their wing,” Jonathan switched the subject.

I followed his eyes, just in time to see them all laughing. “He’s in good hands,” I assured him. “Though Saoirse might talk his ear off.”

He chuckled and another heartbeat of uncomfortable silence followed.

“And-” Jacqueline didn’t finish whatever she was going to say.

“Excuse us.” Kristoff interrupted and his possessive touch on my back stirred us away from them. We strode over to one of the empty tables. “You okay?” he asked when we were out of the earshot.

“Yes.” We both sat down, his arm coming around the back of my seat. “How about you?”

“Never better.” His mouth found the sensitive spot on my neck, kissing it lightly. I fought the urge to tilt my head sideways to allow him better access.

“Kristoff,” I breathed out, my heart thundering. “People will see.”

One more kiss and he leaned back, but his left arm remained looped over my seat. Like he wanted to make sure everyone knew I was with him.

People joined our seating area, and conversation started about everything and nothing. The kids played, their laughter traveling over the backyard and mixing with adult chatter and music playing somewhere in the background. The smell of the grill traveled over the breeze, and somehow the afternoon was perfect.

Both of us relaxed, it felt so right being here with him. He talked about an acquisition in California he was considering. I told him about my hiking trip. Unlike Jack who never sat with me during any gathering we attended together, Kristoff remained with me, attentive and interested only in me.

“Just be prepared for someone to beg you to carry them,” I warned him as we both laughed. “The hike was five miles and four of those were spent begging me to carry her.”

“Saoirse?” he questioned, his eyes sparkling with humor. “The little girl brimming with life was too tired?”

I chuckled. “Yes. She said it was too boring. No bears came so she insisted I carry her.” His eyebrow frowned in confusion. “I know, the logic makes no sense.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Did you?” he questioned.

“Heck no,” I chuckled. “If I even attempted, Sierra would be next. Besides, I like my painless back, thank you very much.” My eyes darted to the girls again to see them showing Kai where to stand in their game.

Lost in our conversation, we didn't notice Rick joining us and taking a spot at my side.

"Hey, beautiful," Rick greeted me with a kiss on the cheek.

"Hey there. Good job with the party," I commended him.

"Betty did most of it," he answered, rolling his eyes. "I know, it defeats the purpose. But her instructions were driving me nuts."

"Okay, both of you did a great job then," I chuckled. "You invited people from work too?"

"Just Jonathan. He's a great guy." Kristoff tensed next to me, but he said nothing. I put my right hand on his left thigh, squeezing in comfort. The gesture didn't escape Rick, but he said nothing. "He's the only one I invited. Betty doesn't know him so I guess he is my guest. Although, I didn't know his wife was going to accompany him. Usually it's just him and his son," he elaborated, and then added, glancing over his shoulder, "She is a piece of work. Crazy as fuck, if you ask me."

My eyes flicked to Kristoff, but he didn't seem concerned with Rick's comment. It was a small world to run into your ex twice in a week.

"Rick, not sure if you met Kristoff," I changed the subject, introducing the two men. "Kristoff Baldwin is my ummm... my boss."

Rick's eyes darted between the two of us, his brown gaze eyeing us suspiciously. I couldn't blame him. One didn't put their hand on their boss' thigh.

Rick extended his hand to Kristoff and the two shook hands.

"Did you come together?" Rick questioned.

"Ah, no," I answered quickly. Rick glanced at Kristoff's arm around my chair that gave the impression of me hanging out with my date rather than my boss, then looked back at me with a slightly raised eyebrow. As if he was asking me whether I was certain. But to his credit, he said nothing. Kristoff, on the other hand, could have frozen Rick with his stare and our conversation from earlier this week came to mind. He was jealous.

I squeezed Kristoff's thigh again, hoping to reassure him there was nothing between me and Rick. I loved him as a good friend. He has been with me through many good and hard times. He and Betty were the closest thing to family that I had.

Betty strolled down the lawn with a glass of wine in one hand, smiling happily, and joined her husband and us. Placing a loud smooch on her husband's cheek, she grinned at all of us.

“The whole party is buzzing about you two,” Betty addressed Kristoff and I, her movements slightly clumsy as she sat down. I groaned, but she chuckled. “I might have had something to do with it,” she admitted conspicuously. “Your ex-wife, Kristoff, hates Gemma’s guts and tried to start a rumor.”

“Betty-” I warned. Drama was the last thing we needed.

“I won’t let that drunk speak badly about my best friend.” Betty slurred her words angrily. “Who in the hell does she think she is?”

“She’s not worth it,” I told her. “And I can handle her, so no need to go to battle on my behalf,” I assured her.

She waved her hand with her glass, as if it was nothing, spilling drops of wine down her shirt.

“Let’s slow down on the alcohol,” Rick grumbled, annoyed.

Kristoff’s fingers brushed against the exposed skin on my neck, strands of my hair wrapped around them and oddly his movements soothed.

“Don’t be a party pooper, husband,” she said, side-eying her husband. I knew that look. Nothing and nobody would ruin her fun. “We want a hopping party. Right, Gemma?” she added, trying to drag me into it.

“The party is certainly hopping,” I answered vaguely, avoiding taking sides. It was diplomacy at its finest - at least in my book.

Using the distraction, I sought out my girls. My little ones were playing with Betty’s little ones, being used to each other’s company since the time they were born. Sienna, on the other hand, was hanging out with Kai and a few other teenagers playing volleyball.

Kristoff never ceased his movements behind me, his fingers brushing against my hair, gently caressing my skin. Betty and Rick got into discussion about caterers, and I leaned back further into Kristoff’s touch.

My skin burned hot everywhere his fingers brushed and I inhaled deeply, letting his cologne invade my lungs. I’d never known a man who could arouse me with a light brush of his finger. Or a single look.

“I want you so fucking much right now,” he rumbled against my ear, his hot breath against my skin, sending waves of lust down my body. It would be so much easier if it was only lust, but it became so much more. This man had power over me like nobody ever before. Maybe I’d regret it in one month, two months. A year from now.

But right now, I wanted more of him. More of whatever was brewing between us.

*I should be able to get what I want once in a while, right?*

I turned to look at him, dark heat flickering across his expression.

“Rick,” I interrupted my friends’ discussion, both their faces turned to me. “Would you mind keeping an eye on the girls? Just for a bit,” I assured him, though he was already nodding his head in agreement. “Kristoff is redecorating his guest room,” I lied boldly. “The paint color you used in there might work for him.”

Kristoff’s face showed no emotion, no surprise. Just his hand on the back of me, gently tightened around strands of my hair.

Rick nodded his agreement. “Of course,” Betty answered quickly, before her husband could even open his mouth. “If you like it, I can give you the color code number for the paint.”

“Perfect,” Kristoff responded, then stood up, offering me his hand.

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## CHAPTER 34

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# GENEVIEVE



I placed my fingers into his big, warm palm and his hand closed over them. He didn't release it once we started walking. Hand in hand we strolled through the backyard. I fought the urge to run, dragging him behind me. We were five feet from the house when his ex-wife stepped in front of us.

She stared at Kristoff, desire shining in her eyes. Kristoff didn't bother glancing her way, his arm wrapped around me and together we sidestepped her, leaving her behind us. His eyes were only on me, like nothing else existed in this world. It made me feel like something precious to him.

Once we stepped into the house and the moment the patio door slid behind us, I gave into my instinct. I dragged him, rushing us both through the house, up the stairs, and into Betty's guest room.

An uncharacteristic wide grin marred his beautiful face. "Are you going to take advantage of me?" he teased, though his voice was too hoarse and his eyes dark, full of the lust reflecting in my own.

I locked the door behind us, then led him into the large bathroom, locking that door as well. Something feral flicker across his expression, setting me aflame. This time, I was determined to give *him* pleasure.

I dropped to my knees at his feet. Heat flared in his gaze and the bulge in his pants seemed on board with my intentions. Anticipation danced down my spine as I worked on his belt buckle. My heart drummed in my chest as the gentle, metal clang of his belt rang in the air. A shiver ran through me and the second his pants were undone, I wrapped my fingers around his thick, hard length.

A strained breath inhaled and I met his burning gaze on me. His eyes had grown dark, pools full of lust swallowing me. I licked him from base to tip, relishing the taste of him. My body was no longer mine but his, as breathy noises left my throat and his precum covered my tongue.

His hand yanked my hair and I met his burning gaze. His grip in my hair was firm and commanding, almost rough. I liked it.

“Suck it,” he ordered in a raspy voice, sending a wave of heat to my pussy. His commanding voice made me hot all over, my sweet spot throbbing with need to have him inside. I squeezed my thighs together, trying to ease the pulsing ache. My whole body was on fire and we had barely gotten started.

I ran my tongue across his crown, then slid him deep into my mouth and his grip on my thick hair tightened even more. Lust shot through my bloodstream, my half-lidded gaze met his gaze. It was empowering. The biggest turn on.

“Fuck.” His voice was guttural, his whole body filled with tension. His free hand caressed my cheek, his rough thumb caressing it and raw emotions bloomed in my chest.

“You’re perfect,” he rasped. “I’m going to fuck that pouty mouth of yours. Thrust deep down your throat. Can I?”

I hummed my approval. A shudder rippled through his body as he slid deeper into my mouth. My hands gripped his thighs, my nails digging into his flesh. I remained still, letting him do what he wanted.

More than anything, I wanted to please him.

“If it gets to be too much, tap my thigh.” His voice was thick, hoarse. As if he teetered on the edge of self-control.

He pushed deeper, until he was buried all the way down my throat and then remained still, letting me adjust to his size.

I blinked, my eyes watering from his size, but I refused to tap out. I started sucking, slowly at first. Tentatively.

“That’s it,” he growled, his groans spurring me on. “You suck it like a good little slut.” My eyes snapped. “My slut. Only mine.” A moan vibrated through my throat and he started thrusting into my mouth, faster and harder.

His ragged breaths and my muffled moans were the only sounds, as he fucked my mouth. Tears trickled down my face and he stilled. I raised my eyebrows in question. He started to pull his hard cock out of my mouth and I grunted my disapproval, digging my nails into his flesh.

“You want more?” he asked incredulously, his voice rough.

I blinked at him in answer. His groan rumbled from low in his throat, and he went wild. He resumed fucking my mouth harder, and I moaned my approval as he thrust deep and fast.

“Your mouth feels so good,” he purred, his voice guttural. Possessive. “Suck it harder.”

And I did. I let him fuck my mouth. I let him use me. Because I wanted to be what he needed; what he wanted. Seeing his control slip away was the best aphrodisiac, the kind of power you could get drunk from.

His muscles tensed, he was close. I bobbed my head, relaxing my throat, letting him hit the back of my throat.

“I want to come in your mouth,” he groaned. “Can I?”

I blinked my agreement, my mouth full of him. “Swallow every single drop,” he ordered, his voice hoarse.

I moaned, then nodded, to ensure no misunderstandings. His groan vibrated against the tile, sending a rush of heat down my body. It pushed Kristoff over the edge and he came hard. Swallowing his cum, I continued sucking, his orgasm the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. I swallowed the last drop of his seed, licking my lips, and my skin heated under the intensity of his stare.

Finally, I understood the appeal of kneeling in front of a man. It was the most empowering feeling. Intoxicating and addictive. I could bring this powerful man to the edge of control with my mouth.

His cock slid out of my mouth with a soft *pop*. His hard breathing filled the bathroom. A soft expression in his eyes settled between us as he ran this thumb across my bottom lip.

“Mine,” he breathed, as I shifted back into a kneeling position. “You let anyone touch you and I’ll kill them. Because you’re mine and mine alone.”

*His.* God help me; I wanted to be his. I wanted to be everything he needed and wanted. My feelings were growing. At a rapid speed. It was illogical, incomprehensible and uncharacteristic for me.

“Understood,” he rasped.

“Yes, I’m yours,” I breathed, the throbbing between my legs growing by the second.

He pulled his briefs over his softening erection and buckled his pants.

*Emotional detachment.* It had never backfired so quickly. I wondered if maybe I hadn’t fallen under his spell at first sight.



“You’ll be my undoing,” he murmured, the lines on his face relaxed. And all along, I feared he was already mine.

The chatter of the party, soft music, and laughter reached my ears, now that the lustful fog cleared. Both Kristoff and my eyes darted to the window, only now realizing it was open all along.

“Fuck.” Both of us uttered the word at the same time.

My cheeks singed, the possibility someone heard us settling with dread. Hesitant, my eyes darted to Kristoff.

“They didn’t hear anything,” he assured me.

“You sure?”

His lips curved into a mischievous smile. “If it was me on my knees eating your pussy, the entire party would hear us.” I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t stop a smile from forming. Reaching out for my hand, he helped me up from my knees. “Because your pussy is the sweetest thing I have ever tasted and my sole purpose in life is to hear you scream my name.”

My breath caught in my throat. His hands grabbed my butt, lifting me up. He sat me down on the counter, his palms moved to my inner thighs, spreading them open.

“Kristoff, I hope you are not-” My voice trailed off when he grinned, sending my heart into overdrive. He was beautiful when he smiled.

“You want me to eat your pussy,” he purred into my ear while his hand found its way under my dress and his fingers brushed against my panties. “Jesus, you’re soaked,” he groaned.

His finger slid inside my panties, his finger rubbing my clit and my back arched.

“Tell me you want it,” he demanded, removing his hand and the loss was instant.

A shuddering breath left my lips. “I want it,” I admitted softly. “But this was for you. Besides, as you said, I’ll be screaming your name and everyone will hear us.”

His hands wrapped around me and I leaned against his chest. I couldn’t decide whether I was relieved or disappointed he gave in so quickly. He buried his head in the crook of my neck, nuzzling my neck and so many fluttering feelings boomed inside me. I looped my arms around his neck, and buried my face into his hard chest. His heat and scent became a familiarity.

Brushing his lips over my sensitive skin on my collarbone, I inhaled deeply, then exhaled. His tenderness was feeding my cravings. My heart and my soul needed him, like my lungs needed oxygen. I started to wonder how I'd move on after this little thing between us was over.

The contract hung in the air, just waiting to explode between us. Kristoff wasn't a man to give up on things he wanted or required.

Maybe I'd suck him off when that time came so he'd be mind blown by my mouth, and he'd forget about the contract. Sounds like a reasonable plan. I smiled against his chest, deciding it was a good plan. Besides, unlike ever before, I was totally on board with giving him a blow job. Over and over again.

"Why are you smiling?" His deep voice rumbled against his chest and my eyes lifted to him. He watched me curiously, his face still relaxed. Jesus, it made me want to blow him again.

"Who says I'm smiling?" I murmured mischievously, a smile playing around my lips

"I felt your smile against my chest."

I couldn't tell him I decided to give him a blow job each time he brought up the contract. Half-truth then.

"I decided I'm going to suck you off whenever I want something," I answered looking at him. It was the closest to the truth I dared to go. My face grew hot, but I held his gaze. "Hmmm... it wasn't for me before, but I quite like it with you."

He watched me in silence and I wondered what passed through his mind. Maybe he thought I'd use him. He probably ran into that a lot. Maybe I should explain myself further, but I didn't want to lie.

"We better get back to the party," I murmured, lifting my head and pressing a kiss on his mouth.

I slid off the counter, then hurriedly washed up, pulled my fingers through my hair to straighten the disheveled mess. Leaning against the bathroom door, Kristoff patiently waited for me, his eyes watched my every move. I turned around and smoothed my palms over the dress.

"Is this okay?" I asked.

"You're perfect," he said and set my heart on fire. He grasped the back on my neck and pressed his mouth against mine, his tongue sliding against mine. A deep, empty ache pulsed between my thighs in response. I moaned into his mouth, my fingers gripping his shirt, pulling him closer to me.

His hand slid between my legs. When his fingers brushed over my soaking wet panties, a whimper left my mouth.

“You are drenched.” He nipped my bottom lip.

“Kristoff,” I breathed against his mouth, my hips grinding against his hand. “We need to get back before it’s time for the cake.”

“You are my cake,” he murmured.

A choked laugh escaped me. I gripped his wrist but he was too strong and my body wasn’t cooperating. My mind said stop, but my body kept rubbing against him, needing the release.

“I touched myself when you called me,” I blurted out randomly. His movement stilled, his eyes searching my gaze.

“Tell me,” he demanded.

“I only did it briefly while you were on the phone,” I admitted softly. “After we hung up, I-I continued.”

The air between us grew hot, a pulse thundered in my ears and my cheeks burned with admission.

“Did you call out my name?” He thrust his fingers deeper.

“Yes,” I moaned.

“Good,” he murmured. Another kiss on my lips. “Next time, you will do it with me on the line so I can hear you moan for me.”

I inhaled a shaky breath and nodded my agreement. This lust would burn me alive.

A loud cheer traveled through the open window and woke both of us from our desire infused fog.

“We better go,” I said softly.

His one arm looped around me, we walked back to the party.

“The paint is eggshell,” I muttered under my breath. He cocked his eyebrow in confusion. “We went to check out the wall color.”

The corner of his lips tugged up. “The paint color is the last thing on my mind,” he said, his eyes shining with amusement. “I’m scheming on how to get you into my bed, so I can keep you there for days.”

“Days, huh?” I chuckled, my eyes skimming through the crowd in search of my daughters. They were still in the same spot, playing with Betty’s kids.

Betty and Rick sat nearby the kids, chatting with some guests. Spotting us, Rick waved us over. The moment we got closer, my youngest two spotted us and pulled us away before we had a chance to sit down.

“It’s a castle,” Saoirse bragged proudly. “It’s going to be mine one day.”

“I like it. Maybe we can add a pool,” Kristoff commented. “And a big playground in the backyard.

Her eyes lit up, shining like dark diamonds. She gave more ideas, chatting away to Kristoff, while Sierra and I each dug with little plastic shovels.

My eyes darted to Kristoff every so often, who listened to Saoirse intently, answering her numerous questions. They started to build a tower, discussing the stability of it. My lips curved into a smile - I hope he realized Saoirse had no idea what that meant. Just across the sandbox, Sienna and Kai had a lively discussion going.

It was a perfect family moment.

*It isn’t real*, my mind whispered.

Except I wanted it to be real.

Within the next half an hour, we sang “Happy Birthday,” ate some cake, and readied to go.

I watched Sienna and Kai exchange numbers, whispering to each other. The boy seemed to be okay, though it was hard to gauge from first impressions.

As Sienna and Kai hugged goodbye, Saoirse insisted Kristoff accompany her to go get her party favor. Sierra’s small hand shyly took Kristoff’s, and the three of them left me waiting for them, not even bothering a glance back my way.

“Will you let your daughter talk to my son?” I turned my head to the left, finding Jonathan next to me. “They exchanged phone numbers,” he added unnecessarily.

“Sienna can pick her own friends,” I answered him. “Unless they entice bad behavior or attempt to hurt her, I usually don’t interfere.”

“I should apologize for my behavior the other day,” he started and I met his gaze. He seemed sincere. “I was being an ass. I had a hard day with Jacqueline and took it out on you.” I remained quiet, watching him. I didn’t know if I could trust someone who betrayed his best friend. “She can drive a sane person insane.”

*I bet*, I thought silently.

“Please forgive me.” He sounded sincere. The man had a heavier cross to bear, if he had to deal with Jacqueline on a daily basis. I guess karma was a bitch.

“Sure, you’re forgiven,” I told him. “Although you don’t need me to tell you that you owe a bigger apology to Kristoff.”

Jonathan cocked an eyebrow, like I surprised him. Shrugging my shoulder, my eyes traveled over the guests searching for the people that matter in my life. I’d spotted Kristoff right away, Sierra on his shoulders, gripping his hair with a wide grin on her face. Even from here, I could see her face shining with happiness. Saoirse held Kristoff’s hand, speaking vividly about something. Whatever she said had his booming laugh travel over and my lips tugged up.

I had taken that *emotional detachment* and burned it to the ground. I was madly in love with this man.

The realization hit like lightning. *Holy fucking shit!* I fell in love with my boss. It snuck up on me with every look, every touch, every word. Though what sealed it for me was the way he treated my daughters. As if they were his.

“You’re good for him,” Jonathan’s words cut through my monologue and my head snapped his way. What the hell was he talking about? Seeing my confused expression, he continued, “You are just what Kristoff needs. You’re good for him.”

I watched him, my mouth slightly parted, pondering what his angle was.

Before anything else could be said, Kristoff came up behind me and I turned to him. The cold look he gave Rick earlier didn’t compare to the murderous stare he pinned Jonathan with. If there was a hell, it was in Kristoff’s gaze and he was dragging Jonathan to the pits of it.

Kai and Sienna came up, both smiling happily, while dread pooled in the pit of my stomach at my realization. Was it even supposed to happen so fast? I didn’t fall in love with my late husband for a long time. It was more a development than falling in love.

“Hey you two,” I greeted them, keeping my panic somewhere far away. “Did you have fun?” I asked them both.

Kai and Sienna shared a look. My eldest daughter’s cheeks were awash with blush. She liked him - a lot. Holy fuck! Was something in the air?

*Love is in the air. That’s what,* I scoffed silently.

“Yes, ma’am. I had a great time,” Kai answered, while a slight panic squeezed my chest. Though I wasn’t sure whether it was for my daughter’s crush or my own. “Saoirse and Sierra introduced me to their friends, and Sienna introduced me to other teenagers.” He hesitated for a bit, and then

continued, "Would it be ok if I call Sienna? We exchanged numbers, and maybe we could go out to the movies sometimes?" His cheek blushed. He was nervous that I'd say no. "You can come too," he quickly added.

I couldn't even imagine that situation. Tagging along behind my teenage daughter and her date. Would Jonathan tag along too and we'd pretend to talk about sports or weather?

"Sure," I answered. I'd give kudos to the boy. He at least asked whether he could call her. I turned to Sienna. "As long as it doesn't interfere with your studies and homework. Kai, I'm sure your parents feel the same."

"Yes, they do." His big grin was answer enough. "Thank you. It was nice meeting you." Kai turned to Kristoff. "You too, sir."

I bet the poor kid had no idea his mother was once married to this man. Kristoff could have been his father if his mother and the best friend hadn't betrayed him.

With that, we left the party, Kristoff holding Saoirse's hand, Sierra still on his shoulders, and Sienna next to me telling me all about her time with Kai.

We got to my car first. Kristoff lowered Sierra off his shoulders, much to her dismay, and handed her to me. Like we had done this a million times, he helped Saoirse into her car seat, while I put Sierra into hers. Sienna slid into the front passenger seat and immediately focused on her phone. Probably texting Kai, though we just left him.

I shut the door and Kristoff walked me to the driver's side. Glancing into my car, I noted the kids' attention was on their iPads.

So feeding my infatuation with this man, I leaned closer, pressing a kiss onto his lips. He cupped my face, deepening the kiss. Our tongues danced against each other and a moan climbed up my throat.

"God, I want to take you home," he murmured against my lips, then nipped my bottom lip gently as if he was mad at me for not being able to take me home.

I put space between us. "I'll see you tomorrow at work," I whispered softly, part of me wishing we were going home together.

Two heartbeats passed.

"What did Jonathan talk to you about?" His voice was nonchalant, but the cautious expression in his eyes and tension in his body was unmistakable.

“He asked whether I’d let Sienna stay in touch with his son,” I answered honestly. As for the other comment, it was best not to share it.

His eyes studied me, as if evaluating whether he could trust me or not. I could understand his distrust. Yet, I couldn’t ignore a slight hurt in my chest.

“See you tomorrow at work,” I finally said, something bitter swirling inside my chest.

A jerky nod. A light kiss on my lips. Then he opened the car door for me and helped me in.

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## CHAPTER 35

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# KRISTOFF



I couldn't say I hadn't known she would consume me. And fucking hell, did she ever!

The image of her kneeling in front of me was tattooed in my mind forever. The moment her beautiful mouth wrapped around my dick, the word *mine* seared into my chest. There was no forgetting that shit. I could still feel her soft strands as I moved them out of her face so I could see my dick sliding in and out of her full lips. She was fucking perfection on her knees. The image of her looking up to me with her soft, hypnotic brown eyes haunted me all night. Of course, it didn't help my dick. It hardened like marble - all it needed was a whisper of her memory and my cock was back in business.

God, she was magnificent. So perfect, moaning as she let me fuck her throat. She enjoyed it and that alone made it ten times better for me.

Resisting her was impossible. I wanted... no, *needed* to consume her like she was consuming me. My jealousy flared and went into overdrive with that woman. I didn't like the way Rick watched her. The fucker cared about her. A lot. But he failed her. He let that piece of shit cousin of his get his hands on a good woman. So he was too goddamn late. I'd take care of her and her girls and any man that looked at her wrong would fucking die. I knew of several ways to make people die and make it look like an accident.

Fuck, I was in so fucking deep there was no chance of getting out from under her spell.

She'd come home to me every day, sit at my table, and sleep in my bed. Though there wouldn't be much sleeping going on. I wanted the woman's everything.

When she talked, everything around me faded and all I heard was *her*. She was all I could think about these days. Fuck a billion dollar company or any million dollar deals. All my attention was on when I'd get to fuck Genevieve Rose again.

Fucking wonderful! Not helpful at my age.

For the first time in forever, I wanted a family. To trust a woman, to have her on my arm, in my house, and in my bed. I wanted to make sure she and her daughters never had to worry about anything again. I wanted to take care of them.

And I'd kill anyone that tried to hurt them - friend or foe.

Slightly overboard? Yeah, maybe, but I couldn't control it any more than I could a hurricane's path. Every second around her had me falling deeper and deeper into a web I had avoided since my last goddamn marriage fiasco.

And Gemma wasn't even spinning a web around me.

All she had to do was look my way and smile; I'd sign over my fortune to her. I'd build another one. I couldn't find another one of her. Now that I've had her, no other woman would do it for me. I wanted to worship her and fuck her all the way to Sunday, and keep her happy, just so she'd stay with me.

Like some love struck puppy, I kept glancing at the clock. She usually came in between eight and nine. It was almost ten. It had never been more apparent to me how empty my life had become until I got home last night. I needed her here, in my home. Or better yet, my fucking office. Right the fuck now.

Pulling up my cell, I checked for any response from Gemma. I sent her a message a little after nine. Nothing.

So I texted Kimberly. **\*Is Gemma in yet?\***

I tapped my fingers impatiently as the meeting continued. It was in regards to the acquisition I was eyeing. Byron shot me a sideways look, questions in his eyes, and I just shrugged. This meeting was just for appearance's sake. I knew exactly what I'd offer them.

Another tap of my fingers. Where in the fuck was Gemma? She was never late.

Here I was, sitting in my office on a Monday morning, handling a deal worth millions, and the only thing I managed energy for was getting a hard dick for my administrative assistant and worrying about her.

“Let me guess,” Byron muttered under his breath. “Your assistant is on your mind.”

I didn’t bother answering him. He had no idea how this felt. I fucking worried whether she and the girls got home safely after the party yesterday. I never worried whether a woman I fucked got home safely. I’d put them in the car and send them on their way. And here I was stressing about all the things that could go wrong in the few miles between her friend’s house and her own.

*Maybe I could have surveillance installed to ensure they were safe,* I pondered. Would it be considered an invasion of privacy if I did it for their protection?

With each taste of her I got, the obsession grew and like some crackhead, I needed more.

Fuck, I was whipped. But there was no going back. I’d make that woman sign the contract, make her mine and never let her go. If I have to, I’d use the blackmail as I did the first time - to ensure she accepted this job.

And God help any man or woman who’d try to stop me.

My phone buzzed. It was a reply from Kimberly. **\*Her car broke down on the way to work. She’s waiting for a tow truck.\***

I shot up from my seat without a second thought and strode out of the room.

“What the fuck, Kristoff?” Byron came behind me. “We were in the middle of reviewing their asset list.”

I pushed the button to the elevator.

“You handle it,” I told him. “Gemma’s car broke down,” I explained as I typed a reply to Kimberly, demanding to know where exactly Gemma was. Fuck if I’d leave my woman on the side of the road - for any business deal.

“So you walk away from potentially closing a multi-million dollar deal?” he asked with sardonic amusement.

“She’s worth more.” The elevator dinged, signaling its opening and I stepped inside.

My friend shook his head. “Fuck, you’re whipped.”

## CHAPTER 36

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# GENEVIEVE



I stood on the side of Route 50, cursing my damn car.

Of course on the day my boss needed me and worked on closing a big deal, my car would take a goddamn vacation. I leaned on the passenger side, facing the woods, and ignoring the occasional honks of cars.

A tow truck would be here any moment. Maybe I could have him drop me off at the car rental. I saw Kristoff's message but opted to ignore it, knowing his schedule and the important meeting he had scheduled for today.

Instead I shot a message to Kimberly and then called around to find a mechanic shop that would look at repairing my Honda today.

Another toot of a horn. It sounded like someone pulled up behind me and it certainly wasn't a tow truck. I didn't bother glancing up from my phone, knowing that it would start a conversation I didn't want to have with strangers.

"I'm good," I shouted over the loud highway while cars sped in both directions, keeping my eyes glued to the screen. "I already have a tow truck coming. I don't need help."

"You're going to get it anyhow." A deep, angry voice came from my left and my head snapped at the familiar tone of it.

"Kristoff?" I blinked, worried I was hallucinating.

"Why didn't you call me?" he growled. "Or respond to my text?"

It took me a moment to find my word. "You have a meeting," I breathed out incredulously. "You shouldn't be here."

"Fuck, I shouldn't." I couldn't understand why he was mad. I didn't want to bother him, knowing his schedule was packed today. "When you're

in trouble, you call *me*.” We stood chest-to-chest, his one hand gripping my chin gently, to ensure he was driving his point home. “You call *me*. I’ll always take care of you. Understood, Genevieve?”

I didn’t understand at all, but I still nodded. “I’m waiting for a tow truck,” I explained for no apparent reason.

“Fuck the tow truck,” he grumbled, nudging me towards his car. “I called in my guy. He’ll scrap the car and take care of the paperwork.”

“What?” I snapped, appalled. “You can’t just scrap my car.”

“You’re getting a new car,” he said firmly, his hand on my lower back, urging me forward.

I abruptly stopped. “Hold on just a minute. You don’t get to decide what happens to my stuff. My car.”

His expression flickered with confusion. “You need a new car,” he reasoned matter-of-factly.

“And I’ll get it when I’m ready. Not when you decide it.”

“Genevieve, you can’t go around with a piece of crap that breaks down.”

A frustrated sigh slipped through my lips. “It’s not a piece of crap. It’s my car. *Mine*. And my life.” When he just kept staring at me, I continued, “I know you mean well, but you can’t just boss me around when it comes to my life.”

A heartbeat of silence followed and it was hard to decipher what he was thinking. “I want you to be safe. Both you and the girls. You’re their whole world so naturally, I want to make sure your safety is a priority.”

I swallowed hard. He had a point there. “I’m not ready to buy a new car.”

He could buy whatever at the drop of a hat. Most people couldn’t. I was one of them.

“Let me worry about it.” He cupped my cheeks, his gaze boring into me. “Let me do this for you. It’ll be one less thing to worry about. It’s peace of mind to know you’ll have a reliable vehicle for you and your girls.”

I blinked, my eyes burning. His care for my daughters’ safety tugged on the strings of my heart and had me spiraling down into the abyss where only this affection existed. This love.

“Please, Genevieve.” He was begging to do something for me. God, I never had a chance against this man. He was everything I ever wanted. Minus emotional detachment. Minus the contract.

A terse nod and it was settled. We resumed walking towards his car. He opened the door to his Land Rover and helped me into the seat. "I'm going to get your things out of the car. Stay here."

He shut the passenger door before I could protest and I watched him stride to my Honda. Unsure what to think of it, I sat, pondering why in the heck I even listened to him. This was my personal life, not my workplace. Except, that it felt good being taken care of. Something I hadn't experienced since my parents died.

I watched him carry my purse, the girls' toys, car seats, shoes, and who knew what else and fuck, if it didn't turn me on. A fucking billionaire with a three-piece-suit that was worth more than all my wardrobe carried my girls' junk and my purse to his fancy car and my libido responded like it had just saw him naked.

Even when he got behind the wheel, I couldn't peel my eyes away from him. God he was hot. A fire lit inside me, growing hotter and brighter, and I knew if I ground against him, it wouldn't take me long to get my release.

*Sweet Jesus.*

"What?" His deep, masculine voice startled me.

"What?" I asked.

"You're looking at me weird," he remarked calmly.

Wonderful! I was on the brink of jumping his bones and he was calm as ice. "Hmmm."

"What does *hmmm* mean?" he asked, amused as he put his car into drive.

"I kind of want to find a remote road and make out in the car," I blurted out, my heart racing in my chest. Then I straightened up, my arousal forgotten. "We can't leave until the tow truck gets it."

"We are scraping that car," he said firmly, ignoring my demand to stay put. "I already arranged for a new car to be delivered to the office."

Alert shot through my spine. "I'm not taking someone else's car."

"It's not someone else's car," he replied calmly, merging into the highway traffic. "It's your car."

"But—"

"Gemma," he growled low. "I won't hear another word about it. I picked out the car and the papers are being done as we speak. I won't have you driving a car that will put you and your daughters at risk."

Fuck!

Thick emotions choked my throat, a lump making it hard to breathe while I blinked my eyes, keeping tears at bay. Jesus, what was it with me and all these weird emotions lately? This man was amazing, despite his weird contract requirements. He worried about me and my girls' safety. Jack gave me shit when I wanted a new car, despite the fact he went through five new vehicles to my single one I had since my eldest was born. Each time I contemplated getting a new car, he gave me shit on extravagant spending and it wasn't worth an argument.

"Isn't it illegal to do that on the company dime?" I whispered.

"It's not on the company." When I didn't comment, he continued, "Now about making out in the car," he mused. "I really like that idea. I'm all for it, unless you're backing out now that you're mad at me for getting you a car."

A choked laugh escaped me. This man confused me. My reaction to every single thing about him confused me.

"When you put it like that, I sound ridiculous," I complained. "But buying someone a new vehicle is not normal, you know."

This time he chuckled. "I thought we established this already. We aren't normal."

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DAYS LATER, I wished I'd taken him up on the offer and let him fuck me. Because the days had been busy, leaving us no time together. Wednesday evening, almost two weeks after Betty's birthday party, everything was in good shape to get the acquisition deal completed. Using my background in finance, Kristoff had me work up several financial scenarios for him, so he could do his own analysis and decide the best way to move negotiations to his favor.

Despite how busy it was, he'd sneak in a kiss when I'd bring him coffee or lunch. I'd forget everything and just melt into him.

The discussion of the car was put to rest, for the final time, when the vehicle was delivered. A fucking top of the line Range Rover. I insisted on paying him somehow, he insisted I stop bringing it up. He won; I lost.

The man was as stubborn as he was handsome. But it was his thoughtfulness that had me losing my head. The way he treated my



daughters. The way he offered comfort, regardless that it wasn't what he usually did. The way he stood up for me against his ex-wife. Jack had never stood up for me - fucking *ever* in all the years we've been together. And in just a few weeks, Kristoff had taken better care of me and my daughters than Jack ever did.

It wasn't just physical for me. I loved him, so fucking much that it actually hurt my heart. In all my life, I could honestly say I had never felt something so strong for another man.

Which led me to the next worry in this whole scenario. Papers loved to report on Kristoff and the women in his life. The first photo of me showed up in one of the tabloids. Kristoff went ballistic and had them pull the article. But news traveled fast.

I couldn't afford to get wrapped up in all the public's curiosity. I harbored a secret, and if it came out, it'd cost me everything.

Then why couldn't I stop this ache for him? This craving for him consumed me. His mouth on me had me losing all my senses, while the man had the capability to go back to work the next moment. It'd give me a case of whiplash and the old ghosts would appear, insecurities creeping up my spine.

Maybe now that he had me, he was slowly tiring of me. What if he no longer wanted me?

It was a ridiculous notion. He wasn't aiming for a long-term relationship. It was clear from the get go where he stood in terms of relationships. Or lack of them. It boiled down to a business contract.

I fell for him but I'd move on, unscathed. My body was probably just going through a hormonal stage so everything felt stronger. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to end our physical arrangement nor discuss it. The possibility of a rejection if I admitted my feelings held me back.

I wanted to hold on to him for as long as I could.

Standing up, I smoothed my hands down my pencil skirt. Reaching into my purse, I pulled out the necklace he bought me and clipped it behind my neck. It was the very same one he wanted to fuck me in, wearing nothing but the necklace.

Was I too old to be doing something like that? Maybe.

But I didn't give a crap. I wanted the pleasure only he could give me. Flicking a glance to Kimberly's empty desk, I pondered waiting for her to come back from her visit to legal but then decided against it. I grabbed the

document he had me working on and with a deep inhale, I sauntered toward his office door. It was past seven in the evening. I knocked on the door, then opened it and peeked my head in. He motioned for me to come in as he stood in front of his executive desk, talking on the phone. Whoever it was, I felt sorry for them because he was ripping into them.

He wore his signature Armani suit, his jacket and tie removed, leaving him in the white button down shirt with his top button undone. This man could wear rags and still make my knees rattle. His rolled up sleeves revealed his strong forearms, and I couldn't help my eyes fleeing to them. I knew how good they felt on my skin, how warm his embrace was. It made my chest tighten with longing.

Lust for him would be easier to get over. But this *longing*; it was what scared me. My heart ached from the intense need. I wanted to be the subject of the man's love. *His* love and affection.

Shifting my eyes back up his body, I admired his strong torso. Broad shoulders. Our eyes met.

Busted!

Heat rose up on my cheeks at being caught gawking him.

"Fix that, Mike, by tomorrow!" Kristoff barked into the phone. "Ten a.m.!" He ended the conversation with a click.

"Everything ok?" I breathed out, holding his green gaze.

"It will be. Tomorrow." The tension in the air was thick, one spark and flames would ignite. The air between us pulsed with each heartbeat. He strolled toward me, his gaze locked with mine.

"Gemma?" He stopped right in front of me and I craned my neck to keep eye contact. I waited for him to continue, suddenly my mouth dry, as my heart drummed against my ribs.

He brushed his thumb across the fluttering pulse on my neck. I tilted my head, giving him better access. Something about it felt vulnerable and thrilling at the same time.

I trusted him not to hurt me physically. Call it intuition. Or stupidity. Either way, he had my explicit trust in that department. It was trusting him explicitly with my heart that worried me.

"What is going through that beautiful head of yours?"

Squeezing my thighs together, I bit on my bottom lip. His eyes followed the movement. He ran a thumb across my bottom lip, while his other hand remained wrapped around my neck, his thumb caressing the wild pulse.

“Nothing,” I lied.

His fiery gaze burned on me and I held my breath, hoping he’d catch me in a lie. All he had to do was slide his fingers underneath my skirt and he’d find me drenched. Instead, he let out a sardonic breath and his finger traced the necklace he bought me.

“You’re wearing it,” he rasped softly, his finger touching the soft skin.

“Yes.”

He bent his head down and nuzzled my neck, his mouth tracing the sensitive spot from my ear down to my collarbone. “I want you naked, wearing nothing but your heels and that necklace. Then I’ll fuck you hard, your screams will rattle the glass of the building.”

A moan traveled up my throat and my fingers curled against his bicep.

“Shouldn’t you eat first?” I murmured, teasing him in a breathless voice. “Rumor is you get cranky when you’re hungry.”

His booming laugh filled his office, the late hour affording darkness and privacy. It felt intimate. Relaxed. I loved it.

He strode to his chair and sat behind the desk. I followed, setting the papers in front of him. I might have bent over unnecessarily, giving him a glimpse of my ass. My heart danced in my chest in anticipation, my skin flared, hungry for his touch. When I felt his both hands on my hips, my breath came out unsteadily.

A gentle slap on my ass and a soft gasp escaped me. Then he pulled me into his lap, his bulge hard against my ass.

“Who does this ass belong to?” His voice was a whisper in my ear as his one hand fisted my hair gently, tugging it back.

“You.”

At the sound of his approval against my neck, my heart fluttered contentedly. His hand traveled over my thighs, snuck underneath my skirt, his palm rough against my skin. My legs parted, needing him in my sweet spot.

“This pussy?” he rasped, cupping me between my legs.

My skin buzzed with heat and electricity. His words only enhanced the fire burning in my veins. And by now, I knew only he could extinguish it. Only to ignite it again and again. Until I turned into ash.

I shifted on his lap, grinding against his hard shaft. “Yours,” I breathed out.

“You little minx.” He let out a sardonic breath, then nipped my earlobe. I yelped, and he pressed his mouth over it, the sting easing. He trailed kisses down the back of my neck, sending goosebumps down my spine. He sucked on the faint outline of my collarbone and a loud moan slipped through my lips.

“Y-you should laugh more,” I panted an irrelevant statement, grinding against his cock. His smiles, his laugh warmed my chest and fed the fire inside me.

Heat erupted between my thighs and adrenaline rushed through my veins. My hands laid flat against his table, the wooden surface cool against my palms.

“With you, I will.” His hot breath was in my ear. His hard body pressing my back. “Tell me what you were thinking about while I was on the phone?”

“No,” I gasped stubbornly, as I ground against his erection. The lust inside me grew more frantic with each second, the hot need burning out of control.

“Do that again, and I’ll strip you right now,” he murmured, his breath rough.

His fingers, still between my legs, slipped under my panties and rubbed my swollen clit. The throbbing in my lower belly intensified. My heart thundered with such force, I thought it’d have to resemble a heart attack. Heat spread through my body like wildfire and warmth erupted into a full-blown explosion.

Kristoff curled his hand around my neck, forcing me to turn my head. His mouth took mine into a bruising kiss. An explosive kiss. Another moan escaped when he shifted his hips, his hardness rubbing against my core. His hands snaked into my hair, tugging me closer to him. Like he couldn’t get enough.

“I’m going to bend you over and make you come so hard, you’ll be screaming my name.” If I thought I was drenched before, I was dead wrong. My pussy dripped at his filthy words. “My woman likes that,” he purred.

“P-please,” I begged, pushing myself against him. I needed him to stop this torture and just thrust into me.

“Tell me what you were thinking about?” he demanded. The man had the self-control of a damn saint. I needed a devil right now, not a saint.

“No.” Something in my chest sparked, like the inferno of his gaze. I loved defying him, anticipation of the pleasure growing with each heartbeat. “Maybe you should spank it out of me,” I suggested, my tone breathless and my face burning crimson.

His lips brushed against mine, his finger slid inside me. My eyes fluttered shut and I whimpered against his lips. “I’ll give you a million dollars. Today. Tell me what you were thinking?”

Gritting my teeth, to prevent myself from begging him to just fuck me already, I lifted my chin in defiance. He needed to learn that everything was not for sale.

“No.” His one hand tightened on my hip while with his other, he was knuckles deep in me. Tension radiated from him, every muscle in his body pulled taut.

“You want me,” he rasped. “I can feel it with each shudder of your body.” His fingers brushed against my panties and a soft moan escaped my lips, betraying me. “You can fight it all you want, but you want me. And I want you. So fucking bad.”

God, words like that would be enough to set me to a full blown inferno. “Tell me what you were thinking about.”

“Give up now, because I’ll never tell,” I breathed as I squirmed against his hand.

He thrust another finger inside me. In and out. Tingles of my impending orgasm danced across the base of my spine. His breathing was harsh, his cock hard against my ass.

“You are going to be my undoing.” He curled his fingers and hit my spot, dragging another moan out of me. “You are fucking drenched.”

His harsh breathing against my neck, his mouth brushing against my skin, I ground against his hand with desperation.

“Please,” I begged. “Just fuck me already.”

His dark chuckle vibrated between us.

“Take off your skirt,” he ordered in a husky voice.

My breathing hitched and I straightened up. My movements frantic, I pulled the side zipper down, and the skirt slid down my body, dropping to the floor.

“Panties.” The word clipped. His control hung by a thread. I wanted to push him. Have him unleash it all and have me experience it all with him. Hooking my fingers through the straps of my lacy panties, I pushed them

down my hips. The lacy garment slipped to my ankles, and I stepped out of them.

“Blouse.” My fingers worked on the buttons, keeping my gaze on him. At this very moment, he burned for me, just as I burned for him. The vain woman in me relished in that revelation. My bra followed without any prompting.

I was left in high heels and his beautiful necklace. His eyes caressed my skin, like a gentle breeze on a beautiful summer day.

“Now you,” I said, my breathing hitched.

His eyes traveled over every inch of me, starting at my heels. The look in his eyes made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. Insecurities dissipated with every second under his burning gaze.

My fingers trembled as I reached for his crisp, white shirt, working buttons one by one. Once the shirt was open, my hands trailed leisurely down his bronze chest, defined abs, loving his warmth under my fingertips. He could be a Greek god with that body, to hell with his age. My hands reached his belt and I paused, searching his eyes.

He granted me permission, his muscles taut.

I licked my lips as I reached for the clasp on his pants, my fingers slightly shaking. I fumbled with his belt, my hands too slow, my desire too strong. As soon as I had his pants undone, my mouth dried at the sight of his hard shaft. For me.

I swallowed hard, then swept my tongue over my lips. Geez, from dry mouth to drool.

He sat in his luxurious office chair, manspreading, then gripped his length as I stared at his cock like my life depended on it. My breath hitched, watching his fingers wrap around his thick, hard cock. Leisurely tugging on it. Up and down. The veins on his hand seemed more pronounced somehow. Or maybe I was so zeroed in on them that I finally noticed it.

Another tug. He pumped up and down, and each move had my pussy clenching, dying to feel his hard length against my throbbing center. I bit into my lower lip, swallowing my whimper. I wanted to taste him, the glistening of pre-cum, running down his shaft, tempting me. My mouth salivated with the need to taste him again.

He groaned and I forced my eyes up to his face. Flames burning in his gaze, tension in his neck palpable. The office was quiet, except for his soft

grunts and my labored breathing. The air cooled my heated skin, the blaze inside his eyes liquid emeralds glittering with desire.

“Kristoff,” I murmured, stepping fully between his parted legs. My heartbeat fluttered around us as my fingers brushed across his neck and into his thick, dark hair. Dark need flickered across his expression, raw and feral.

“Get on your knees,” he rasped, his voice strained. “Wrap those beautiful lips around my cock.”

Without hesitation, I fell down on my knees in front of him. If you’d have told me I’d get down on my knees for any man four weeks ago, I’d laugh in your face. I refused to do it for Jack. I’d given him a blow job twice, maybe three times tops in the beginning of our relationship. He never reciprocated and made me feel used, so I stopped. God knew, he was getting plenty elsewhere.

But with this man, it made me feel powerful. His length was hard and thick, my small hand wrapped around it. Releasing his grip on it, he ran a hand across my mouth. The reverent look in his eyes was intoxicating. Exhilarating.

His fingers tangled in my hair, fisting around the strands and pushed it out of my face.

“I can’t miss the best view.” His tone was harsh, tension passing his eyes. Yet, a hum of satisfaction traveled up my throat, because there was something unhinged lurking in his gaze and I caused it.

I licked him from base to tip, breathy noises traveling up my throat. A sharp inhale of his breath echoed through the room as he watched me with hazy, deep forest eyes. I held his gaze as I licked him everywhere. Groans of approval and his satisfaction were my only goals. I couldn’t stop the small noises of approval from forming in my throat, any more than I could stop sucking him, his musky taste intoxicating.

Heat bloomed in my stomach, moving lower. My arousal dripped down my inner thighs, the ache pulsing with need. I squeezed my thighs together to ease the ache. His guttural sounds traveled the room and I relished in it, eager to see him unravel. For me.

I ran my tongue across his crown, then slid him deep into my mouth, holding his gaze. My hands rested on his thighs, my fingers clutching his suit material.

“Suck harder,” he demanded. He sat there, looking like a king, demanding. Yet, the tension in his shoulders and his eyes told me *he* was hanging by a thread while I held all the power.

I obeyed his demand, his smooth cock warm in my mouth. I relaxed my throat, taking him deeper. My eyes watered when he thrust his hips but I remained still. He started fucking my mouth, hard and relentless. Deep and fast. And I let him.

Because I wanted to own him. Own his every single pleasure. Just like he owned all of mine.

“Fuck.” His groans rumbled from deep in his throat, turning hoarse. He grasped my face with his big hands, caressing my cheeks. “Just like that. You take me so well,” he hissed, his hands grabbing a fistful of my hair. His eyes had grown dark and hazy.

His filthy words had my insides shudder with my craving for him. My breasts rubbed against his thighs, sparks fluttering through me. His grip on my hair tightened, pushing deeper down my throat. My head bobbed up and down, his grip on my hair controlling the rhythm. Up and down. Deeper and harder into my mouth.

“That’s my good little slut,” he rasped, a shudder passing his muscles. I finally understood why women dropped to their knees for men. He was on the verge of losing his control. “Can I come in your mouth?”

Like I would let him finish anywhere else. I hummed my approval. He pushed deep down my throat and spilled with a guttural noise, his breathing heavy. God, I wanted to do it again, the addiction to him growing with each heartbeat. I sucked him clean, not wanting to waste a single drop of his cum off my lips. I sat back on my heels, drunk off the empowering sensation bringing him to the edge. He ran a rough thumb across my bottom lip, the movement tender and a wave of warmth flickered in my chest. With his other hand, he smoothed my hair back from my forehead, pressing a lingering kiss on my forehead.

“You did so well,” he praised. I must have glowed like a firefly at his words. “My turn to taste your beautiful pussy.”

A low moan came up my throat, my ears buzzed with adrenaline. *Buzzzz. Buzzzz.*

The intercom startled us both, and we both scrambled like two teenagers caught red handed. He pulled me up, off my knees.



“Mr. Baldwin,” Kimberly’s voice came through the intercom and we both froze. “I got the documents from legal.” Thank God she didn’t just walk into the office. I was naked, Kristoff’s shirt open and pants half-unbuckled. She’d have a pretty good idea what we were doing. “I just sent you the last legal agreement.”

I wrapped my arms around myself. Suddenly painfully aware of how naked I was, all my flaws for him to see clearly.

“Thank you,” he told her. “That will be all. Have a good night, Kimberly.” It was his signature dismissal.

I bent over, reaching for my blouse. *Slap*. I jumped up with a yelp. “Ouch,” I mouthed, glaring at him.

“Good night, sir,” Kimberly said, and Kristoff ended the call, pressing the *Do Not Disturb* button.

“What do you think you are doing?” he demanded.

“Getting dressed.” I thought it was obvious. “Don’t spank me again,” I warned, narrowing my eyes on him.

He grinned, yanking my blouse out of my hands, then discarding it back. “I thought you liked being spanked,” he retorted, a smirk on his face. I eyed him suspiciously, though the words ignited something hot in the pit of my belly.

“On the desk,” he ordered. His voice was smooth, relaxed lines on his face mesmerizing me. His lips curved up, a dark gleam in his eyes and whatever he planned on doing, had his cock hardening again. “Now.”

With an erratic heartbeat, I followed his order, the wooden desk too cold against my ass. Or my skin was just too hot. Deep in my stomach, hot iron burned in anticipation, sending a rush of adrenaline through my veins. His large hands came to rest on my naked thighs, his palms rough against my skin. I wondered why his palms were rough, like he did manual labor but I never thought to ask.

His eyes shone with a feral possessiveness. He ran his tongue across his teeth. Such a contrast between us. I sat naked on his desk, him still somewhat dressed.

I had yet to soak up the sight of this man completely naked.

## CHAPTER 37

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# KRISTOFF



I sat in my chair, watching this woman naked, wearing nothing but heels and the million dollar necklace I bought her. She looked fucking amazing and I was rock-hard again. Every time I saw her, a rush of heat ran to my groin. It couldn't be helped.

She was mine, whether she liked it or not. She was the yin to my yang. Rain to my desert. Simply, she fucking completed me. Since she entered my life, she commanded my attention without trying.

"Spread your legs."

She didn't even hesitate, the trust in her soft brown eyes blinding me. A fierce protectiveness welled in my chest and I knew I'd go to the ends of the Earth for her. Just to ensure she was happy.

My rough palms snaked up her inner thighs, her skin soft under my touch. I inched my face closer to her entrance, the scent of her arousal intoxicating, perfuming the air. She was drenched.

I dove in, licking from her clit to her entrance, then alternating between gentle licks and long hard pulls on her clit. Her moans vibrated straight to my dick and I was ready to ram into her and fuck her deep. Except, this was for her. I wanted to make her feel good, her soft moans as she writhed under my mouth.

"You taste so fucking good," I growled, lapping her up like my life depended on it.

She fisted my hair with both her hands, as I pushed two fingers inside her. I groaned against her pussy, the taste of her giving me the best high. I pumped my fingers in and out slowly, teasing her clit while keeping a

steady pace. Her arousal dripped down my hand, and I lapped at it like it was my last drop of sustenance I'd ever get.

"Kristoff," she moaned my name in a whisper, grinding against my face.

I pulled my fingers out and replaced them with my tongue. I watched her face as I tongue fucked her, and the sight was one to behold. It was seared into my mind and would stay with me until my dying breath. Her cheeks flushed, desire under her half-lidded gaze unmistakable. Yet, I wanted more from her.

Fuck, I wanted so much more. I wanted her submission, her reverence. Her love.

My senses swam with her scent, as she rode my face and her juices flooded my tongue. I increased the pace and intensity, sucking and nipping. She tried to squirm away and I gripped her hips, forcing her to remain still.

"Oh, oh, oh..." she panted as I continued tongue fucking her. She exploded with my name on her lips and a moan that vibrated against the glass windows and the office walls. I savored the last taste of her; my blood pounding with another wave of arousal. Teenage stamina was somehow coming back tenfold around her, and I thanked all the saints I regularly exercised so I could give her this pleasure.

I grabbed the nape of her head and pulled her closer to me, our mouths molding together. The kiss was soft, tender. I knew she needed tenderness and for the first time in my life, I'd give it to a woman. This woman only. Fuck, I'd grant this woman any and all wishes. She just had to voice them.

I cupped her face, tracing my tongue over her lips and her mouth parted for me. She sighed into my mouth and I swallowed it. Her body leaned into me, soft and fragile, and my chest welled with something fierce and soft. Deep and raw.

Pulling back, my gaze roamed over her naked body. She was the most beautiful sight to see. Forget Picasso. Forget Botticelli. Or Van Gogh. Just give me this woman and I had my art inspiration to last me lifetimes.

Her arms wrapped around herself and she folded her thighs, hiding herself from me.

I put my hands on her arms and peeled them away from her body.

"Don't hide from me," I murmured softly. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I wouldn't allow her to hide herself from me. If anyone else gazed upon her naked, I'd detach their head from their person. It would be the last thing they ever saw.

Her shoulders slightly slumped. “I-I’m not exactly twenty,” she murmured, her eyes averted.

I took her cheeks between my hands and my eyes bore into her.

“You are right. You are not twenty.” Her little exhale didn’t escape me. “You are even better. Every scar, every stretch mark, every goddamn thing makes you more beautiful. Stronger. You are perfect, just the way you are.”

Her eyes widened, her mouth parted and a soft blush crept up her chest and neck ending on her cheeks.

“Kristoff, if you keep talking like that I’ll-” she cut herself off. *Bu-bum. Bu-bum. Bu-bum.* I waited for the words I was hungry to hear. “I’ll melt into a puddle.”

Disappointment washed over me. Yet, what in the hell did I expect? She didn’t want the contract. I blackmailed her into accepting this position.

Maybe she’d stay with me without a contract. I’d risk it all for her. I’d broken every single one of the rules since I met her. She was the exception to all my rules.

“Beg me,” I demanded while she squirmed underneath me. All of the fucking rules could go to hell. As long as I had her. “Beg me to touch you.”

Life without her wasn’t a possibility.

The soft expression in her eyes was becoming just as addictive as her moans and her pussy. Maybe even more so. I just knew I’d tear down this world into pieces for her. To find her again if she ran. To keep her as mine.

She couldn’t have children, but I was fine with that. I’d love her girls like they were mine.

As long as *she* was mine.

## CHAPTER 38

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



My heart thundered wildly under my ribcage. I *almost* slipped. I almost told him I'd fallen in love with him. Too late though. I was so deep in, I didn't want to get out. I loved him, and I knew when this was all over, I'd be left shattered into a million pieces. I'd miss him for the remainder of my days.

Like the desert missed the rain.

His hands came to my hips, lowered me onto my feet, his big hands steadying me.

His gaze traveled over every inch of me, and it felt just as good as his hands on me. The look in his eyes heated my skin, sending tingling sensations down to my toes. I'd willingly stand naked in Alaska in the dead of winter, as long as he looked at me like *that*.

With reverence. With possession. With something raw and feral.

It was all I needed to survive the cold. And the loneliness I felt over the last fifteen years washed away. His gaze, a gentle caress on my heated skin, roamed over my body slowly, pausing on my thighs, then continued up my body, over my breasts until our eyes locked.

Those icy, frozen forests had melted, the raw need in them hitting me straight in my chest.

"Please touch me," I breathed, my skin on fire.

His rough palms on my hips pulled me gently into him. I straddled him, enjoying the feeling of his skin against mine. I slid my palms under his unbuttoned shirt, bracing my hands on his broad shoulders. I just had the most amazing orgasm and another one started to build up. My folds clenched, his stiff, hot cock lined up with my wet sex. His mouth was on

my neck, on my chest, on my breasts and I arched my back, needing more of it. My skin burned. Pressure built and built, fanning the flames.

He latched onto my breast, his mouth rough and urgent on my nipple. Sucking and nipping, feeding the fire in my veins as I ground against his erection. Pleasure shot through my veins, through every fiber of me. He smacked my ass, grinding me hard with his other hand against his erection.

“Ride me,” he rasped, his hot breath against my chest and his hands on my hips. Before I could even move, he slammed inside of me in one smooth thrust, burying himself to the hilt.

“Fuck,” he cursed, his voice guttural. “You take my cock so well, love. I can feel your greedy, little pussy strangling it.”

“Kristoff,” I whimpered, my insides clenching around his hard length at his filthy words. Our mouths collided, he slid his tongue inside. A groan came from deep in his chest as I licked inside his mouth, tasting every inch of him.

He tasted like *mine*. God knew, I was his. I couldn’t understand it or how it was even possible to feel so much for someone you had just met. Yet. I felt it *all* with him. My blood drummed in my ears, feeling so consumed and so complete. I pulled back, feeling overwhelmed by the way he enveloped me. Like he stole my breath straight from my lungs.

Hot desire burned in the pit of my stomach, our eyes locked for two heartbeats before I rolled my hips, slow and easy. I buried my face into his neck, my eyes closed and I just felt.

Heat sparked as I ground myself against him, faster and harder. His pelvis grinding against my clit, my mouth nipping at his neck as my hot breaths fanned across his flesh. He was buried deep inside me and a long moan escaped me, the sensation of him filling me overwhelming.

I lifted my hips and sat back down, plunging onto him. His hands gripped my hips tightly, moving my hips harder, up and down. Hot pleasure began to build, burning my insides while my chest fluttered with warm feelings for this man. The sound of skin-on-skin and our labored breathing filled the room. I bit my lip to stop the moans from escaping from me. His hands squeezed my hips, guiding my moves, increasing my pace. His cock filled me, hitting all the deep places. All the right places.

Then his hands slid up my back and hooked on my shoulders, pulling me down harder, his lips on my neck leaving a trail of seared skin in its wake.



“Your pussy was made for me,” he rasped, my insides quivering at his praise. A jolt of pure pleasure bolted through me and mindless whimpers ripped from my throat.

I clutched his shoulders as pleasure spread through me like languid heat. My forehead fell to his, my eyes lowered to where our bodies connected. My breath heavy and erratic, I watched as he fucked me full force through my orgasm. My head fell back as I met him thrust for thrust.

Our rhythm became even harder and faster. He pounded my body hard, and I relished the sensation chasing new heights with him. Sensing my strength wavering, he leaned forward, embracing me in his strong arms. He thrust upward again and again, his big cock impaling me, filling me to the hilt. Again and again.

“You feel so fucking good, love,” he growled as white-hot pleasure blazed through me. Somewhere in the far corner of my mind, his endearment sunk in, but the mind-numbing pleasure was all I could focus on. “Come for me again,” he commanded.

And another orgasm chased behind the first one... or was it the second, I couldn't tell. He kept fucking me relentlessly. My body was his tool to play with, wringing everything out of me.

“Kristoff,” I begged, gasping for air, my body little more than a boneless heap in his arms as he fucked me like a madman. Like he wanted to leave a mark on my body and my soul. My heart was already branded as his. This man would consume me completely. I groaned, feeling so close. Again. He thrust harder and harder, faster and faster, while I clung tightly to him.

“My cock is tearing that tight little pussy,” he growled. “It's mine. Just mine.”

“Yes,” I gasped. “Oh, God. Please. I'm going to... Oh, fuck.” And everything in me exploded. The orgasm shook my body, making me fall apart. The wave of pleasure hit me, violent like stormy seas. He yanked my hair, ripping another moan from me, as he pumped into my body.

Kristoff finally came, grunting his release with a masculine groan, and his fingers digging into my flesh. Goosebumps danced down my spine, our foreheads connected and both of us breathed heavily. His deep exhale soaked through my skin, spreading warmth through my chest and filling the broken cracks left behind by my late husband.

We sat, silence enveloping us. I soaked in his heat, my arms wrapped around his shoulders, and my limbs relaxed. His one hand ran up and down my back, while his other played with the strands of my hair.

“We should probably feed you before you get cranky,” I murmured lazily, my body sated. I scraped my nails against his nape, inhaling deeply. I didn’t want this moment to end. I wanted to relish in his warmth, cuddle into him and spend the night in his arms. It was a fairytale dream, unattainable. I knew it, but it didn’t stop me from wanting it.

He gently smacked my bottom. “I don’t get cranky,” he grumbled but there was no merit to it.

I chuckled. “Sure.”

I hadn’t seen him cranky but he did get slightly clipped when he was hungry. Only a few weeks around him and his moods were easy to recognize.

My lips brushed against his, our breaths becoming one. His touch lingered on my skin, feeding my infatuation with this man.

“How many lovers have you had, Gemma?” His question had me stiffen for a moment, then I reminded myself. I had nothing to feel ashamed about. His arms tightened around me, like he braced himself for an answer he wouldn’t like.

I shifted, my eyes searching out his gaze, pondering why the question.

“You’re my second,” I admitted.

Just as I started to wonder whether he considered me lacking, a deep grumble of satisfaction sounded deep in his throat.

“Good,” he said without elaborating. “I’ll be your last.”

Bu-bum. Bu-bum. Bu-bum.

## CHAPTER 39

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



Two weeks.

I had another two weeks before my trial period with Kristoff expired. We'd gotten into a routine. Our passion burned hotter, my feelings deeper and his walls stronger. He gave me everything when he kissed me and fucked me. Tender moments fed my love for him, but once our hunger was sated, I could see his guard falling firmly back into place.

He was building his empire. Like it wasn't vast enough already. But if it made him happy, it made me happy. Every day, we'd sneak in moments, whether with a kiss or hard core fuck. I was so far gone. So deep into this thing, whatever this was, I knew there was no coming back from it. It would end in heartbreak. Mine. Maybe his. Ours.

But this wasn't enough for me. I needed something more than stolen moments during work hours. Soul-destroying animalistic desire was sure to shatter me into a million pieces. And I feared one day, he'd no longer be here to put me back together.

The reality would eventually set in. We'd been ignoring it for far too long. Yet, uncharacteristically I refused to wake up. Blissfully, I buried my head into the sand, for the first time in my life, taking these moments for myself.

Yes, the worry lingered somewhere in the back of my mind. But I ignored it. When I was home, I was a mother, a father, a provider. When I was with Kristoff, I was his assistant.

And his slut. I frowned, entering the elevator of W&W. If anyone else called me a slut, I'd break their nose. Yet, this man made it sound like an

endearment. It was almost interchangeable when he called me slut and his love.

I shook my head at myself as the elevator opened and I stepped into it. My temples throbbed and I pushed the button to the executive floor. I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting off the headache that was surely coming.

It was the wrong day for it. Kristoff had a meeting with the owner of the company he was acquiring.

“Hello Gemma.” A familiar voice came from behind me and I turned around to come face-to-face with Byron Ashford. He smiled, and my breath cut through my chest. That man was fucking gorgeous. Not my type, but gorgeous.

“Mr. Ashford,” I greeted him.

“Please, call me Byron.”

I nodded. “How is your father’s campaign going?”

For a moment, a cold expression crossed his face, but it was gone before I had a chance to blink.

“Do you follow politics?” he asked curiously.

“No, not really,” I admitted. “I think most of the politicians are corrupt.” Then realizing what I said, I quickly added, “I’m sure your father’s not-”

His laugh filled the small space. “You’re right. Most of them are corrupt.”

I noticed he didn’t defend his father.

The elevator door opened with a ding on the executive floor. I rushed out of the elevator and towards my desk, leaving Byron behind me.

“I know, I know,” I waved to Kimberly. “Sorry I’m late.”

The day started off rough. My girls decided to throw a fit, all at different times. I wished they’d at least sync up their tantrums. Of all days, they picked the day of the merger closing.

“It’s alright, Gemma. You haven’t missed anything,” Kimberly assured me in her calm voice.

I rubbed my temples, hoping to ease the tension and the headache. When the migraines hit, it made my stomach queasy. I swallowed hard, trying to keep it at bay, my eyes teared up at the piercing pain that shot through my brain.

“Mr. Ashford,” Kimberly greeted him with a surprise. “You can go ahead to see Mr. Baldwin.”

“Thank you, Kimberly.” He glanced my way, then strode to Kristoff’s office with assurance and confidence only a man used to getting his own way could pull off.

Once he was behind closed doors, Kimberly returned her attention to me.

“Are you okay?”

I massaged my temples, my fingers cool against the skin. “Yes, just a small headache. It’s nothing.”

“Have you seen a doctor?” Kristoff’s voice had me whipping around, and the sudden movement sent pain piercing through my brain.

“Ugh,” I whimpered. Squeezing my eyes shut, I pinched the bridge of my nose, hoping for relief. “I’m fine,” I assured him.

“You are not fine,” he insisted, both his hands on my shoulders. “We have to take you to the doctor.”

The concern in his voice was evident and the stupid part of me melted that he cared.

“Don’t be silly,” I protested with a feeble smile. “It’s just a headache and you are closing the merger today.”

“The merger can wait,” he insisted.

I narrowed my eyes. Was he crazy? He was closing on a multi-million dollar deal.

“Kristoff, I promise,” I muttered. “I’m fine. It’s just a headache. And you have a visitor.”

He observed me, his eyes studying my every move. “Byron was just dropping off something. He can hold the fort. You’re pale.”

“Because I have a headache,” I reasoned. The pounding in my brain was too intense; otherwise I’d have rolled my eyes. “Tell me what you need.”

His jaw ticked, but the tension in his shoulders told me he was not happy with this.

When he said nothing and refused to move, I continued, “I promise you, I’m fine. Mr. Ashford needs your attention.”

He wasn’t happy, I knew it.

## CHAPTER 40

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# KRISTOFF



“I didn’t expect you here today,” I told Byron as I sat down behind my desk and he took a chair opposite of me.

He handed me a folder. “Fuck, Byron. I hope this is not information you missed on the merger. We are closing today.”

“It’s not about the merger,” he responded. “It’s about your ex-wife and Gemma.”

I instantly tensed. “What do you mean?”

“Your ex is digging into Gemma, slipping information to tabloids.”

I tightened my fists, anger boiling in my chest. If there was a woman that deserved to be fucking eliminated, it was that bitch. There wasn’t a single bone in that woman’s body that worried about anyone else but herself. Her son was lucky to have his father, because he certainly didn’t get his manners from his alcoholic mother. For all my disagreements at Jonathan’s betrayal, I couldn’t take that from him.

“What does she know?” I questioned him, as I ran through the folder. It seemed there were only facts there.

“Not much,” he responded. “Facts only. It doesn’t prevent her from making up shit.”

Without another word, I dialed up Jacqueline. She changed her phone number like underwear but the stupid bitch always sent me her new number. As if I cared about it. I scrolled down to my messages from unsaved numbers and located it.

I dialed her up. She answered on the first ring.

“Kristoff, darling-” I cut her off, not giving her a chance to start her bullshit.



“You type, say, or even think one more thing about Genevieve Rose,” I warned, “-and it will be the last thing you ever do. You’ll be left penniless and taken off every social list. Understood?”

“I have no idea-”

“Is. That. Understood?” I gritted.

“Yes.”

I ended the call and met Byron’s eyes. “Can you keep monitoring her?”

He nodded. “So she’s the one, huh?” he asked.

I didn’t answer him. There was no need, because it was fucking obvious. He stood up and so did I. Gemma wasn’t fine and I planned on taking care of her. The acquisition could go to hell. She came first.

“I owe you, Byron.”

He waved his hand. “You’d do the same for me.”

“I would,” I vowed. And I intended to keep that word. Whatever he needed, I’d help him.

We shook hands and he left my office. He headed for the elevator, while I stopped by Gemma’s desk and took her hand.

“Come with me,” I told her, taking her by her elbow gently and dragging her into my office.

I shut the door behind us, pulled up the phone, typed a message to my doctor who made home visits, and shoved it back into my pocket.

“Come here.” I wrapped her into my arms. She buried her face into my chest and sighed softly. It felt so right to take care of her.

“I have some Advil,” I said softly. Her plain black dress accentuated her hourglass waist, no longer as skinny as the day I first met her. She had a white cardigan over it, but it still didn’t take away from the tailored dress that came down to her knees. She wore a pair of white heels. No make-up, her pale complexion punching me right in the gut.

I didn’t like to see her in pain. I’d rather bear it than see her suffer.

“Oh, the mighty and powerful Kristoff Baldwin has a stash of Advil, huh?” she teased, though her smile was weak.

“I keep some for emergencies.” I always had a mini first aid kit with essentials. I rarely needed it, but it didn’t hurt to be prepared. I walked her over to the little two-seater sofa. “Sit down; I’ll get you a glass of water and Advil.”

Leaving her on the couch, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Her long, dark eyelashes fanned her cheeks but her face twisted with pain. I

walked into the bathroom and opened the little medicine cabinet. I picked up the tiny bottle of Advil, took out two pills, and got a glass of water. Then returned to Gemma's side.

"Here, take this." I offered her the pills, sitting down next to her. She opened her eyes and took the pills, putting them into her mouth. Then chased it down with a glass of water.

I took her glass and sat it on the little side table. "Come here."

Without hesitation, she leaned into me and I rubbed her back. As the minutes passed, she gradually relaxed. I wanted to take her home and tuck her into my bed, close the shades and let her rest. Except, I didn't think she'd let me. She offered tenderness, affection, but only to a certain point. She kept herself guarded, always a reluctant wariness about her.

She felt small in my arms. Vulnerable. I had never worried about another human being as much as I have about her. And her daughters. I came to learn her schedule and would call her late at night when her girls were already tucked into bed. With each conversation, I learned more and more about her. She thought she was boring, her whole world revolving around her daughters. I thought she was magnificent. She liked to do yoga with her girls and spend time with Betty and Rick. The latter I could live without.

Some nights she'd even venture into the past, giving me glimpses of her pain. Maybe it was that which connected us. We both had fucked up relationships that turned us into these human beings that kept walls up to protect us from more pain. Fuck if I knew.

All I knew was that I loved spending time with her. Yes, I loved fucking her but even more I loved spending time with her and her daughters. We even have had several dinners together, all five of us. Goddamn it, I never thought I'd wanted a family. Not after the fiasco with my ex. Yet, here I was, having dinner with her and her girls. I wanted to have them in my life, take care of them, provide for them.

Neither one of us mentioned the contract again, but it lurked like a ghost between us. She gave me her body willingly. It should be enough. Yet it wasn't. I wanted her tied to me, with a legally binding agreement. So she'd be mine.

*Marriage*, my mind whispered. I could marry her and it would tie her to me. Forever.

There was nobody that was more important to me than her. And I'd kill any man that dared to look at her, never mind touch her.

Yesterday's conversation with my mother flashed to my mind.

*"Women like Gemma are rare," she remarked, her comment coming out of the blue.*

*"They are," I agreed, unsure where she was going with it. I never discussed my relationships, or lack of them with her.*

*"I was too young when I fell for your father," she started, her voice hesitant. We never talked about him. I hated his guts - for the way he brought scandal to our family, burned through her inheritance and most of all, for the way he treated my mother. He paraded his mistresses in front of her, humiliating her in private and public. "Too naive. Too weak."*

*I didn't confirm nor deny. There was no point in it. The fact was she should have used Grandfather's influence and had my father eliminated from her life.*

*"Gemma is nothing like me," she continued. "She's strong and independent with strong convictions. And most importantly, she stands by the people she loves."*

My mother didn't even know how right she was. Gemma would kill to protect her girls.

Fuck, I'd marry her. The question was how to convince her to commit for life, if she refused to commit for a shorter period.

## CHAPTER 41

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



A knock on the door startled me and I quickly pulled away from Kristoff's embrace. I already missed his arms around me - strong, warm, and protective. It was so easy to rely on him to make everything better.

"Come in," Kristoff called out. The door opened and a man walked in. Gray beard. Frown on his face. One hand in his white coat, a black bag in his other. A doctor?

The memory of the last time I saw a black doctor's bag resurfaced, and I quickly pushed it out of my mind. This wasn't the time to remember those ghosts.

"What is this emergency?" he asked, concerned as his eyes traveled around the room. When he realized there was nobody else, his eyes came back to Kristoff and me. "You realize I walked out on two other appointments to come see to this emergency."

Kristoff didn't even flinch. "Dr. Craven, this is Gemma Rose. She has a bad headache."

If there was paleness to my skin tone until this point, it was certainly gone now. Heat climbed up my neck and into my cheeks. Kristoff called a doctor. Called it an emergency. My wide eyes darted to Kristoff.

He held Dr. Craven's look, his eyebrow arched in challenge. "Please examine her to ensure she is alright."

A sharp inhale. "A headache?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes." Kristoff stood up, to allow room for Dr. Craven next to me. "As soon as you ensure she is okay, you can go back to your appointments."

Dr. Craven shook his head and I had to agree with the sentiment. Kristoff went slightly overboard with this one. Although, it seemed to be his signature way.

The old doctor took a seat next to me and I offered an apologetic smile. "It's just a small migraine."

A nod in acknowledgement. "Do you get them often?"

"Just occasionally," I told him. "Nothing horrible." God, I wished Kristoff hadn't made such a fuss. What was he thinking? I didn't realize he was prepared to go that far for a mere headache.

He opened his doctor's bag and dug out a blood pressure cuff. Inwardly, I groaned.

"I took some Advil." Maybe that would dissuade him to continue this charade, he'd tell Kristoff he was a crazy billionaire, and go back to his patients.

"Since I'm here, I might as well take your vitals." He smiled. At least his bedside manner wasn't bad. "Otherwise, I'll really be mad that I wasted a trip."

Expertly, he wrapped it around my upper arm. "Any possibility of pregnancy?" he asked.

An inferno blew up within me and I was certain I'd blow up his device.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably, avoiding looking anywhere in Kristoff's direction. "No."

The doctor met my gaze. "Are we certain?"

"Positive." I wouldn't go into details. "It's probably my anemia. I haven't been taking my vitamins as regularly as I should."

The beep of the device had my eyes flashing to the device. I never had issues with any of my vitals. This was just ridiculous.

"I think the Advil is kicking in," I tried again. "My head feels so much better."

"Your blood pressure is good. Let me listen to your heart and lungs."

This time I groaned out loud. "I feel better. Really."

"Ah, but appease this old man." Dr. Craven had a soft, calming voice. "And I don't mean me."

His dark eyes twinkled with amusement as they flicked Kristoff's way. My boss grumbled something about horrible bedside manners.

"Better than yours, Kristoff," he muttered. Suddenly, I loved this doctor and wanted him for my family physician. "Now, dear, let's take your shirt

off so I can listen to your heart.”

“Her shirt stays on,” Kristoff growled and I glanced at him confused. Dr. Craven cocked his eyebrow, but Kristoff wouldn’t be swayed. “Those devices work through the shirt. I’d know since one of my companies produces it.”

Dr. Craven returned his attention to me. “Through the shirt then, my dear. Next time, we’re doing this without your boyfriend around.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” I chuckled, though by Kristoff’s expression, he didn’t seem to find it amusing at all.

Five minutes later, the exam was over and Dr. Craven was gone.

“Are you sure you feel well enough?” Kristoff worried, his arms coming around me.

“Yes” I assured him for the hundredth time. “Don’t call a doctor again, unless it is something serious,” I warned him, narrowing my eyes on him in feigned annoyance. My smile ruined it though. The Advil had kicked in for sure, because there was only a dull pain lingering in my temples. “I’ll go grab your coffee. We can’t have you ripping into your visitors today.”

I turned around to leave, but his hand wrapped around my wrist, pulling me back into his hard chest.

“Don’t leave without a kiss.”

When he was like this, caring and soft, I just melted. I wanted to be just his. And have him as mine and only mine. Like this was my first time falling in love. It was exciting and scary.

My breasts pushed against his hard chest, I craned my neck, meeting his gaze. Then I lifted on my toes and brushed my lips against his. My eyes fluttered shut, his warmth wrapping me into his cocoon. His hands tightened around me, our lips molding together, as if we couldn’t get close enough.

My palms flat against his chest, I gently pushed him away.

“You have a busy day,” I told him. “Get to work.”

“I’m the boss,” he grumbled, taking my hand and pressing his soft lips in the center of my palm. There wasn’t much merit to his tone, since his hands roamed my back, up and down.

The next few hours flew by in a blur. Update this, update that, change this, change that. The afternoon rolled around and Kristoff’s office was full of people. Powerful, rich men like him.

Getting his guests situated and comfortable, all of them seated around the conference table, I headed for the door when Kristoff's voice stopped me.

"Gemma, stay and take notes, please," Kristoff asked. He was calm, like he was closing negotiations for a yard sale, not a multi-million dollar deal.

"Sure," I answered and went to grab an extra chair to sit a bit away from the table.

"You could sit on my lap." My head snapped to the youngest man in the group and I narrowed my eyes. Totally unprofessional.

"You'll sit here." Kristoff's voice was colder than frigid air, yet it was unparalleled to the Arctic look in his eyes. I nodded, grabbed my notepad and a pencil, then returned to the table.

Kristoff stood up and pulled out the chair for me, his eyes on the man that made the inappropriate comment. The silence was tense. I swallowed and my gulp traveled through the air. At least it sounded that way. I took the offered chair and lowered myself to it.

An older gentleman sat to my left who smiled. "I'm sorry, my dear. What did you say your name was? You said it but my hearing is bad in my old age."

I cleared my throat. "It's Gemma."

His smile widened and his eyes softened, the wrinkles around his eyes pronounced. The color of his hair shone silver against his expensive dark suit, though he seemed frail. His appearance was pristine. Without his smile, he was another cold businessman. With it, he was an approachable human being.

"Beautiful name." He extended his hand and I accepted it in a handshake. His grip was firm. "Like precious gems."

The very same man that suggested I sit on his lap, grinned. "I'm Samuel Ridley, Junior. My father," he tilted his head to the man sitting next to me, "-he's the Senior."

"Nice to meet you." I thought I might have heard Kristoff growl next to me. Yes, fucking growl. The temperature must have lowered by twenty degrees because suddenly goosebumps broke through my skin.

"Pleasure is all mine," he drawled, oblivious to the tension.

I crossed my legs, ignoring him. I doubted I'd work with him at all, but I kept the words to myself. I wouldn't ruin Kristoff's deal for some



immature, rude, rich prick. My eyes darted to his father, and I saw annoyance flash in his eyes.

Turning my attention to Kristoff, I was taken aback by the look in his eyes. Cold. Cruel. Ruthless. Like he was ready to rip into Samuel's throat.

"Let's get this started," he announced coldly. And page after page, discussion, notation, change. Kristoff was collected and merciless in his business dealings. There wasn't a single point where he didn't end up on top. I took a mental note to never enter into negotiations with him. I was guaranteed to lose.

I kept the notes going, writing off-hand tasks to follow up with copies of paperwork after the meeting, and then, an hour into the meeting, it was all over. Apparently, it only takes one hour to sign a huge multi-million dollar deal. Who knew?

"This is the last document," Kristoff concluded. "It lays out our agreement. Samuel, you will be assigned the Senior Advisor role until you are ready to retire."

"What?" Samuel Jr. jumped to his feet, an outrageous expression on his face.

My eyes darted to Kristoff, then around the table. The other men were lawyers. The only decision that mattered was by Kristoff and the man that was selling the company. Samuel Ridley Sr.

"You'll have to earn your position in any company I own," Kristoff told him.

Samuel's jaw ticked and I tensed, waiting for his temper to flare. It was coming. I could taste it in the air.

"Kristoff and I decided this is the best recourse for now," Mr. Ridley Sr. tried to smooth the tense situation. I warily watched the scene play out in front of me.

Samuel Jr.'s fist slammed hard against the table, prompting me to jump, and the pencil fell out of my grip, rolling across the mahogany table.

"This is bullshit!" Junior shouted angrily, his voice vibrating against the walls.

My hands trembled as I reached out to grab the pencil, but Kristoff beat me to it. It was stupid. I knew nothing could happen to me. Yet, any kind of violence always sent me into a shaking mess.

He handed me the pencil, watching me intently. Forcing a smile, I murmured my thanks and took it.

“You can’t do this,” Junior gritted out furiously.

“It’s done,” Kristoff said coolly. “Otherwise, no deal.” He casually glanced at his expensive watch. “Make up your mind, because my time is valuable.”

Peering under my eyelashes at Kristoff and the other two men, I observed the situation. Kristoff would walk away from the deal, I was certain. The other men shifted, probably just as uncomfortable with witnessing this as I was.

I sat tensely, waiting. Silence was heavy in the room. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I held my breath in anticipation.

It was Senior who finally broke it. “This is what we agreed on,” he acknowledged, laying his hand on his son’s arm. “My son will recognize this is the best outcome for the future of the employees and the company.”

A silent exhale slipped through my lips as Junior sat back in his chair. He still wasn’t happy with the outcome, but it seemed he accepted it. The final signature was obtained. Everyone stood up, congratulating each other. Though Kristoff seemed the only one that came out on top. All the men cleared out, leaving me with Kristoff and the Ridley men.

Junior’s eyes roamed my body, pausing on my breasts longer than appropriate. Truthfully, there was nothing appropriate about his leering.

“Gemma, you were the only highlight of this meeting,” he drawled, a charming smile on his face. Except it didn’t work for me at all. “I’m sure we’ll speak again. Maybe even do something more,” he purred.

He left the room without another word to Kristoff or his father.

Senior shook Kristoff’s hand, then turned to me. “It was nice meeting you.” I nodded my acknowledgement with a resemblance of a smile. “I look forward to working with you.”

“Thank you.”

Truth was, I didn’t think I’d be working with any of them. And I certainly hoped I wouldn’t work with Junior. I didn’t need any of those complications. I had plenty of them with Kristoff.

When the door softly clicked, I turned to face him.

“Congratulations.” The exhaustion and headache I held at bay all day slowly crept up. I craned my head, meeting his eyes. “That was intense,” I muttered when he remained silent. A guarded expression lurked in his eyes.

When he didn’t say anything, I turned to leave but his hand curled around my wrist, pulling me back to him. I let him, feeling drained, and

needing his warmth.

"How are you feeling?" he murmured against my neck. He trailed his mouth over my neck, the touch soft and hot. A sigh slipped through my lips, tilting my head to the side to allow him better access.

His lips skimmed up to my jaw until they hovered over my lips. I closed the distance pressing my mouth to his. My hands connected around his neck and my fingers tangled in the hair at the nape of his neck. He kissed me hard, possessive and rough, setting my blood aflame. His tongue brushed against mine, consuming, and all the while his fingers gently stroked my body.

"Mmm, better now," I sighed against his lips.

I could stay like this with him forever. My hands slid down his chest, the hard muscles hot under my touch and then wrapped them around his waist.

"There is a business dinner to celebrate our purchase in an hour." Kristoff's mouth moved over the top of my head. "Do you want to come? All the men that were at the signing table will be there."

I shifted to raise my head, searching out his eyes. I had a feeling he didn't want me to come. Then why tell me about the dinner.

"If you want me to come, I'll come. But if you don't need me, I'd rather not." It was a long day.

"Are you sure?" he questioned, his eyes betraying none of the tension that streamed off his body. "Ridley, Senior and Junior, will be there. Junior seems particularly fond of you."

His hands on me tensed, his fingers digging into my hips. Was he-

"Yes, I'm sure," I finally replied, holding his gaze. He was jealous.

"What do you think of Samuel Jr.?" His eyes narrowed on me, and the question felt like a trap. I chewed on my bottom lip trying to figure out the most diplomatic way to answer.

"He seems like a playboy," I answered honestly. "Not exactly my type." My words died on my lips, noticing something flash in his eyes. *Jealousy?*

Raising my hand, I put my palm gently against his cheek. I wished there was a way to chase his ghosts away. For all his money and status, he was just as wounded as the rest of us.

"And he has nothing on you." I added softly.

His muscles eased under my hands. A soft smile touched his lips and his eyes softened.

"Do you want me to come to this dinner with you?" I asked him.

"I want you to come with *me*," he said, emphasizing *me*. "But you look drained and I don't want that prick ogling you. You go home to your girls and get some rest. If I need anything, I'll call you."

I chuckled.

"Did you just say girls and rest in the same sentence? Those two words don't go together at all," I joked. "One day you'll find that out." The words slipped and it wasn't until they were already uttered that I realized how they sounded. Silently, I cursed myself for the insensitivity. "Besides, I have to pack the girls for their weekend with Grandma," I explained, hoping to change the subject.

They haven't even left yet, and I already dreaded the quiet days without them. It was always too quiet without them. It became evident more than ever during the days when they visited Grandma that my whole life revolved around my children. It was only in the last few weeks that Kristoff took a sliver of the time for himself, but after work hours were all about my girls.

"Take an early day," he suggested and I happily nodded my head in agreement. "I should have taken you home first thing this morning."

"Don't be silly," I objected. "Today was a big day."

It was the first time I saw a merger up close and personal. He went through a lot of them in his lifetime, so it was probably an everyday occurrence to him. Though I had to admit, it wasn't as exciting as I hoped.

"I'll walk you to your car," Kristoff offered. "Text me when you get home so I know you got there safely."

The jealous man was gone and in its place was the man that stole my heart.

---

BY NINE THAT NIGHT, I was in bed, unwinding with an old movie playing on Netflix. My eyes were on the television, but my thoughts were everywhere. Packing. Future. Past. Present.

I had avoided bringing up the contract to Kristoff but it lingered in my mind. True to his word, he was giving me two months, but that time was rapidly coming to an end. The question was whether I'd stay or leave after

the time was up. Signing that contract felt wrong. Scratch that. It was wrong.

Signing that little piece of paper took this whole arrangement from a willing sexual understanding to a business arrangement. And I wasn't okay with that.

My phone rang and I reached for it. Seeing it was my boss, I quickly answered it.

"Hi there," I greeted him, my voice slightly raspy.

"Did I wake you?"

"No, you didn't wake me. Is everything ok?"

"Yes, everything is ok. What are you doing?"

I smiled into the phone. "I hope you are not expecting some sexy response," I teased. "I'm in bed, watching *Gone with the Wind*." And stressing over things I had no control over like past, present, and future. "How was dinner?"

"Boring." I could only imagine the tension between Kristoff and the rest of the dinner party. He could be quite intimidating when he wanted to be. "Both Ridleys asked about you," he grumbled. The unsaid meaning was the grudge behind younger Ridley asking about me. And I had a feeling that one liked to agitate. "The part about being in bed is sexy."

I chuckled at his unsettled subject change. There was no sense adding fuel to his fire with jealousy so I went along with it.

"If you saw what I was wearing, you wouldn't think so."

His laughter boomed over the headset and I closed my eyes, relishing in the sound of it. It had quickly become one of my favorite sounds, right after hearing my children laugh.

"You are always beautiful." The warmth in my chest spread, making me putty for him and he wasn't even in the same room with me. "I didn't take you for a girl that watches old movies," he teased.

"Have you seen *Gone with the Wind*?" I asked curiously.

"No, never." A feigned gasp left me.

"Seriously?" I uttered in shock but couldn't hide the humor from my voice. "You've got to get a life! *Gone with the Wind* is a classic."

"Can't be that great of a classic," he retorted dryly. "If I hadn't seen it."

Typical Kristoff. It only counted if he saw it.

"Have you heard of the phrase, '*Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn*'?" I asked him.

“It doesn’t ring a bell.” He didn’t seem interested in the movie at all. “How about you tell me what you are wearing?”

It was my turn to laugh. “Not a chance. I don’t want you to know that I’m sleeping in a hot pink tank top with only boy shorts on. Oops, did I just give it away?” I teased.

Another round of booming laughter followed, sending my chest fluttering with feelings. God, this man was able to get to me in all the right ways.

“I have to see that,” he drawled, his voice deepening. “Send me a picture.”

Of course he would demand, not ask.

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## CHAPTER 42

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# KRISTOFF



The dinner with the Ridley men was fucking annoying as shit. Especially the younger one. Junior's face fell the moment he realized Gemma wouldn't join us. I wanted to smash his face into the dinner table and make him forget ever seeing her.

Overboard? Yes, just a bit.

Did I care? Fuck no.

The young prick was closer to her age, but he was a playboy through and through. He changed women like underwear, and he'd be bad for Gemma and her girls.

Wonderful. Now I was pretending to be a knight. Gemma had been consuming my thoughts in the most unhealthy, obsessive way. My mind had been whirling for weeks, that goddamn contract hanging over us.

I wanted something to tie her to me. A bit obsessive but fuck it. I couldn't help it. It was the only way to control the outcome. For Gemma to remain with me.

She had been giving me her body freely, I knew she wasn't seeing anyone. Not that she had time between her kids and me. Yet, it wasn't enough. I wanted to lock her in my house and throw away the key. Not that it would work, because I had no doubt, she'd fight me on it. It made no fucking sense. She'd give me her body freely but wouldn't sign the contract that stated the same. If she couldn't commit to me, how in the fuck would I convince her to marry me?

The image of her in bed, wearing a tank top and boy-shorts seared my mind.



“Send me a picture,” I demanded. I heard a little grumbling chuckle over the line.

“Of course, you’d demand.” I smirked at her sassy response. Her voice was too husky, which meant she was turned on. Good! I was glad this thing between us was arousing her as much as me.

“Please,” I added, trying to appease her. Fuck, if she’d ask me to beg her for it, I might. She had me wrapped around her finger and she didn’t even know it.

I heard some shuffling and my phone buzzed. Removing it from my ear, I stared at the picture.

Fuck, I couldn’t even rub one out at the moment.

My dick instantly thickened in my slacks, which was annoying considering I was in my Bentley with the driver up front who pretended not to listen to my conversation. I asked for that one, so I had nobody to blame.

Her dark hair was spilled all over her white sheets, make up free. The camisole she wore was hot pink and stark against her dark hair. Her nipples perked through the fabric and her soft expression was the one she wore when she wanted me to fuck her.

Damn it.

“Don’t ask for another one,” she warned, her voice raspy. “Because it will be a middle finger.”

I chuckled. I bet there were plenty of times she wanted to tell me to fuck off. There was a peculiar balance to her, softness and stubbornness. She didn’t bend to my every whim just because I was rich.

Maybe it was that which intrigued me about her.

She let me fuck her because she wanted *me*. She couldn’t hide her body’s response to me. The way she melted in my arms, her hot pussy clenching my cock as I pounded into her. It was heaven on earth. No other woman had *ever* felt like Gemma.

And I would own her. One way or another, I would keep her.

To hell with any other man. Including her best friend who worked with fucking Jonathan.

If I had to, I’d buy that company just so I could get rid of him.

## CHAPTER 43

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



Talking on the phone with my boss was a completely different experience than talking to him in the office. It was like flirting with a man.

Not my boss. Not an intimidating billionaire. Not a controlling, obsessive man.

It was just him.

His soft chuckle over the phone had me smiling with happiness. The only other people on this planet that made me melt with their happiness were my children.

“What are you wearing?” I asked, ignoring all the things he made me feel. I was in so damn deep with this man, there would be no getting over him.

“I’m still in the same suit you saw me in earlier,” he purred. I could picture him, sitting in the back seat comfortably, his legs spread. If he was in his limo, maybe his partition was closed, and he stroked himself.

I started fanning myself with my hand. Just the thought of his big hand over his length had me nursing flames and heat pooling in my lower belly.

“Are- are you,” I cleared my throat, my voice breathy, “... are you in a limo with a partition closed?”

Okay, so maybe he made me braver and my thoughts dirtier. It was his fault. He turned me into an insatiable, horny woman.

His dark chuckle told me he knew exactly what I was thinking.

“I wish,” he rasped. “I’m in the car.”

“You look sexy in your suits.” The admission slipped. God, he’d realize how far I’d fallen for him if I kept this up.

He laughed again and my chest glowed.

“Then how come you’re able to keep your hands off of me?”

It was my turn to laugh.

“Good self-restraint,” I retorted, grinning. “Try it sometime.”

“Oh, I do. Plenty around you,” he drawled. “More than you’ll ever know. If I hadn’t, you’d be sprawled on my desk 24/7, ready for me. To feast on your pussy. To fuck. And to bend to my will.”

A volcano erupted through my veins at his filthy words. He really had a way with them. And then I realized his driver more than likely heard those words too. Jesus, I hoped never to run into him. Embarrassing with a capital E.

Clearing my throat, I decided it was probably better to change the subject. “I have a question.”

“Ask, beautiful.” I practically heard the grin in his voice. He enjoyed ruffling my feathers.

“Has something been bothering you lately?” I asked hesitantly, not sure whether I should be bringing it up. “Was it just the company purchase?”

I shouldn’t have offered him the latter for an excuse. I knew for a fact it wasn’t the company purchase. He handled everything with the acquisition like a pro.

The line went quiet. I waited for three heartbeats.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” I apologized.

“That’s ok.” Just a few words but I felt the chill in his tone over the phone. “You better go to sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow. Sweet dreams.”

The line went dead before I could even reply. I stared at the phone, wondering what just happened. Though my gut warned and my brain whispered to stop fooling myself. I knew exactly what was left unsaid between us.

*The contract.*

I clicked the television off, leaving me in the dark. *How appropriate*, my mind mocked. Kristoff left me in the dark, to stew with my thoughts and desire for him.

I knew it was all about the contract that I refused to sign. My sixth sense never failed me before.

Staring at my bedroom ceiling, the constant whirring sound of the ceiling fan, I laid still. The deafening silence with the rhythmic buzz of the fan made the voices in my head even louder. The memories screamed. The

pain tore at my chest. I have worked so hard to forget the past, but it all flooded back now.

Haunting me.

Mocking my feeble attempt to move on. With a man like Kristoff who would consume me and then spit me out when he was done with me. Luckily, I had enough brain to know the contract would be exactly that. His way to control me, and then discard me when he was done with me.

There was no denying the attraction and feelings I had for my boss. But I wouldn't let him use it for his own benefit. Thankfully, I wasn't that far gone. Yet.

I'd never let anyone treat me like my late husband. I deserved better. And so did my daughters. My eyes stung at the images of Jack and his cruelty. The past that shattered my ideals of a happy relationship. If I hadn't seen it firsthand from my parents, I'd believe it all an unrealistic dream.

My hand shook as I tried to wipe a lone tear off my cheek. That last day with Jack flashed through my mind. His anger. His cruelty. His attempt to take what he believed was his. Whatever triggered Jack to go too far that day would remain a mystery forever.

My screams and pleas from that day screamed through tonight's silence. My breaths shallowed with the memories.

*I still remembered how it felt to plunge that knife into his flesh. My rage – at him and at myself. I still had no idea where that last ounce of strength came from but I reached for the Swiss knife Jack kept in the back of his pants. Then I did something I could never come back from.*

*I flipped it open and stabbed it into his gut. I could feel the hot, sticky liquid on my hands, staining my hands with blood and sin. I couldn't ponder on it. Instead, I kicked him hard in the shaft.*

*A yelp echoed through the empty bedroom as Jack curled over, clutching his groin like they were precious diamonds.*

*The rage inside me urged me to kick him again and again, so he'd never be able to cheat on me. Or attempt to force me against my will. Before insanity and rage to hurt him took over, I pushed him away from me. He stumbled onto the floor and I ran.*

*His screams shattered the air, my name followed me as I ran out of the house.*

*What a fucking irony? My house and I ran, abandoning my hard earned safe haven. I should have kicked him out of it and changed all the locks. I*

*jumped into my car, struggling to put the key into the ignition, my hands shaking too hard.*

*Tears ran down my face and I could barely see the road as I drove frantically out of my neighborhood.*

*“No more,” I whispered over and over again, the salty taste of tears on my lips.*

*I decided right then and there, I wasn’t going back. I’d take the girls and start a new life. Visitation if he wanted it. Shared custody. But this marriage was history. Assuming I hadn’t killed him.*

*I showed up at Betty and Rick’s that day with a bruised face and a broken arm.*

*Betty cried, whether it was my battered appearance or fucked up circumstance. Oddly enough, I stopped crying when I got there. I just felt empty.*

*I had no more tears left.*

The worst part was that I couldn’t forgive myself for letting it get so bad that I had to stab my husband to save myself. Betty took the girls out of town so they wouldn’t see me in such a pitiful state. Rick stayed with me, helping me plan the next few months away from my husband.

Except, I couldn’t tell anyone that I stabbed Jack. I was terrified that I’d end up in jail.

When the highway patrol’s call came in to let me know that Jack had been in an accident and got himself killed, I felt nothing but relief. A tractor trailer ran into Jack’s truck, with his mistress in the car. They were both killed on the spot. The stab wound was never brought up.

Thank God for small blessings.

## CHAPTER 44

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



Before I even opened my eyes, I sensed the pounding headache. The memories of Jack haunted my dreams. Self-doubt that my judgment was skewed. Just as it had been with my late husband.

It was sheer luck that the fuck up with Jack hadn't left a lasting impact on my daughters. Saoirse and Sierra were too young. And my eldest... well, she lucked out. Thank God. But if my judgment failed me again, my girls would be hurt. They'd already grown attached to Kristoff.

"Two days in a row with a headache," I muttered to myself as my feet touched the soft carpet.

After a quick shower, I eyed my closet, wondering if Kristoff would fire me if I showed up in sweats. I scoffed in my head. Probably. So I continued going through possibilities until my eyes stopped on an emerald, tailored dress.

Green like Kristoff's eyes.

*Dress it is*, I decided. Courtesy of the billionaire boss.

My youngest two dressed, I ran around the house finishing the weekend bags.

"Toiletries, check," I muttered to myself. "Play shoes, check. Book, check. Favorite stuffy, check."

"Kristoff," my youngest screamed in delight.

I frowned, wondering why she called out my boss' name.

"Kristoff, not check," I muttered to myself. "Though we want to have a check. I think."

Giggling and happy squeals had me abandoning my checklist. I rushed down the stairs and stopped dead in my tracks. Kristoff was in my kitchen,



looking sharp and pristine. Broad shoulders filled his crisp black suit that molded to his toned body. Control. Precision. Power. He exuded it all.

My heart leapt in my chest. Was this how our mornings would look if we lived together?

*Nope. Don't go there, idiot.*

"What are you doing here?" I asked instead, eyeing him suspiciously. "How did you get in?"

"I let him in," Saoirse announced, grinning. Both of the girls' expressions were full of delight. They loved my boss too. Wonderful.

"That's right," Kristoff agreed. "I knocked on the door, since the doorbell is not working." His eyes twinkled, probably recalling the doorbell conversation. "Saoirse let me in."

"Oh."

"I'd like to take your girls to school and you to work." Hmm, very presumptuous.

Before I could reject or accept, both Sierra and Sienna squealed their delight.

"In your Land Rover?" Sienna asked, coming up behind me in her school uniform and her shoulder bag.

"What if I say no?" I told them all.

Girls frowned. "Why would you do that?" Saoirse pondered, her eyebrows scrunched. "You always say you don't like driving."

Ah, my little traitor.

"Should I put our weekend bags into your car, Kristoff?" Sienna suggested hopefully. "We are spending the weekend with Grandma."

Kristoff's deep forest eyes remained on me. My dress was the exact same shade as his eyes. My skin flared at his full attention. His eyes coasted down my body, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

"Only if your mom says it's okay." This man knew how to get his way. Jack tended to tell kids the opposite of what I asked them to do. Of course, Kristoff wouldn't. *He will be a good father.* The thought hit me suddenly and violently, followed by a pang of regret.

I had no doubt one of these days he'd marry and secure an heir. Men in his shoes usually did. And somehow the idea that it wouldn't be me hurt.

"Yes, please." All three girls scattered excitedly, chatting among themselves.

I came up to him, craning my neck to hold his gaze and standing in his shadow.

“I wanted to spend some time with you before the day kicked off,” he murmured softly, brushing his knuckles across my cheek. “Even if only in the car.”

This man was everything a woman could possibly wish for. Everything I wanted.

---

FROM THE MOMENT we arrived at the office, the madness kicked off the workday. Kristoff had conference calls booked for the entire day. Kimberly and I had a long laundry list of tasks to complete, scrambling to get Kristoff information he needed before his next call.

That man was a damn machine.

I barely saw Kristoff throughout the day and reluctantly, it made me appreciate our morning ride together. There was *nothing* about this man I didn't like. Except for the damned contract.

Right before lunch time, I poured another cup of coffee for him and walked it into his office. He was on the phone. Speaking Spanish. Damn if I didn't find it sexy as he rattled on, like he was born speaking it, and I wondered what else I didn't know about this man.

I just nodded and turned around to leave, but his hand gently wrapped around my wrist, bringing it to his face, then placing a soft kiss against my pale vein there. Warmth surged through me and my heart fluttered.

He mouthed a silent *thank you*. I smiled happily about his little show of affection. They were priceless, and fed my heart with dangerous dreams. I whispered back, “*You're welcome.*” Then gently tugged my hand back so he could get back to his business. And I to mine, before I became a complete puddle under this man's touch.

I barely saw him for the rest of the day. But I saw plenty of Samuel Jr. *Unfortunately*. His father's office was on the lower floor, but Junior kept ringing me with one question, after another. I couldn't say that he was annoying. He was surprisingly polite in our encounters, rather than a shameless flirt from the day before.

Just as Kimberly was leaving for the day, Samuel strode off the elevator.

“Leaving early?” he asked her, smiling.

“Yes, it’s my anniversary.” Her eyes darted to me, like she was unsure whether she should leave me alone with Samuel.

I smiled with assurance. “Have a great weekend,” I told her.

She stepped into the elevator and the door closed behind her.

“Hello again, Gemma.” Samuel Jr. strode towards me with confidence. Unlike Kristoff’s brooding, dominant ways, Junior was good looking in a lighthearted, boyish way. Very handsome. Except that a specific possessive boss was the only man I wanted.

I firmly pushed that longing of the unattainable to the back of my mind.

“Hello again, Samuel,” I greeted him. “What can I do for you?”

He casually leaned against my desk, a carefree smile on his face. Unlike Kristoff who always wore dark suits, Samuel’s was light gray with a design that seemed too busy but somehow it fit him perfectly and his personality. No tie. Crisp white shirt unbuttoned, revealing his bronze chest.

Definitely a playboy.

“I came to say thank you for all your help today.” I cocked my eyebrow in surprise, but remained quiet. “Neither my father nor I could have completed our duties today without all of your assistance.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” I responded unsure of where this was going. It was hard to be comfortable around someone that was nonchalant one day and seductive another.

“Are you free after work?” He grinned, boyish charm in full effect. Now, that was the man I met yesterday. Before I could answer, he continued, “I thought we could go grab a few drinks, and you could give me some pointers on how things work here. A happy hour and then who knows where the evening takes us.”

I shook my head incredulously. Did that actually ever work for him? The sad part was that it probably did. All he had to do was wave his wallet and women probably caved to his every whim.

*Kind of like Kristoff*, I thought wryly. And unfortunately, when it came to Kristoff, I was included in the group of women that fawned over him. I opened my mouth, just about to decline him, when Kristoff’s voice came from behind me.

“Gemma is working late today.”

His voice sent a cold chill down my spine. I looked up and found my boss’ glare on Samuel, and if looks could kill, I was certain Samuel would

be long dead. Who knows, maybe I would be dead too. Because Kristoff's gaze on me was just as cold.

"Gemma, do you have the documents I need?"

Frustration at his tone flickered in my chest. I waited a full three heartbeats before I answered.

"I do." I handed him the folder, then turned to Samuel. "Have a good time. Maybe next time," I told him.

I shouldn't have added the last bit. Yet, the rebel in me hated that Kristoff transferred his cold tone from Samuel to me.

"Next time," Samuel drawled, his grin wide. "Have a good weekend, Gemma." His eyes darted to Kristoff and I knew his next words could set Kristoff off. "Don't work her too hard and too late into the night, Boss."

My face burned at the insinuation. Samuel wouldn't know that I was sleeping with my boss. There was no way he could know.

"Concern yourself with your job," was Kristoff's dry response, his body an ice statue.

"Have a good weekend, Samuel," I ended the conversation, dismissing Samuel.

Kristoff behaved like a damn caveman and an asshole.

The elevator door shut behind Samuel with a soft beep, leaving me alone with Kristoff in a room as quiet as a graveyard. Without another word, he strode away from me and back into his office. He left the folder behind so I assumed he wanted me to bring it to him.

"Caveman," I muttered.

I grabbed the folder and followed him into his office.

"Here are the documents you needed." I laid them in front of him on his mahogany desk.

No acknowledgement. Not even a glance. It was his dismissal.

Anger raged inside of me. *Leave him to it. Or call him out on it.* The day started out so well and now he acted like a grumpy ass.

"What was that about?" I blurted, unable to hold it in.

Looking up from his document, he leaned back in his chair. Loosening his tie, tension in his shoulders visible, annoyance flashed in his eyes. The silence grew so deafening, I had to fight the urge to shift on my feet. But I refused to cower.

"You tell me, Gemma," he said gruffly, his eyes narrowing on me.

Anger burned in my chest and I refused to keep it in. I kept my anger and bitterness in for the duration of my marriage and it got me nowhere.

"Whatever your problem, just spit it out," I snapped.

I gritted my teeth as I waited for his answer, silence stretching between us. Heavy and full of ghosts.

"Were you busy all day?" His voice held a hint of anger. Unsure where he was going with it, I teetered on the edge. His demeanor was calm, but there was a volcano brewing inside of him. I could taste it and feel it as my own.

"Yes, it was busy," I retorted. His eyes were as dry as gin, but in their depths emerald sparkled. "Both Samuel Sr. and Jr. had questions so I kept getting interrupted."

"There is a lot of groundwork that has to be laid for the company to be successful."

Puzzled at the change of subject, I waited for him to elaborate. He didn't.

"I'm sure you'll succeed," I commented. "You never fail at anything."

A tight smile. No words. His body tense. His face cold and distant. I missed his warmth. I wanted his arms around me.

But I wouldn't ask him. I wouldn't beg.

"Our two months are coming up," he drawled. I forced my eyes to stay on Kristoff's face, my breath stuck in my lungs. I knew the contract would be brought up again eventually. The weeks flew by too fast. *I'm not ready*, I wanted to scream. Instead, I remained silent.

Was that the reason he was hot and cold towards me all week? It would make sense if it was. He wasn't the type of man to be accustomed to rejection. Except, I didn't reject him. I wanted him, gave him my body and my heart. I'd continue giving it to him if he'd let this thing between us go its natural way. Without a contract.

"Nothing to say?" His voice dripped with something bitter and sweet.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked, my hands tightening into fists, my nails digging into my palms.

"Seems you have already moved on," he said, and I tensed at his words. His jaw ticked with anger or annoyance, I couldn't tell. His tone was cold and merciless, the same one he used during his business negotiation. Maybe I was a business deal to him? "It didn't take you long."

Pain and bitterness tasted acidic in my mouth. Deep irritation flared inside of me that I'd allow him to get to me like that. I loved the man but I resented his comment and the way it made me feel.

"How dare you?" I hissed, hurt by his insinuation. Just this morning he picked up the girls and me, so he could spend time with me before the workday kicked off. And now this?

"This is my company. So yes, I dare if you are flirting with other staff on company time. And Junior," he spit the word, "... is part of that staff."

"That's rich coming from you," I snapped, my hands and my voice shaking with rage. I pushed hair off my forehead, and tucked it behind my ear. "Explain to me how you figured out I was flirting with him?"

"You admitted to spending the majority of the day with him. Junior gawks at you, wants to take you out. And you are encouraging his advances."

Appalled at his words, I stared at him dumbfounded. I couldn't even deign to reply. Not that I could find words, except '*You fucking asshole.*' Maybe a slap across his face for thinking he could talk to me like that.

Because regardless of his anger, I didn't worry that he'd strike me back.

"You are *my* assistant, not his." His eyes sparked with something dark, his jaw tightened. But it was his voice that got to me. Cold tenor that ghosted through me with a shiver, freezing my heart. "You had no business talking to him. Is this the reason you refuse to sign the contract?"

"I refuse to sign it because it's wrong!" I snapped, my voice bitter. "Signing that contract makes me no better than a common prostitute."

"That was our deal." His voice was professional and indifferent. Non-negotiable. "Two months of a trial period. Will you or will you not sign the contract?"

My eyes wide on him, I remained silent before something I regretted passed through my lips. Though anger simmered inside me.

"It won't be any different from what we are doing now," he continued his argument. "We're already fucking. Unless you intend to switch it up and fuck Junior now."

If he'd punched me, it would have hurt less than his words. Kristoff took my heart, body, and soul, unlike Jack who never touched my soul and had a fraction of my heart till he lost it forever.

I took three steps to him and before I could process it, my hand flew across the air but never connected with his cheek. His fingers curled around

my wrist, the grip firm but gentle. And I hated how my skin warmed under his touch.

“You’re a mistake,” I snapped, my voice a hiss. “I should have never allowed you to touch me.” I pushed my free hand into my hair, tugging on it. “So stupid. I’m so damn stupid!”

Stupid to have hoped for something more with him. Stupid to like him. And definitely stupid to love him.

Narrowing my eyes at him, it annoyed me that he seemed so put together and unperturbed. I should have known all the damn tenderness and affection was fake. It was probably his strategy to get me to sign his stupid contract.

*It didn’t feel fake*, my heart whispered. My damned traitorous heart.

I knew all along it would end eventually. I was prepared for it, but I really didn’t think it would end like this. With such cruel words.

“I’ve been open about our arrangement all along.” Kristoff never raised his tone, his words taunting me. I’ve seen firsthand how merciless he was at negotiation, so really, I shouldn’t be surprised. “There are no surprises here. I need a signed contract or I can move you to another department in my company.” Just like that, like I was a piece of furniture. “Unless you intend to fuck Samuel-”

His unfinished sentence lingered between us as a judgement against me. My blood boiled in anger and hurt against the meaning behind it. I ripped my arm out of his grip.

“I have never given you a reason to think I’d cheat on you,” I said icily. With each second that ticked in silence, my anger boiled stronger. “You know what? Go to fucking hell! I don’t need this bullshit again after my husband. And here I imagined you were better. You can take that contract and burn in hell with it. If I never see you again, it will be too soon.”

My phone still in my left hand, I stormed out of his office, not even bothering with the elevator. There was no chance I’d stay another second in the same building as him. I rushed down the stairs, taking two steps at a time. And in the stupid heels Kristoff preferred.

I should have thrown the stupid shoes at him. I only wore them because of his stupid contract. I preferred flats.

His words kept ringing in my ears. *Unless you intend to fuck Samuel. Unless you intend to fuck Samuel.*

My first argument with Kristoff and it had to be a major blow up. But then I sensed it would be. Yes, his ex-wife cheated on him, but I wasn't her. It never even crossed my mind. Even with Jack and all his infidelities, I had never cheated on my late husband.

For fuck's sake, I knew Kristoff was damaged, but this might be irreparable. I had my share of hurt in my marriage, but I'd like to think I was better poised than Kristoff. That man was borderline controlling and paranoid.

Though most of the time I loved and craved his control, I drew the line at him calling me a cheat. Kristoff's words and doubts hurt. More than anything.

*Gorgeous jerk!* If he knew how much I craved his touch, he'd probably use it against me.

Storming through the W&W lobby, I kept my emotions in check. I didn't need the entire company gossiping about my meltdown.

I pushed through the door and stepped out onto the street, a slight breeze blowing my hair. A chokehold grabbed my throat but the tears never came. Maybe I spent all of them all in my lifetime.

*You made your bed, Sunce.* My mother always called me sunshine. *Now you must lay in it.*

My personality was nothing like sunshine. Maybe I was just her sunshine. But she was right. I made my bed. Both fucking times. I married Jack because I felt lonely and wanted a family. Then pregnancy happened and I thought we'd be one. What a joke that turned out to be!

And Kristoff... fuck. Again, loneliness and longing. It got you into a pickle every damn time.

I should've seen this coming a mile away. What happened back there was just the beginning. Kristoff's past had scarred him, just like my past had scarred me! I would never let it happen to me again, no matter how much it hurt to leave him. This time I had to protect myself before it became too much. I didn't have the luxury to walk away from a job in his company, but I would walk away from *him*. I'd take his offer and get transferred to another department.

He was a good dream while it lasted. But, I wouldn't stay long enough to watch him turn into a jealous nightmare.



## CHAPTER 45

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# KRISTOFF



It took me exactly ten heartbeats to realize what an ass I was and rush after Gemma. This jealousy around her had turned me into a fucking monster. I didn't like it; she didn't deserve it. Except, knowing she could have so much better than me made a wimp out of me.

Approaching my fifties and I had lost my fucking shit. Not even finding my best friend in bed with my ex-wife impacted me like this. My thoughts drifted to the past.

*The machine guns and bombs blazed all around. Ambush. We fell right into it. I had one more day and I was out. One more fucking day.*

*Screams filled the air. The scent of blood invaded my lungs. Hot desert sun burning my skin, along with the flames of the burning compound.*

*My eyes roamed the area, death surrounding me. Nobody was supposed to know this location. Nobody but us. Yet, here we were. Getting attacked by the enemy.*

*I made my way towards my men, cornered, shooting back at the enemy who was closing in on them. The desert sand felt heavy under my boots. Sweat trickled down my back. But I kept my control. I couldn't afford to lose it.*

*Another loud explosion. My knees gave out and I fell. I shook my head, trying to clear the loud ringing in my ears. It didn't help.*

*Blinking my eyes, I focused on the senses that worked. My sight.*

*It was then that I saw it. Byron bleeding, his shirt melted, as was the skin on his back. Fuck!*

*Ignoring the pain in my ears and my body, I shuffled on my legs. I lifted my gun and started shooting at the enemy. Aimed to kill, not to wound. I*

*didn't give a shit if we caught them dead or alive, as long as the men under me lived.*

*Three men surrounded Byron. He snatched the gun that lay next to him, despite the pain he had to feel. I shot one man. He shot the other. We both shot the third.*

*My eyes alert to our surroundings, I reached Byron. The smell of burnt flesh was something I'd never forget. It stained my lungs.*

*"Fuck," I grunted, lowering myself down.*

*"I don't think I'll get out of this one," he gritted with a painful expression.*

*I shifted him around so the sand wouldn't rub against his raw, burnt flesh. "You will," I demanded. "We're going to get the fuck out of here. So you can take care of your sister and your brothers."*

*"Royce and Winston will take care of Aurora." His glazed, vacant eyes stared at me, but didn't see me.*

*I checked the signal and the transponder. "Chopper is on its way," I told him. "You stay alive. That's an order, goddamn it."*

*Picking him up, I threw him over my shoulder and started barking orders to my men. "Get to higher ground. Chopper's coming."*

*We barely made it out alive. I didn't lose a single man, but a few of us came out scarred.*

*For three days, I sat in the hospital, checking on my men. Then slept in the seat by Byron's bed. Over the past few years, we'd become close. Became friends. I failed him. Fuck, I failed my whole team.*

*The evidence stared right back at me. Blisters on Byron's back. His skin peeled off.*

*"Why are you still here?" Byron never moved his head, his voice hoarse. From screams. From grunts. From cursing.*

*"I have nowhere else to be."*

*"Fucking liar," Byron spat out. "You're supposed to be getting some pussy right now."*

*I shrugged, although he couldn't see me. "She can wait."*

*The truth was I didn't miss Jacqueline. Marriage had been the next natural step, we were both from the same social circles, and the sex was okay, so we tied the knot.*

*"Good women usually wait," Byron hissed as he shifted around.*

*I shot up to my feet. "Want me to help you get more comfortable?"*

*“Fuck!” he grumbled.*

*Before I had a chance to turn him over, the nurse rushed over, shooting me a scolding look. She immediately took charge, her small frame bracing Byron and shifting him around. Her red hair reminded me of flames and somehow it felt ironic concerning Byron’s burns. Actually, it reminded me of my cousin.*

*“Here,” she offered. “Let me make you comfortable.”*

*It took her a minute, then satisfied that he was comfortable, she turned around and left us without another word.*

*It’s time for you to get out of the military,” he added.*

*“Eyeing my position?” I joked.*

*He shrugged. “Maybe. Either way, you’re done with this. You have a wife. A baby on the way. Don’t get stuck in this shithole and lose out on it.”*

*Except, I wasn’t too keen on going back to my wife. To a baby on the way, yes. But Jacqueline, no. The rare occasions she made time to FaceTime me were awkward and forced. It only highlighted how little we had in common.*

*It took me thirty-six hours and three different flights to get back to D.C., only to find my wife in bed. With my best friend. Both sound asleep.*

*It wasn’t a blinding fury that filled me. It wasn’t a red rage. It was my goddamned pride and exhaustion that had me pissed off that I wouldn’t be able to lay my head down and rest. Just for one goddamn day.*

*I ripped the covers off in one swift move, hoping they’d fall off the bed along with it. No such luck.*

*“And here I thought I’d surprise **you**,” I said, my voice cold. Surprise and shock filled their eyes as they clutched for a sheet to cover themselves. “How lovely that you two surprised me.”*

*I didn’t care that it was the middle of the night when I threw them both out. But first I landed a couple of punches to Jonathan’s face.*

*That didn’t compare to the jealousy I felt when I saw Samuel Jr. around Gemma. This jealousy felt like hot lava rushing through my veins. It made me see red. I knew full well I glared at him with a look of ‘touch her and I’ll kill you’.*

*I had the clause of emotional detachment and no strings attached to the contract. And here I was. All fucking in.*

*Her dark hair trailed down her back, and I knew how soft those strands were on my fingers. Her soft eyes. Her pouty lips. Her soft body. The flare*

of her hips and her shudders, welcoming my thrusts so perfectly. And her smiles! Jesus, it made me want to blind any man who saw her beautiful smiles. Those were just for me. And her daughters.

Rolling my shoulders, I attempted to push away my obsessive and possessive nature before I lost her. *Keep her*. It has become my single goal. *Make her mine*.

I clenched my teeth, angry with myself to have let her get to me like that. It was all Junior's fault. I should just fire the motherfucker despite the fact that he was smart.

Just not smart enough to keep his distance from my woman.

*Fuck*. My woman. I wasn't the sharing type and she was all mine.

Junior must have a death wish, the way he kept calling Gemma and kept intruding on her personal space. I just had to get rid of him and everything would be back to normal.

Except for the goddamn contract.

I needed her to sign it. To get her commitment. Fuck, maybe I could convince her to sign a marriage certificate.

Then the angry look she flashed my way before she stormed off played in my mind.

Yeah, she wouldn't accept it.

I was ready to offer up my fortune to get her to marry me, to accept the ultimate contract that would bind her to me forever. Except, Gemma had to be the only woman on this planet that would refuse to marry because of my fortune.

Challenge accepted. After all, strategy was my strength.

## CHAPTER 46

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



I stood in the street unsure where to go or what to do. An angry tear rolled down my face, and it was like a floodgate opened. I probably looked just as messy as my two-year-old when she cried.

I walked aimlessly, barely seeing where I was going. The streets were busy with people ready for the weekend. There were a few curious glances thrown my way, but I ignored it all. My argument with Kristoff playing on repeat in my mind.

*I need a signed contract.* I was a contract to him. Nothing more; nothing less. Maybe if I felt nothing for him, I'd be able to evaluate his words rationally. Instead, this hurt like a bitch. There was no chance in hell I could sign that contract. I was protecting him as much as myself. It'd destroy his carefully constructed life if my secret came out. And officially connecting myself to him opened the door to strangers digging into my past.

I tilted my head upwards to see that the clouds turned gray. The sky opened and the rain broke through the clouds, matching my mood. Nothing worked better for a depressing day than having my mood match the weather. If only I'd driven to work.

Walking aimlessly, rain soaked through my clothes and my skin. My heart hurt like a bitch. Still, life just went on. No matter what. Just like this city. There weren't many events that paused the buzz of life in this city. Cars honking. People rushing to their destination.

I stopped and glanced around me. I was blocks away from W&W. The mall with the National Museum of History in front of me. My parents used to bring me here all the time. It was free. So were the memories that

overwhelmed me. Mom and Dad holding hands with happy grins and love on their faces.

Was that so much to ask for? Why was it hard to find something so simple?

I stood in front of the steps, my hands wrapped around myself.

*“Gemma, stop daydreaming. Stay close.”* My mother’s voice echoed in my head. She always called me a daydreamer. Was that what got me into this mess? Daydreaming. Hope.

Droplets landed on my lips and I licked it off. It tasted salty. Tears mixed with rain. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. At least the summer rain wasn’t cold. I had to look at the positives. At least this weekend I’d have a break and get myself together.

To hell with Kristoff and his hot touches. I could live without them, right after I cried my eyes out.

Drenched by rain, I turned around towards the street and went to raise my hand to flag a cab. I froze. Shit. I left my purse in the office. I sniffled, my eyes locking on my phone. Five missed calls. All Kristoff.

Going back to the office was out of the question. I didn’t want to see nor talk to Kristoff. Not yet. I needed to have a good cry, along with a good night’s sleep before I’d steel my heart and spine to face my boss.

Raindrops dripped onto my face as I debated what to do.

Then with a heavy sigh, I dialed up Rick. I’d face a million questions, but he was a better alternative than Betty. She’d grill me to death and then possibly decide to tackle Kristoff personally.

“Please, answer,” I murmured softly to myself, hoping Rick hadn’t left the city yet.

“Hey girl,” Rick’s voice reached through the phone. A sigh slipped through.

“Hey.” My voice came through strangled so I cleared my throat. I wouldn’t act heartbroken. “Hey there,” I tried again, inserting some cheer into my tone.

“What’s wrong?” he questioned.

“Why do you assume something’s wrong?” I attempted humor although I failed miserably.

“Because I’ve known you for a long time,” he answered. “Are you ok?”

“Yes, peachy.” I cursed myself. “I need a favor. Please.”

“Anything. Name it.”



“Could you pick me up please?” I asked. “I left my purse in the office so I have no money for a cab.” I left out the part where Kristoff picked me up to take me to work and I lived way out of his way.

“Tell me where you are.” No questions, no judgements, no advice. That’s why I loved Rick.

“I’m in front of the National Museum,” I answered. “Thank you, Rick.”

“You bet,” his voice was firm. “I’m walking out the door as we speak. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

I pressed the end button on my phone and glanced around me. There weren’t many people out and about since only idiots like me hung out in the rain. Spotting an empty bench, I walked over to it to sit down, feeling exhausted. I stared in front of me, not really seeing anything.

*How could a day that started so well turn so shitty,* I wondered.

“Gemma.” A man’s voice had me turning my head in its direction.

“Rick.” I jumped up. He walked towards me in his firm stride and his steps rushed.

“Jesus Christ,” he breathed heavily. “You are soaked to the bone. I’ve been calling you.”

I attempted a smile, though I suspected I failed miserably. “Sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

He took his suit jacket off and wrapped it around me. “C’mon, let’s get you home.”

His hand on my shoulder, he gently nudged me towards his car, sitting in the middle of the road with the driver’s door wide open, the engine still running.

“You must be aiming for a new car,” I retorted, a chill settling into my bones and my teeth chattering. “Leaving your car door open is basically an invitation to get your car stolen.”

He rolled his eyes.

“I’ll remember that for when I want a new car.” I slid into the passenger seat and before I could reach for my seatbelt, he already leaned over me and clicked it in.

He hurried around, got in the driver seat, and put his black BMW M5 into drive.

“Want me to take you by the office to get your purse?” he asked.

I should. I needed my purse and my wallet. Yet, I didn’t want to tempt fate by running into Kristoff.

“No, thanks.”

With a sharp nod, he sped down the street, taking the quickest route out of the city. I stared in front of me as buildings and the city blurred past me. The heat slowly started to thaw the chill in my bones.

“Man, what happened?” he asked, concerned. “You look like a fucking mess.”

“Geez, thanks,” I muttered dryly. “Please dish out more compliments.”

My eyes lowered. My green dress clung to my body, almost soaking wet, my push up bra outline showing through it.

*At least it is the same color*, I mused silently.

My hair was so wet, droplets of water fell onto Rick’s suit jacket slowly drenching it. I needed a damn towel. I knew he noticed I didn’t answer his question, though thankfully he didn’t ask another. I knew he wouldn’t. It was why I called him, not Betty.

Speeding down the highway, I stared out the window. I was ready to climb into my own bed and sleep the remaining day away. Tomorrow would be a better day. Without Kristoff.

“Better?” Rick asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Much better. Thanks.”

He eyed me, concern in his dark eyes, then returned his attention on the road. “Should I get us something to eat?”

I shrugged. “I’m not hungry. But if you are, go ahead.”

“You should eat something,” he insisted. My mom always thought eating solved everything too. Maybe that was the reason I loved Rick so much.

“I will,” I said. “When I get home, I promise.”

“Girls spending the weekend with Grandma?” he asked.

“Yes.” *Thank God*. I needed one night to recover from my Kristoff-coma. And then I’d be brave, like nothing was wrong. Just like I had put on a brave face during my marriage with Jack, hiding my distress in front of the girls.

The rest of the drive was spent in silence, the low tunes of Frank Sinatra coming through the stereo.

“Here we are.” Rick pulled in my driveway and got out.

I didn’t want any company right now. Rick had seen plenty of my shit with Jack. Opening the car door for me, I took his hand and climbed out of his car.

“Thanks for picking me up,” I said again. Walking around to the garage door, I punched my PIN into the keypad, prompting it to open.

“No need to stay,” I told him, smiling. Though a lump seemed to be stuck in my throat. God, I fucking hated emotions sometimes. It would be so much easier to just not feel anything.

Disregarding my comment, Rick followed me through the garage into my house.

“You don’t need to thank me,” he answered simply. “We’re family.”

I swallowed hard. Sometimes it was easier when people were pricks. It was easier to fight it with anger. But when someone was kind, it was harder to maintain composure.

Rick’s hands came to my shoulders and turned me to face him. Our eyes connected and my lip quivered. Fucking lip. Without another word, he pulled me into a tight hug, crushing my face into his chest.

“So stupid,” I mumbled into his shirt, trying to hold back my tears. I was so goddamn stupid to let my boss impact me like this. The warning signs were there all along.

“You shouldn’t be alone right now.” His mouth moved against my scalp. His hands gently rubbed my back in a soothing motion, which only made it worse. I had to fight the urge to sob like a baby. He cooed to me like a child, like he could sense the impending crying fit.

“It’s ok,” he whispered softly into my hair. “Just cry it out.”

I gently pushed against him. I wouldn’t cry; I refused to cry for a man that would think so little of me and accuse me of cheating. Yes, he could be tender, affectionate, and sweet. Yes, his touch burned my skin and made me an addict. But I wouldn’t cry.

“Want to have dinner with us?” Rick probed, his attempt unsubtle.

I smiled, shaking my head. “Not tonight.” I leaned in closer and hugged him. “Good night.”

He bent his head and smooched my cheek. “Remember, if you need me, just call.”

I walked him out the door, watching from my porch as he entered his car and drove off, leaving me alone with the empty house and silence. Quiet was so uncharacteristic of our house that it almost felt eerie. At least out here, I could hear a dog barking in the distance, the waves crashing against the shore.

It had stopped raining and the smell of the wet soil scented the air, along with the fishy bay smell. But it was home. Just as my mother's small place was always home to her. Though the scent of the Adriatic Sea was hard to compare to the smell of the Chesapeake Bay.

I went in search of my cell phone to call the girls and touch base. I searched the kitchen, then the hallway, and porch. I ended up searching the entire house for it, including upstairs, although I knew the phone couldn't be there since I had it in my hand when we walked in.

*Didn't I?*

*To hell with it,* I thought and went to my house phone that I hadn't used in forever. Hopefully, I still remembered how to dial it.

"Crap, what is her number?" I muttered to myself, trying to remember the digits to her cell phone number. I failed the first time. And the second. I finally got it right on the third try.

Maybe that applies to men too, I thought wryly to myself as I listened to the line ring.

"Hello?" Her voice was tentative, like she was uncertain who it was. *Duh, she probably was since I called from the house line.*

"Hi there," I chirped, forcing cheer into my voice.

"Gemma? Is that you? Did you get a new phone number?"

I sighed. "No, I didn't. I can't find my cell phone so I'm calling from the house phone."

She chuckled. "No wonder Sienna said she couldn't get you."

Alarm shot through me. "Is everything ok?"

"Yes, yes," she said fast. "We just tried to call and ask if the girls could stay all next week. Since summer break has officially started. We wanted to see how you felt about taking a mini vacation to Florida."

"Ok," I caved. "They love your place in Florida."

A loud squeal echoed through the line.

"Thank you!" she exclaimed. Then her voice muffled. "Girls, Mommy said yes. Pack it up, we'll fly out tomorrow."

The next fifteen minutes were full of giggles and outbursts of excitement from all of them. Sienna worried about the perfect bathing suit. Such a typical teenager. Saoirse and Sierra worried about beach toys.

"Grandma will make sure you have beach toys," I assured them for the fifth time. "And when you build the sand castle, remind her to take a picture and send it to me."

More laughter. Kisses sent over the line and they were done with me, more concerned with their adventure. Not that I could blame them.

After a quick shower, I slipped on a long, soft sleeping gown that came down to my knees, and crawled into bed, eager for rest. To stop thinking and feeling. Though as tired and exhausted as I felt, both emotionally and physically, sleep wouldn't find me.

I lay in bed unable to sleep, staring at the dark ceiling and overwhelmed with thoughts of what happened today.

Two months!

That was all it took for Kristoff to consume all of me. He had crept into my heart and my soul, and engraved himself into every fiber of my being. The longing to be the subject of Kristoff's raw and intense affection.

Too much to ask? Probably.

Pulling the blankets over me, I shifted to my side, the bed too big just for one person. My youngest always found her way into it in the middle of the night, and something about the knowledge that it would be empty all night, hit me right in the chest.

*Loneliness.*

It had never bothered me as much as it did tonight. I shifted again, focusing my mind on the rhythmic sound of the fan. *Don't think. Don't think.*

I shifted again, this time onto my back. It was pointless. Sleep wouldn't find me. I got to my feet and padded down the stairs and into the living room. Grabbing the remote, I turned the TV on, and laid down on the loveseat.

I watched Channel 5, trying to concentrate on the show, but unable to process a single word because my thoughts were scattered all over the place. Mainly around a certain tall, dark man who made me feel alive.

With a sigh, I muted the TV. I let thoughts of Kristoff fill my mind. I wasn't successful keeping them at bay anyhow. The filthy billionaire whose touch burned through my skin like hotwire had ingrained himself into every fiber of my being.

I recognized this feeling; it was longing.

*Longing for him.*

## CHAPTER 47

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



*“I want your full submission, Gemma.”*

*Kristoff whispered in my ear, his mouth brushing against it, and his hard body pressing against mine. It all felt like heaven. He trailed kisses down my neck until he gently bit my collarbone, sending shivers down my body.*

*“Tell me you’re mine.” His hot breath lit up my skin.*

*“Yes.” My voice was barely a whisper. His signature cologne invaded all my senses. My fingers pushed through his hair, I pulled on the strands to bring him closer to me. I couldn’t get enough of him.*

*“Tell me you’re mine,” he demanded possessively.*

*I struggled to open my eyes. I never wanted to stop feeling him so close to me.*

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

*I attempted to move my head to check the noise, but Kristoff’s mouth took mine into a hard kiss. And everything else faded.*

*Another bang.*

*Kristoff slowly faded away.*

*“Where are you going?” I needed him to stay.*

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

*“Gemma.” A loud shout pierced the fog.*

*I struggled to open my eyes; my eyelids were too heavy. Exhaustion too deep. I wanted to feel Kristoff’s arms around me. Have him hold me. I just wanted him back.*

*Glass shattered.*

I jumped up, almost tumbling onto the floor. I scrambled onto my knees, trying to remember where I was.

Couch. Living room. More glass breaking.

I heard muffled voices. Fear spiked through my heart as I got to my feet and nearly tripped over the armrest. I blinked my eyes and silently cursed at the pain that shot through my knee.

Calm down. Think clearly.

Another set of muffled voices drifted through the air.

*Jesus, did someone break in?* I ran to my alarm panel.

“Genevieve.” Kristoff's voice called out, panic in his tone. I stopped dead in my tracks. It couldn't be. I'd never heard a hint of panic in his voice.

“Miss Rose.” Another voice. “This is Officer James, Eastern District Police department.”

Maybe I was still sleeping? I pinched the bridge of my nose.

*Oh shit, that hurt!*

“Hello?” I hesitated, peeking from the doorway of my living room.

*What the hell is going on?*

Heavy footsteps slapped against the kitchen tile and I held my breath, unsure of what to expect. That was when I saw him. Kristoff's long strides had him in front of me and his hands wrapped around me, pulling me against his hard body.

Kristoff showered my head with kisses. Two police officers came in behind him. A light came on and I blinked hard against it.

“Ummm. What's going on?” His hug tightened and despite how good it felt, I gently pushed away from him. I couldn't forgive his cruel words just yet, no matter how much I wanted his comfort. I took a step back from him, worried I'd cave in to my craving for him. Reluctantly he let go, though he remained close.

“We received reports of concern for your safety.” I scrunched my eyebrows. The officer's explanation made no sense. “We came to check the house and saw your leg dangling off the couch, not moving at all. We banged on the window for quite a while.”

“What?” I was certain my brain wasn't quite catching up yet. “It's the middle of the night.”

“My apologies, Miss,” the other police officer interjected. “Your purse was left at your desk. You were reported missing.” The policeman sent an



exasperated side glance at Kristoff. "Seeing you through the window like that, we thought you were hurt."

I glanced towards the front room and saw the large window they broke through to enter the house.

I frowned, then looked up at Kristoff. He was a mess. His tie was half untied, his hair was a disheveled mess, and his green eyes looked almost bruised like he hadn't slept in days.

"It didn't occur to you that I might be sleeping?" I muttered, my voice still raspy from sleep.

"I was worried sick," Kristoff growled. "I thought something happened to you when you didn't return for your purse."

"Everything's ok," I mumbled. "I had a friend bring me home."

"Do you mind if we have a look around?" the officer asked.

"That's unnecessary, but please be my guest," I grumbled. The two went to ensure I was safe. "Though now with the broken window, I might get uninvited guests," I complained.

"I'll have the window repaired tomorrow," Kristoff interjected, assuring me. "I'll stay with you until it's fixed."

*The hell you are*, I thought to myself but kept silent. I wouldn't argue with him in front of witnesses.

Within a few minutes, the officers were satisfied with my safety and left, leaving me alone with Kristoff. As I watched the police officers depart from my front porch, Kristoff stood next to me.

Once the car disappeared from view, I slowly turned to Kristoff. The moon was bright and combined with the porch light, I could clearly see the outline of his strong jaw. He clenched his teeth, and I wondered if he was still mad.

I didn't care... slight correction, I didn't want to care. But that was just a minor detail that he didn't need to know.

I took a few short steps to my swing and sat down on my front porch. The sound of the rain pattering around us helped to calm and cool the hurt burning inside of me.

"Kristoff." I began since he just stood there as still as a statue, granted a beautiful and sexy statue, but that wasn't important. "You can't stay the night."

"I'm not leaving you with a broken window." His voice was final, just like his negotiations.

“I’m not spending the night under the same roof as you.” I swore I heard his teeth grinding. “I can’t be around you right now,” I told him tiredly.

I wasn’t sure if the moonlight’s reflection played tricks on me, but I thought I saw him flinch.

“I’ll stay in my car then,” he grumbled. “But I’m not leaving until your window is fixed.”

“Great.” I wasn’t in the mood for a debate. I got up from the seat. “I’ll bring you a blanket.”

He’d leave. This man lived a life of luxury. There was no chance in hell, he’d sleep in his car all night for me. Even a bigger SUV such as his Land Rover. I went in search of a blanket and brought it back to him.

I handed it to him, his eyes burning a hole through me.

“Good night.” I turned around before I could do something stupid. Like kiss him.

*How is it possible that I still want him?* I thought desperately.

The first day I walked into his office, I had no idea I’d end up here. But I should have, considering from the moment I laid eyes on this man, I was completely twisted up on the inside. There was something about him that pulled on me. Maybe it was his devastatingly good looks, maybe it was the way he seemed to command every room he entered, or maybe it was because I found someone who, like me, had been hurt.

I glanced out the glass door before I took the stairs up to my bedroom, and I saw him lean back in his driver’s seat, tucking his expensive jacket behind his head as a pillow.

“Billionaire Kristoff Baldwin sleeping in a car in front of my house,” I mumbled to myself, and went up the stairs. “Now that would be a front page story.”

I slid into my comfortable bed and for a fraction of a second, guilt consumed me.

“He deserves it,” I whispered to myself, fluffing up my own pillow. *Though it would be nice to wake up with him in the bed,* my heart whispered.

“Whatever,” I muttered and turned over.

Sleeping was impossible. I kept checking on my boss through my window, peeking like some peeping Tom. I wasn’t sure if I hoped he would finally drive off, or that he’d stick it through all night.

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DAWN'S RAYS fanned across my bedroom. I got out of bed, pulled my hair into a bun, took a quick shower, then brushed my teeth.

"I'll wear the most comfortable thing I can find," I muttered to myself, my feeble protest against him in the form of his preferred wardrobe. So I pulled on a pair of capri jeans.

"Ugh," I complained. They felt snug. I sucked in my stomach and buttoned them up. Barely. I combined it with a light green blouse, because it had become my favorite color and padded down the stairs barefoot.

Once in the kitchen, I started preparing coffee. Glancing out the door, I spotted the familiar Land Rover.

"Still here," I muttered under my breath, slightly impressed. He could have easily assigned someone else to watch the house. Why would he put himself through the discomfort? He certainly owed me nothing.

*Maybe an apology,* I snorted to myself.

Though the fact he stayed and ensured my safety made me soften toward him by a tiny bit.

I fixed a pot of coffee, knowing how he loved his coffee, and went out onto my porch. I just caught him stepping out of his Rover, stretching his legs and his body. He took his tie off sometime in the night, his white crisp shirt wasn't so crisp anymore, his sleeves rolled up, and his pants slightly wrinkled. He still looked too good for my own good.

I stood motionless, appreciating the view of his backside, when he turned around and caught me ogling him.

*Busted!*

"You can use the guest bathroom if you want to freshen up. There are packaged toiletries there. Help yourself to anything." I headed back into the house, Kristoff right behind me. "I'll be on the back deck with my coffee. There is a pot of coffee in the kitchen if you want some."

But he'd have to get it himself.

Finding my way to my favorite spot, I enjoyed the quiet morning over the bay. The view was something I would never tire of.

Kristoff made noise inside, looking for a mug probably. The door opened, and as if he was my magnet, my eyes sought him out.

He sat on a single seater with a full cup of coffee, as if he was unsure whether he'd be welcomed to sit next to me although there was plenty of

room. He looked completely refreshed.

"It's nice to see you are capable of making your own coffee," I mocked. A gorgeous smile curved his lips and my traitorous heart fluttered.

"Yes, I am," he purred. "But I love it when you bring it to me. It's the highlight of my day."

*What?*

I clamped my mouth, not wanting to comment on it, and locked my eyes on the horizon.

"This view is stunning," he murmured. My eyes darted his way to find him looking at me.

"It's my favorite part of the house," I noted, his eyes never wavering away from me. It was slightly unnerving, so I turned my eyes back to the sea, relishing in the calmness it brought me.

"I came after you," he started.

My head snapped back to him. I couldn't imagine Kristoff going after anyone. Maybe he cared at least a little for me? I forced my eyes back to the horizon.

He continued, his soft voice like a light caress with the affection I craved from him.

"After you ran off, I came after you, to find you. I tried calling your cell, over and over again. Why didn't you answer? I thought something happened to you. Those hours were the worst hours of my entire life."

I sighed and glanced at him. There were so many invisible scars between the two of us.

"I'm sorry." Kristoff's voice was sorrowful. His expression, even more so. "Please forgive me."

"I don't know where my phone is," I remarked, unsure whether I was ready to forgive. "I didn't see your calls."

The whoosh of the waves soothed. They almost matched the beat of my heart. One. Two. Three.

"We are good for each other." He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. Our faces only inches apart. "You know we are."

I shook my head dubiously.

"Gemma." The anguish in his voice matched the one in my heart. "I want you, and you want me, nothing ever felt as right as us."

I held his gaze, desperately wanting to agree with him but what happened yesterday held me back.

“Let me prove it to you,” he begged. “Give us another chance.”

“You were a complete asshole yesterday,” I grumbled. “I understand your ex-wife hurt you, but I’m not her. I’m nothing like her.” I took a deep breath and continued before I lost my courage. “We all have ghosts. Your accusations opened a lot of old wounds for me.”

“Please forgive me,” he rasped. “I’ll fix it,” he vowed.

Could he fix his jealousy? His distrust? My past?

“Tell me you don’t want me Gemma, and I’ll leave,” he promised, and I had no doubt he meant it.

A breeze pushed my hair into my face, and I reached up to push an unruly strand out of my face but he beat me to it. Brushing it out of my face, tucking it behind my ear, before he took my fingers into his.

“Tell me you don’t want me,” he repeated in a firm voice.

I locked eyes with him. “You know I’d be lying if I said I don’t want you,” I justified. “But it is not as simple as that.”

He knew that. That contract was a deal breaker for me. His jealousy too. Then there was the secret I harbored. Right now, all Kristoff had was speculation but what would he do if he knew what I did to my late husband.

“Please don’t leave,” he spoke softly. “Let me fix this. Let me prove to you, we are great together.”

A deep sigh slipped through my lips. “We both have too many ghosts to deal with,” I said, trying to keep my voice firm. “I- I just can’t make this thing with you a business deal. I have my daughters to think of. They already like you way too much.”

“And I love them,” he admitted and my heart fluttered softly. “They are a big part of you.”

*Then why don’t you love **me**?* If only I was brave enough to ask that question. Albeit, even if he did love me, my secret held me back. It could destroy him and everything he built if it came out.

“I’d never hurt them,” he reasoned with me. “I want them as part of our contract. I’ll protect you and them. From everything.”

If only I could trust him completely. Maybe with some things I could, but others... no. I couldn’t risk it.

I licked my lips, swallowing the lump in my throat. “You have to stop trying to control me. The world. Everyone.”

The corner of his lips tipped up. “I think at this point, I’m ready to say fuck the world and everyone in it. I just want you and your girls.” God, I

could take those words so many ways. They melted my heart. When I said nothing, he continued, "I'm a distrustful, old bastard. I know."

I shook my head. "You're not old."

He chuckled, slightly bitter. "But I'm distrustful and a bastard." I nibbled on my lower lip, unsure what to say to make him feel better. "I wasn't trustful to begin with and then the whole fiasco with my ex-wife set any trust I had to flames."

I curled my fingers, gripping the cup of coffee, fighting the need to reach out to him. "I'm sorry for what your ex and friend did to you."

He nodded. "My parents' marriage wasn't the best example of a relationship. Then I got married, too young and too stupid. On and off deployments. Until I came back to find my best friend warming my wife's bed. It was a hard pill to swallow."

"I can imagine," I rasped.

"Losing my friend hit me harder than losing my wife," he added. "It should have been my sign. And Jonathan's life with my ex-wife is anything but roses."

He reached for the unruly strand of hair and tucked it behind my ear. "I'm selfish, but I promise, I'll try harder."

A tense, yet almost comfortable silence followed. The silence grew so deafening and ghosts I buried demanded I set them free.

"Jack, my husband, and I, we were too young," I started, glancing away from him, too scared he'd see more than I wanted him to see in my eyes. "He had a wandering eye. It caused problems, and because he cheated, he became paranoid and accused me of cheating too."

Finding my courage, I returned my gaze to his. "It was shitty of you to do the same." I tried to sound strong, but I felt vulnerable, more than ever. "I don't need another paranoid man in my life."

He cupped my cheeks and brought our faces close together. "Fuck, I'm sorry," he rasped. I had a feeling this man rarely ever apologized. "I'm so fucking sorry. If he was alive, I'd tear into him and make him regret ever looking at another woman. For hurting you."

Jack no longer mattered to me. But Kristoff, he mattered a lot. More than Jack ever did. However, it didn't mean I'd tolerate his harsh words.

He got up and knelt in front of me wrapping his strong arms around me tightly, as if he was scared I'd change my mind. His warmth was an

addiction and I caved in. I leaned my body into him. It scared me how right that felt.

The slightly desperate look in his eyes, fear of loss I knew too well, hit me right in the chest. My throat felt tight as relief swelled in my chest that he wanted me. Me and my girls. "I apologize for hurting you."

I leaned closer, our lips a breath apart.

"Don't do it again," I warned him in a soft voice. "Hurt me once, shame on you. Hurt me twice, you'll never see me again. I'm not about to repeat mistakes I made with my late husband."

He kissed me with a sweet pull. "You're the best thing that has ever happened to me." His lips brushed mine. "Every part of you is mine and I'd search every corner of this world to find you. Because life will never be the same without you."

He moved and sat next to me. Lifting me up, he sat me on his lap and we watched the horizon as his admission rattled the silence.

No ghosts of our pasts. No secrets. No broken souls.

Just the two of us.

I cut myself off. I didn't want to ruin this little moment, but I also didn't want to pretend that this lingering topic did not exist. The truth is, we didn't work everything out. The discussion about the words he used and the comparison between our pasts was only part of the problem... The other was the dreaded contract.

"My need for the contract is the result of my past experience during my marriage." Kristoff stopped all my whirling thoughts. "It has less to do with you and more to do with the fucked up circumstances during my marriage."

That made me pause and watch him pensively. Would I give him peace of mind if I signed it? Was it as simple as that? But every part of me objected to the idea of signing it.

"Is the contract negotiable?" I couldn't believe the words came out of my mouth. Maybe, just maybe, we could find a middle ground that would make us both happy.

"Maybe," he replied vaguely. "For now, I want your promise."

I raised my eyebrow curiously and eyed him. "What promise?"

"That you'll be faithful to me," he answered in a strong voice, but there was so much vulnerability in his eyes. We both remained silent, watching each other, and I couldn't help but notice how tense he was. I lifted my hand and gently put my palm against his warm cheek.

“I promise,” I whispered and gently kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll always be faithful.”

I felt his tension evaporate at my words. My heart bled for this strong and powerful man. I knew I should be worried more about myself but I didn’t like seeing this strong man so vulnerable. My hands roamed over his back, feeling his hard muscles underneath his shirt. God, he felt like home and comfort to me and his smile warmed up my heart like sunshine on a hot day.

Kristoff had a hurtful past, just like me. We were both dealing with our own ghosts in our own way. He had shown me he was sorry, didn’t he? And he apologized. What more could I possibly want?

*Everything*, the little voice in my head whispered and warned of hurt that would surely follow if I opened up too much.

It would be so much easier to just keep it physical, give him my body and keep feelings out of the equation. My heart and my soul wanted it to go all in with him. But I was scared of rejection and hurt. The sensible and reasonable side of me understood that if I wasn’t giving him all of me, I couldn’t expect him to give me everything. I would have to learn to trust him, just as much as he would have to learn to trust me.



## CHAPTER 48

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# KRISTOFF



Gemma and I prepared breakfast together. Every so often, I'd catch her pensive look on me as if she debated whether she could trust me or not.

I couldn't fucking blame her, but I meant what I said. It was her and her girls I wanted in my life. Nothing else mattered. She opened up, a tiny bit, but I wanted more. I'd protect her against anyone and anything. I half debated telling her I knew there was more to the story than her husband's cheating, but if I pushed too hard and too fast, she'd shut down.

*I almost lost her.* The thought of it had a cold sweat drifting down my back. The idea of life without her stole my fucking breath and turned my blood to ice. I destroyed every goddamn piece of furniture on my floor. It was time to re-decorate anyhow.

After I found her safe and sound last night, I expected her to demand I move her to another department and never talk to her again. I'd do it, just to make her happy. Even despite a feeling in my chest that suffocated me every time I thought about never seeing her again. But I couldn't bear to see her unhappy more than my own pain. Yesterday gave me a glimpse of how that would feel and almost tore me apart.

I had to make her stay with me. Willingly.

Fuck, she had become the exception to all my rules, set some of her own, and I'd agree to any of them just to keep her with me. This obsession with her ran deeper than I ever realized. I finally had to admit to myself it would never be over for me. Even if this woman decided she didn't want me, I'd be a poor schmuck pinning after her for years to come.

I let out a dry breath.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, curiosity in those dark eyes that fascinated me.

“I’m enjoying you bossing me around,” I responded.

“Those were instructions, not orders,” she pouted. “Add some pepper to those eggs. No salt.”

I shook my head amused and did as she ordered. “I thought you said you didn’t like cooking.”

Her back was to me as she opened the cabinet with perfectly organized plates and bowls. “It’s unavoidable. After all, I have to feed my kids.”

With plates prepared and refills of coffee, we went back to the back deck.

“This is delicious,” I commended her after I got my first bite. “You’re good at cooking.”

She sat down on the sofa, tucking her legs underneath her.

“I wouldn’t call fixing scrambled eggs cooking.” She stifled her yawn.

“Tired?” I asked, frowning. She has been tired for days with dark circles under her eyes.

“No,” she answered defensively. I gave her a pointed look. “Ok, maybe a little. I think my iron levels are getting really low; it comes and goes but makes me extremely tired and nauseated,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Gemma.” Rick’s voice interrupted from the inside of the house and I had to swallow my growl. Did the guy come and go as he pleased?

“Out back, Rick,” she called out to him.

Rick came out and stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes darting back and forth between Gemma and I. He didn’t like seeing me here.

“Hey there,” she greeted him. “Want some breakfast?”

“Ah... no,” he answered hesitantly. “Is everything ok? Do you know that your window in the front is broken?”

“Yes,” she quickly answered. “Just a small accident. I’ll have someone come and fix it today.”

“I already called,” I told her. “Handyman will be here to fix it by noon.”

My gaze met Gemma’s and her hand came to my chest, her touch sending a small shudder through my body. “Thank you.”

“Hey, Kristoff,” Rick greeted me and then turned back to Gemma. “You left your cell phone in my car, so I just swung by to give it to you.”

Something dark and unwanted slithered through my veins. She called Rick when she needed help. She didn’t call me; she called Rick.

“I searched everywhere for it,” she exclaimed, accepting the device from Rick. “Thank you so much.”

She scrolled through the messages, throwing a brief glance my way then back to her phone.

“Good,” she mumbled to herself. “They made it.”

Her fingers moved across the screen fast.

“Who made it?” Rick asked curiously, shooting me another look.

“Laura took the girls to Florida for a week.”

Rick raised his eyebrow. “And you let them?” He glanced back at Kristoff. “This is the same woman that refused to go to dinner and leave her babies with a sitter. I’m surprised you’re ok being without them for a week.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not a control freak if that is what you’re implying.”

She was so relaxed around that man, making jealousy spike inside me. Fuck! Goddamn it!

“I would never say that,” Rick teased, chuckling. “I’d only think it.”

Didn’t the man have his own wife to go back to rather than linger here?

“Anyhow,” Rick started and stood up. He must have read my murderous expression. “I better go.” His gaze flicked my way. “Nice seeing you again.”

Once Rick was gone, the silence stretched, Gemma’s eyes on me. It didn’t bother me at all. As long as her eyes were on *me*.

“Why do I get the sense there is something you want to say?” She broke the silence. “I feel like there is a cat and mouse game going on, and I’m the mouse. I don’t like it.”

I shifted her around on my lap, so I could see her better.

“I don’t share, beautiful,” I growled, then took her beautiful mouth for a kiss. Her lips parted, a blush rising to her cheeks. I’d make this woman love me. I nipped her bottom lip and she sighed in my mouth.

Like I made her happy.

She pulled back, putting an inch of space between us and her breathing slightly hitched. “Neither do I,” she murmured softly. “So does that mean we’re exclusive?”

I chuckled. In my mind, we were so past exclusive, it was almost comical. I already imagined her as my wife. “We’re exclusive. Another man touches you, I kill him. You touch another man, I kill him too.”

Then I made out with her like it was the last kiss I'd ever get from her.

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## CHAPTER 49

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# GENEVIEVE



“Ready?” he asked with a raised eyebrow, his eyes darting to my weekend bag. “Is that all you’re bringing?”

“Do you think it’s too much?” I asked nervously. I felt like I was having a sleepover with a boyfriend and was a total nervous wreck. He asked me out to dinner. Byron and his brother might join us.

“No,” he answered. “I can’t believe how light you pack. But that’s ok, whatever we need, we can have it delivered or pick it up.”

“Maybe I should...” Kristoff stopped my question with a kiss on my mouth.

“Lock the house and let’s go. I’ve got everything you need,” he murmured against my lips. “It’s time for our first official date.”

“Okay,” I smiled happily against his lips and kissed him back.

Ten minutes later, we were speeding down the highway in the general direction of his mother’s place.

“Do you live close to your mother?” I asked curiously.

“Not too close,” he answered and took my hand, our fingers interlocking while his eyes never wavered from the road. “But close enough where I don’t have to drive an hour to get to her place in a hurry.”

“When I was looking for a house, I kept my mind on the distance to my mother-in-law’s house. But I also didn’t want to be next door,” I added chuckling. Lifting my hand to his lips, he brushed his mouth over my knuckles. Goosebumps rose on my skin.

We talked about his mother who was enroute or possibly in Croatia by now, about his plans for the new company. An hour later, we approached a large gate that Kristoff opened with the push of a button. His car sped past

the gate that closed right behind us. I kept looking for a house to pop up, but we kept driving and driving through the massive estate of land and woods. Fifteen minutes later, a huge mansion came into sight, bathed in soft light.

“You live here?” I asked.

“Yes, when I don’t stay at my condo in the city,” he answered.

“By yourself?”

He looked at me. “There is staff, but I mainly live here by myself.”

“This place is huge,” I said incredulously. “It must be creepy at night when you are all by yourself.”

He smiled. “Are you telling me you don’t want to sleep over?”

“As long as you don’t leave me to sleep alone, I’ll stay.”

“I’ll be with you the entire time,” he assured me as he pulled in front of the grand entrance to his mansion. He exited the car and came around to open the door for me.

As I got out of the car, he wrapped his arm around me. “C’mon, let me show you around.”

We walked together towards his massive house when a butler opened the door.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Baldwin,” the elderly man said.

“Hello James,” Kristoff greeted him. Holy shit, what is it with this family and butlers. He went on introducing us. “James, this is Genevieve Rose.”

“Miss Rose,” he smiled at me.

“Please just call me Gemma,” I answered.

When his butler left us, I asked Kristoff in amazement. “You have a butler?”

“He is not a butler. He helps out with some stuff around the house,” Kristoff answered while my eyes were taking in all the luxury.

“Oh, okay. Do you have a good cook too? Because if you do, I’m all for moving in. Regardless of how creepy it gets at night,” I joked while looking left and right, admiring it all.

We entered the house, his enormous, grand foyer welcoming us. He guided me through his house, every corner decorated with exquisite and expensive taste.

He took me around the house, from the ridiculously large wine cellar, through the kitchen, several living rooms, dining room, ballroom, to a bar



room.

“I do, actually,” Kristoff said as we entered the library.

I look at him puzzled. “You do what?”

“I do have a cook,” he clarified.

I chuckled back at him. “I guess I should watch what I say.”

“Should I take that as moving into this house is off the table?” His voice was light, but he looked strangely serious. He sported that same determined look when closing his acquisition earlier this week.

“Very funny, Kristoff.”

I shifted forward, curious to see his library, and fell in love with this room. The large library was furnished in a fifteenth century vibe while not lacking comfort. Warm wood paneled walls and a lit fireplace, in the summer, gave it a welcoming vibe.

“Oh my gosh,” I mumbled, wide eyes looking around. “This room,” I sighed. “...this room is just perfect.”

A beautiful vaulted ceiling made the room feel huge. I left his side and walked over to the built-in bookshelves that covered the walls from top to bottom, and there were also steps that led to another floor of bookshelves. And from that floor you could look down into the sitting area of the library.

I looked at Kristoff. “I don’t envy you for anything. But this... this is heaven.”

“You’re welcome to use it anytime,” Kristoff offered, leaning against one of the columns, his hands in his pockets, observing me casually.

“I want to steal it.” I grinned at him, then turned again to read through the book titles to get an idea of his reading selection. “I didn’t know you were an avid reader.” My fingers were lightly brushing against the book covers. Some appeared very old.

“I enjoy it, but frankly I mostly read business journals lately,” he commented. “I don’t remember the last time I entered this room.”

“What?” I gave him my most horrific look. “I’d be living in this room if it were mine,” I mumbled more to myself. I regretted the dinner date now, I wanted to stay home. “I guess we better get ready if we don’t want to be late.”

I reluctantly walked away from the books and approached Kristoff whose gaze never wavered from me. As I got closer, he pulled me into him. “It can be yours,” he spoke softly against my lips.

I chuckled. "Done," I said. "I'll find a contractor who will cut this section of your house and move it to my place. I'll fit it in my front yard."

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I lifted my face to his towering frame. He bent his head and laid a feather light kiss on my lips. And just like that, the library was forgotten. With his hand on the nape of my neck, he controlled the kiss with a sweet pull on my bottom lip and I sighed into his mouth.

"Mr. Baldwin," the butler's voice reached my ears, and I quickly stepped away from Kristoff, a blush coloring my cheeks. Kristoff never looked away from me, his eyes locked on my embarrassed gaze. "My apologies. I just wanted to inform you that the bedroom next to yours has been freshened up for Miss Rose, and all her belongings are there too."

"Thank you, James." Kristoff didn't seem flustered at all.

"Yes, thank you very much," I added and glanced his way a bit embarrassed. He seemed kind, and his expression did not let on that he saw anything.

"My pleasure." He tilted his head with a smile, small lines highlighting his years crinkled around his eyes. He turned away leaving us behind in the library again.

"We better start getting ready," I suggested.

Kristoff didn't move, his arms pulling me back closer to him again. Our faces close together, I could smell the sweet mint on his breath. I closed the distance between us, gently brushing my tongue against his lower lip. His hands tightened on my back, drawing me closer.

The kiss ended too quickly and my eyelids fluttered open to find him looking at me. His fingers skimmed against my cheek in a light touch.

"What are you doing to me?" he murmured against my lips, my gaze locked with his. Before I could ask him to elaborate, he muttered, "We should get ready."

I nodded, and hand in hand, I followed him out of the library and up the grand staircase to a bedroom.

"If you need anything," he stated, kissing me on the cheek. "I'll be right next door. Your bag is already on the bed."

"Thanks."

He left me in his guest room which was probably double the size of my bedroom, and my bedroom wasn't small by any means. A large, king-size bed sat in the middle of the room with my bag on it.

I walked over to it, pulling out the toiletries and clothes for tonight. I glanced around me, looking for a bathroom door. There were several of them, so I went to the first one on my right and opened it.

I peeked in and saw Kristoff taking off his unbuttoned white shirt, reaching to unbuckle his belt. His eyes snapped to me in surprise.

“Oops,” I gasped embarrassed. “Sorry, I thought maybe this door led to the bathroom.”

I ogled his broad shoulders and toned, bronze chest. I couldn’t peel my gaze away from him.

“It’s the door on the left side.”

“Okay.” Before I caved in to my temptation and helped him strip his pants off, I rushed out of the room.

Thirty minutes later, showered and ready in my slightly revealing dress, I stepped out of the bathroom to find Kristoff sitting on a loveseat, typing on his phone while waiting for me.

He raised his eyes, and the sharp inhale traveled through the air.

“Holy fuck, Gemma,” he breathed out.

“That bad?”

Self-consciously, I smoothed the nonexistent wrinkle on my short sparkly mini-dress. I felt exposed with most of my legs bare. I haven’t worn something as sexy as this in over a decade. I applied my make-up a bit heavier than usual for a dramatic effect and let my hair fall in soft waves down my back.

He stood up, his phone forgotten as he dropped it on the love seat, and his stroll powerful as he approached me.

“You look fucking exquisite,” he hummed. “So hot. I want to bend you over and fuck you until you forget everything but me. I want you wrapped around my cock, screaming my name with nothing but those sexy knee-high boots on.”

I inhaled sharply, a blush creeping up my neck. His words brought all kinds of images to mind, making me feel hot. I wanted him badly. Almost with desperation. His smell, that special cologne mixed with the smell of him, enveloped me, and I leaned closer to kiss him on the cheek.

“Later,” I breathed my promise.

“Let’s go,” he groaned. “...before I lose all self-control and lock us in this bedroom.”

I smiled happily and a giggle escaped my lips as I grabbed a black shawl to cover my shoulders at the restaurant, in case they had some dress etiquette rules. Although I had a feeling they'd break them for Kristoff Baldwin.

We left the bedroom, Kristoff almost dragging me out as if he was scared he'd cave to his earlier promise.

"Slow down, Kris," I chuckled. "I haven't walked in heels like this in over a decade. I can't walk that fast."

"Sorry," he answered apologetically and added, "I can't wait to bring you back home."

I smiled seductively at him, feeling like I was back in my early twenties and completely carefree.

"The wait will be worth it though," I teased and alluded further as he opened the door to his car. "For both of us."

He smacked my butt gently and urged me into the car.

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## CHAPTER 50

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# GENEVIEVE



The moment we pulled up in front of the restaurant by Capitol Hill, a swarm of paparazzi surrounded the car. It should have been a clue. It wasn't.

"There has to be a celebrity eating here tonight," I grumbled as a valet opened the door for me but before he could help me up, Kristoff was out of the car, moving around it to assist me.

"Touch her and you're fired," he warned and the poor valet faltered. Kristoff tossed him the keys, then reaching for my hand, Kristoff helped me out of the car. The moment I stood up, my hands smoothed my dress down.

"Thank you." Flashes from the cameras blinded me and I struggled to figure out which way to look to shield my face.

He put a hand to the small of my back and guided me through the crowd of paparazzi and guests waiting to be seated.

"Mr. Baldwin, is it true you and Genevieve Rose have been in a relationship for years?" I blinked in confusion, stiffening at the question. Instinctively I sought out the reporter who asked the question.

"Miss Rose, is it true that you serve Mr. Baldwin's every whim? Are you his sex toy?"

"What?" I breathed, my eyes searching Kristoff's face. His jaw ticked. I watched in a haze as staff from the restaurant rushed out to help deal with all of the reporters throwing questions at us.

Kristoff's hand came around my waist and rested on my hip as he urged me inside the restaurant. The second we were inside, a hostess offered him a blinding smile. He didn't even offer her a second look, his eyes narrowed on the manager walking over to us.

“My apologies, Mr. Baldwin,” he breathed out, panic in his eyes. “They just showed up out of nowhere.”

A terse nod by Kristoff. “Show us to our table.”

The manager snapped his fingers at the waiter who rushed to us. “Daniel will be taking care of you tonight.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, when Kristoff said nothing, his wrath clearly visible on his face.

The waiter led us to our secluded table with an open view of Capitol Hill. Byron and another man, who resembled him, were already there. *Brothers*, I thought to myself.

The moment we arrived, the two men jumped up. “Gemma,” Byron greeted me, his eyes roaming down my body and I felt my cheeks burn. “So nice to see you.”

“Hello.”

Kristoff pulled out my chair like a gentleman and I slid into it with a thankful smile.

“This is my younger brother, Winston,” Byron introduced. “Kristoff, Winston has some information for you.”

The pointed look he gave Kristoff had my date still.

“Bad?” Kristoff questioned. My eyes darted between the three of them as they sat down.

“Not good,” Winston answered emotionlessly.

My eyes came to rest on Winston. His dark hair made his eyes appear lighter than they really were. His gaze came to me curiously, our eyes connecting. A brief glint flashed in them as he studied me.

“What’s not good?” I rasped.

My hands clenched in my lap, my knuckles turning white. I didn’t even realize I was doing it until Kristoff’s hand came to rest on top of them and I instantly stopped.

Winston’s eyes flickered to Kristoff and I could sense raw fury simmering under Kristoff’s expensive, three-piece-suit.

“What’s happening?” I whispered, searching his face. I had a bad feeling about this.

“My ex is causing trouble,” Kristoff answered shortly. “We’re handling it.”

“Oh.”

As I pondered what kind of trouble he referred to, our waiter was back with menus. Byron opened his own menu and quickly rattled off his order. Kristoff was next, then his eyes met mine. "Want a recommendation?" he offered.

"Order whatever," I told him, my tone slightly breathless because my heart raced in my chest. "You know what I like."

The moment the words slipped through my lips, I realized it sounded dirty. He didn't seem to mind because he grinned and placed an order. Winston was next and all the while, my cheeks burned.

Once he was gone, I stood up from the table. All three men shot up at the same time.

"I'm going to the powder room."

I walked away and followed the signs to the bathroom. Once inside, I went to the sink and turned it on. Right now, I wished I could splash cold water on my face but it'd ruin my makeup. Instead, I washed my hands and dried them off, watching my expression in the mirror.

My eyes shone dark, with a slight bewildered expression on my face. Whether it was tied to everything that had happened with Kristoff, the paparazzi, or the potential trouble his ex was causing, I wasn't even sure.

The door to the bathroom opened and Kristoff's ex appeared behind me, our eyes connecting in the mirror.

*Jesus, of all the people on this planet, why her?*

Her pale blue eyes gleamed with cruelty and miracle of miracles, she didn't appear drunk.

"Well, well, well," she drawled, her eyes roaming down my body. "Look what we have here." I dried my hands and threw the paper towel into the trash can. "I paid good money to get a reservation here tonight." I cocked an eyebrow. "Just for you."

"You wasted your money." I attempted to sidestep her. Unsuccessfully. The bathroom was empty, leaving me alone with a lunatic.

"Not so fast," she snickered. "Or should I pay you for your time? Being the paid whore you are?"

I stiffened. She took another step towards me, sure of herself. Like she owned this place. Her golden tan made her appear as if she was glowing, an attractive contrast to her blonde hair. But the hard gleam in her eyes ruined her whole appearance.



She drew up one hand, her finger trailing over my forearm. "Soft," she purred. "I bet that's what he likes. You're soft and bend to his will. Let him do whatever he wants."

I jerked my arm away from her. "Don't touch me."

She laughed, a high-pitched, ear piercing laugh. Then she leaned even closer to me, her scent invading me.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked, truly appalled that she'd still be pining after Kristoff after all these years. After all, she was the one that cheated on Kristoff.

"You think he cares about you," she snarled. "But he doesn't. He cares about nobody."

"Well, then it should be easy for you to stop harassing us," I retorted dryly. "Because quite frankly, it's getting old."

She glared at me. "He's not yours."

"Neither is he yours," I warned. "If you cared about Kristoff, you wouldn't have cheated on him." I have had it with this woman. "And with his best friend. The least you could do for your ex-husband is to wish him all the happiness. Because *he* deserves it."

*And you don't*, but I kept those words to myself.

"What is it that he sees in you?" she wondered, her eyes roaming my body. "You're one of those boring, average women that have no place in our world."

I shrugged. "Maybe but it still won't bring Kristoff back to you. So. Move. The. Fuck. On."

She took another step toward me.

"Maybe I'll kiss you. See what draws him to you." Her breath brushed against my lips and I leaned further back. "To test why he likes to fuck you."

"I'm not into women," I huffed. "So please find someone else to kiss."

She chuckled, like I said the funniest thing. Her hand came to my thigh, the touch of her fingers sending shudders of disgust through me. I disliked everything about this woman. The cruelty in her eyes, the way she treated Kristoff, the way she treated her own son.

"Get your hands off me," I hissed. "Last warning."

Her hand never faltered, almost reaching my panties. "Ah, I bet you've been wet since you walked into the restaurant. I saw the way Kristoff rubbed his hand against-

The bathroom door flung open, Kristoff's enraged expression filling the space as he rushed in.

"Take your hands off my date," Kristoff snarled. "Or I'll have them cut off."

As if burned, Jacqueline stepped back, raising her hands. "She was curious, never fucked a woman."

"She's not you," Kristoff growled, his lips curled in disgust at his ex-wife. "You're a sadist and you're testing my patience, Jacqueline. You thought you saw my ruthlessness during the divorce? It won't compare to what you'll see if you approach my woman again."

She strode off with her head held high and blew him a kiss. The moment she left the bathroom, I took a deep breath to compose myself.

"Are you okay?" Kristoff asked, his hands cupping my cheeks, his eyes drilling into me.

I sighed and leaned into his touch. "I am," I assured him. "She's really determined to get your attention."

"She'll never get it." Kristoff's low rumble comforted as much as his touch. "I have you."

Taking my hand, he guided me back to the table where Byron and Winston waited for us. One was on the phone, speaking in an urgent, hushed tone, while the other typed something on his cell, his fingers flying across the keyboard.

My body strung tight, I sat on the edge of my seat with my spine stiff.

From the corner of my eye, I caught Jacqueline being escorted out of the restaurant as she shouted some obscenities and shot me a deadly look.

"I called security and had the bitch escorted out." Byron's tone was colder than Alaska in winter and his gaze even colder as he flickered his gaze her way, then back to me. "I can't stand the bitch, but unfortunately my father's fond of her. The old fucker probably thinks it's him she wants, when Jacqueline always has ulterior motives."

My mouth parted with shock, as my eyes ping-ponged between Byron and Kristoff. Holy fucking shit. Was that a triangle or what?

"That's her," Kristoff retorted dryly.

"I'm glad you held your own," Byron drawled.

I assumed he referred to me standing up to Kristoff's ex. "How did you know that I did? Maybe I cowered and cried."

“You stood up to her at the fundraiser and you don’t look like you’ve been crying.”

“Besides, if you had,” his brother Winston chimed in, “-Kristoff would have murdered the woman and we’d have to bail him out of jail.”

A choked laugh escaped me. Okay, maybe I liked these guys.

“Gemma’s one of strongest women I know,” Kristoff announced, taking the seat next to me and looping his arm over mine.

“Do you have a sister?” Winston teased. “We might need someone to set Byron straight.”

I chuckled, “No. I’m an only child.”

“That must have been lonely,” Byron commented. “This coming from a man that has four brothers and two sisters. Granted, the one brother and one sister didn’t grow up with us.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Seriously? That’s a big family. It was only my parents and I but it wasn’t lonely. We did a lot of things together.”

Winston raised his glass. “Let’s toast to normal families.”

It was the weirdest toast I had ever participated in.

---

THE REST of the evening passed with the men entertaining me with stories from their service days.

“Are you two married?” I asked curiously, my eyes darting between Byron and his brother.

They both shook their heads. “Please don’t say you want to set me up with someone.”

A soft laugh escaped me. “I’d never do something like that to you,” I teased. “Those conversations on blind dates are the worst.”

“Thank God it’s not just me,” Winston agreed. “I can tell within the first five minutes. But how do you just get up and leave?”

“I don’t know, maybe you just get up and go to the bathroom and never come back?” I suggested teasingly.

“Speaking from experience?” Byron inquired, a curious gleam in his eyes.

My face flamed red and I smiled guilty. “Only once, but I paid for my portion before I did it,” I justified myself.

Booming laughter filled the table.

A part of me felt flattered that three handsome and powerful men enjoyed my company.

“Kristoff mentioned you have three daughters?” Byron had a way of keeping the conversation away from himself, I noticed.

I took a sip of my wine and smiled, Kristoff’s hand on my thigh warm and comforting.

“I do.” I reached for my little clutch and dug out my phone. “They are vacationing with their grandma in Florida for the next week.” I shared a picture I got from Sienna, a silly selfie of the girls with their grandma - all making a funny face. “My eldest is fifteen and my youngest is two.”

“You miss them,” Kristoff stated and I nodded, offering a sheepish smile.

“It’s healthy for all of us to have some time apart, but I do miss them,” I admitted. “One day they’ll go off and start their own lives, and when they are gone, like now, it makes me painfully aware how fast that time will come.” I rolled my eyes. “Now that Sienna is interested in a boy, she needs me even less. And yes, I know it’s silly.”

The men chuckled. “Not as silly as you think. My sister, Aurora, is twenty-five and she’d tell you we’re still unable to let go.”

“They will always find their way back to you,” Kristoff comforted me. “Are Sienna and Kai dating?”

I rolled my shoulders, attempting to release the tension. “I guess, kind of.”

“Who’s Kai?” Winston asked curiously.

“Jacqueline’s son,” Kristoff grumbled.

“That’s awkward,” Winston remarked. “Have you had playdates?”

My choked laugh vibrated through the air. “More like a date-date last week. His father and I were chaperones.”

“Where did they go on their first date?” Byron asked.

“Kai actually made it pretty fun and original. They went to the paintball range. I dropped off Sienna at the address, where we met Kai and his father. Then Jonathan secured a private driver to take them to their first dinner. I picked her up from the restaurant.”

“Ah young love,” Winston drawled. “It’s good to be their age.”

“Like you’re old,” I retorted dryly. “What are you, like twenty-five?”

He grinned. “Not quite as old as these two fuckers, but definitely not in my twenties.”

Byron’s big hand landed on his brother’s back, making the latter almost spit out his drink. “Who the fuck are you calling old?”

It was one of the best evenings I have ever had.

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## CHAPTER 51

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# GENEVIEVE



We sat in Kristoff's library that looked even more enticing at night than during the day. He sipped on his scotch with one arm resting on the back and coming around me.

"I had a good time," I told him, bringing my glass of wine to my lips.

"I'm sorry about my ex," he grumbled.

I shook my head. "That's not on you." My eyes flitted to his face. My heart twisted into a knot each time I thought about him loving someone so much that he resorted to a contract instead of a normal relationship. "Even with her little drama, I had a great time."

I unzipped the knee high boots and tossed them to the side, then tucked my legs under me, leaning further into him. The atmosphere was easy, relaxed. My gaze flicked toward my iPhone on the coffee table and I picked it up, then scrolled through my messages.

Missed message from Grandma and my eldest. Missed call from Betty. More text messages from Betty.

I swiped open the first message. Grandma sent pictures from the pool and beach. Sienna did the same. The next was from Betty.

**\*Dinner soon? I have feedback on your gift.\***

Amusement filled me as I attempted not to picture the scenarios with the oils and toys she asked for. I'd catch up with her during lunch sometime soon. It was too late to call her now. She might be using the birthday gift as we speak.

"What's funny?" Kristoff's gaze found mine and my lips curved.

"Betty's birthday gift."

The dim light in the library made his eyes darker. Or maybe it was the way he looked at me, setting me aflame. I wanted him to put it out, the only way he knew how. I wanted his body on mine, his weight covering me like a blanket.

Heat crept its way between my legs and settled there like a heavy weight. I wanted to get lost in his body and enjoy my response to him. He was the only man to ever take me to exhilarating heights. The tug of my hair. Filthy words in my ear. Grunts through the air. The scrape of teeth on the nape of my neck.

It was all him and only him.

My pulse drifted between my thighs, and I pressed my legs together.

“Kristoff, I- I need you,” I breathed out. The longing hung in the air, warming my skin and my heart.

His eyes darkened as he glanced at me, those green orbs molten. He set his scotch on the side table and his gaze was dark and shimmering. Like I was something he needed, just as he was something I needed. A seductive haze permeated the air, enveloping me in it and pulling me under.

And the man hasn't even kissed me yet.

“You need me to thoroughly fuck you?” he rasped, his voice laced with sex and sin.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Beg me to fuck you senseless,” he murmured against my skin.

“Please, Kristoff,” I panted, every inch of my skin set aflame. “Please fuck me senseless.”

When his lips touched mine, all thoughts fled my brain. Sliding a hand up his neck, I grabbed a fistful of hair and parted my mouth, welcoming his tongue. The kiss was hot. Exhilarating. Like it was our first one, all over again. It stole my breath away. He tasted like scotch, sin, and home.

My home.

Butterflies fluttered in my veins as his tongue slid across mine. A rough groan from deep in his chest resonated through me and he sucked on my tongue. Like I was the most delicious alcohol he had ever tasted. A moan of pleasure vibrated in my throat, as our tongues danced together.

He nipped my lip. Gently. With a sweet pull.

My lips tingled. My heart buzzed in my ears, leaving me breathless.

“You're mine.” His voice was a dark timbre rolling down my spine. His mouth moved down my jaw, further down my neck, leaving a trail of fire in



its wake. The wetness of his mouth was setting my whole body on fire, his lips on my throat, sucking and ravaging down to the top of my breasts. In one swift move, he shredded the dress off my body.

“Kristoff?” I protested breathlessly.

“I’ll buy you a new one,” he rasped, his mouth on my breast. My back arched, eager for more of his mouth. Kneeling in front of me, he ran his hands along my breasts, as his eyes burned into mine. When he pulled my tightly budded nipples into his mouth, my whimper broke the silence of the library. He showered kisses, lower and lower down my body, until he came to my sweet spot. I gasped at the sensation and arched my back for more.

“Ohhhh,” I moaned, my hands gripping his hair.

“So fucking beautiful” he whispered into me, the heat from his breath causing me to quiver underneath him. “So fucking mine.”

“Yes.” A shudder rolled down my spine.

His mouth on me was sweet torture, licking and lapping as I moaned and arched into him. He didn’t hesitate licking me from my entrance to clit. A hum of approval vibrated against me and I had to fight the imminent orgasm. His thumb on my clit, his mouth worked the center of my sex as I bucked beneath him, my hips moving against his mouth with desperation. My fingers in his hair, I held on for the ride as he sped up his rhythm, wrapping one hand around my bottom and squeezing lightly without pulling away from me.

“Kristoff,” his name left my lips on a breathless whisper.

The heat of his tongue on my clit set my entire body on fire. The pressure built and built as I squirmed against him. Sparks burned, igniting hotter and hotter until the pleasure exploded through me so hard, my ears rang.

The orgasm washed over me and a languid sensation pulled on my muscles. His mouth kept working, like he needed every drop of me.

My eyes fluttered open to find his gaze, soft and burning, on me and his breathing uneven. In the next second, he lifted me and my legs wrapped around his waist. He walked us over to the front of the fireplace, gently laying me down on the fur rug in front of it.

Crawling to my knees, I knelt in front of him and pressed my lips to his neck while my fingers worked at undoing his belt. With eagerness unlike ever before, I helped him get rid of his clothes, then leaned forward taking the length of his cock into my hand, stroking it slowly.

My insides quivered in anticipation and desire for him. His every touch burned my skin and ignited my desire further.

“Fuck,” he grunted as he flipped me around. “If I’m too rough, say red.”

He lifted me on all fours, giving him access to my pussy from behind. He entered me with a forceful thrust, and a soft moan escaped my lip.

“Yes,” the words left my lips on a sigh. It felt amazing having him inside of me, filling me to the hilt. There was nothing that mattered right now, just him and I.

His fingers dug into my soft hips, pulling me back, bringing me as close to him as possible, as he sank deeper and harder inside me. His lips on the nape of my neck, his teeth marked me while his hands held me firmly as I ground against him, his pace quickening.

My insides clenched, I was close and a shudder ghosted down my spine.

“Not yet,” he rasped his order.

He thrust harder and harder, deeper into me. My body started shaking, on the verge. He flipped me around and brought me up to face him. His hands slid up the backs of my thighs, pulling me closer to straddle him.

“Your pussy takes me so well.” He nipped at the hollow behind my ear, and I moaned. Loud. *Oh, God.*

A sigh escaped me as he slid back inside me, making me feel full and content. His eyes lowered to where our bodies were connected and he started thrusting again.

“Look at us,” he groaned, watching his cock slide in and out of me. He gripped my hips tight enough to bruise. “*You*, beautiful, take me so well.”

Kristoff sounded on the brink of losing control and I moved against him, rocking my hips and grinding my clit against him. We both shuddered with the intensity, his hands roaming my body. Like he wanted to touch every single inch of me. Then grabbing a fistful of my hair, he angled my head so he could watch my face as his other hand guided my hips to grind harder against him.

“Who’s fucking you?” he rasped as he slapped my ass, then nipped my neck. “Tell me,” he demanded.

“You.”

“Whose slut are you?”

The feeling of him inside me, his hands on my skin and his voice in my head, it was too much.

“Yours,” I breathed out.

Then like a blinding explosion, he thrust back into me, his hands fisting my hair as he kissed me rough and consuming. I came hard. So hard that spots flew behind my eyelids. His hands on my hips kept moving me and I rode him, his gaze on fire as he watched my bouncing breasts and where he slid in and out of me. My whimpers and moans, his grunts filled the library with erotic sounds.

He bounced me on his erection. Hard and rough. My body trembled, my moans turned into screams, on the brink of another climax. With a last rough thrust, he finished, exploding inside me.

We both rode the wave through our orgasms, our heavy breaths filling the silence. His mouth skimmed over my neck and I sighed in contentment, high on post-orgasmic bliss as I tilted my neck, letting him mark me as his.

As our labored breathing evened out, he finally spoke up.

“Next time we’re doing this in bed,” he murmured against my ear, his arms still wrapped around me.

I nuzzled my face in the crook of his neck and curled my fingers in his hair. “I don’t care where we do it, as long as we do it again.”

I shut my eyes, relishing in his affection as he held me, his hands playing with my hair. I felt content, almost happy. My body was high on a languid heat, relaxed in his arms as my eyelids grew heavy with each second that ticked by.

“I’ll carry you to bed.” His thumb gently brushed against my cheek, his voice gentle and low, barely a whisper.

“We can’t go through your house naked,” I protested sleepily.

Ignoring me, he rose up and pulled his pants on. Before I had a chance to even move, he wrapped me in a light blanket and lifted me up.

A squeal escaped me. “I can walk,” I giggled. “There is no need for you to strain your back.”

He pinched my butt, continuing up his large hallway and the grand staircase. “You better not even dare say I’m too old.”

I chuckled. “Never. I was taught respect towards my elders.”

“Tease.” He softly nipped my earlobe, fanning flames of desire all over again.

He carried me to his bed, and kissed me all over again.

“We fit perfectly together,” he said roughly. “It feels so good having you in my home.”

This time he fucked me slowly, each thrust sending a wave of toe-curling sensations through my body.

This time, it felt like lovemaking.

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## CHAPTER 52

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# KRISTOFF



I looked down at Gemma to see she'd fallen asleep. Her head rested against my chest, her breathing even and her scent all around me. There was so much more to this woman than I originally thought. A perfect balance of strong and delicate.

Sweeping my gaze over her face, I admired her long lashes against her smooth cheekbones and her full lips. Despite all the shitty cards dealt her way by her late husband, she'd remained strong. It was her strength I admired the most, powering through all the ordeals and protecting her girls.

Unlike women like my ex-wife who only thought about themselves.

The deepest part of me feared she'd want out. It would take a better man than me to let her. But I couldn't force her to sign the contract. And I certainly wouldn't be able to force her to marry me. It made no sense, but some people weren't wired to use others. Gemma wasn't.

But losing her wasn't an option. I wanted - *needed* - her to choose me. Choose us.

## CHAPTER 53

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# GENEVIEVE



I woke up alone in Kristoff's bed the next morning. Glancing at the clock, eight a.m. stared back at me. I could not remember the last time I slept that late. But then my date had kept me up until the early hours of the morning, running his mouth and hands over every inch of my body.

He knew my body better than me.

Getting to my feet, I spotted clothes laid out on an armchair, then dressed. I found him in the library, dressed in jeans and a polo shirt. I had never seen him dressed down like this before, and I couldn't keep my eyes from roaming his body. He looked hot in jeans.

"Morning," I breathed, my cheeks flushed.

"Morning, sleeping beauty." Amusement filled his gaze at seeing me blush. "You looked so beautiful between my sheets, I didn't want to wake you."

He grabbed my hips and pulled me into him, his mouth finding the sensitive spot behind my ear. Every ounce of me melted into him, relishing in his affection. I had to be a sad case of a woman starved for affection because my heart fluttered ridiculously.

I wanted to enjoy all this time with him because I knew it wouldn't last. Call it intuition or a premonition.

I shifted on my feet. "Do you have any plans for today?"

He raised a brow. "Like work plans?"

"No, more like fun plans."

He tightened his arms around me and I gasped as he pressed his hard-on against me. He chuckled, dark and low, his mouth skimming over my neck. "I'm all for fun with you."



This time it was my turn to chuckle. “Mr. Baldwin, what are you insinuating?”

“Breakfast, lunch, and dinner in bed.” I flushed, not hating the idea at all, but we couldn’t spend all this alone time in bed.

I grinned. “I like it, but I was thinking more along the lines of taking you hiking.”

---

AN HOUR LATER, we were enroute to Boonsboro, in western Maryland, ready to hike up part of the Appalachian Trail to Annapolis Rock.

My eyes searched him out, unable to stay away for too long. His shirt molded to his broad shoulders, giving me a glimpse of his strong biceps. It’d never been more evident how built he was. And I loved everything about him.

His eyes flickered my way and caught me watching him and then a slow smile pulled on the corner of his beautiful lips that brought so much pleasure. Even when he smiled, the heat of his gaze burned through my skin like fire.

“Like what you see?” he teased, catching me eyeballing him.

I laughed lightly, while my heart beat wildly. “You know I do.”

“You don’t have to keep your hands off me,” he joked, offering me a wide grin. His smile was beautiful, almost stealing my breath away.

“Ah, saved by the bell,” I teased as my phone buzzed, breaking the moment. It was a text message from his mother and I laughed out loud seeing it.

“Your mom and her friends,” I said, chuckling as I showed him the picture of the group at his mother’s birthday party, drinking wine I recognized. “They found the wine,” I remarked as I typed a quick message back.

“You should let me pay you,” Kristoff tried again, his one hand on the wheel while the other lightly brushed my hair out of my face. “It will cover your expenses and let you replenish your alcohol stock, since I’m pretty sure they’ll leave a dent in it.”

“Absolutely not,” I objected. “It makes me happy to do this, and the alcohol would have sat there for years to come anyhow. They did me a

favor.”

“But, Gemma...” he started and I stopped him right away with a smug look.

“If you really insist on paying for their stay,” I offered, a coy smile tugging on my lips. “I’ll let you. We could write up a personal contract listing what kind of services you can pay me with.”

Smug satisfaction filled me as I gave him a taste of his own medicine.

Kristoff’s booming laughter filled the small space of his Land Rover. He gently tugged my hair, and to hide how flustered he made me feel, I reached for the radio.

“Touché, beautiful. You got me there,” he admitted, tugging gently on a strand of my hair. “I’ll drop the subject. Although, you piqued my interest on what kind of services you had in mind exactly.”

I grinned happily, feeling at ease with him. “I was going to test your level of kink. But I guess we’ll never find out now.”

His one hand on the wheel, he reached for the nape of my neck with the other and pulled me closer. The romantic lyrics came through the radio, Jason Aldean's “Got What I Got” causing goosebumps to break out over my skin.

The old me belonged to the past. The new me belonged to him.

“My temptress,” he rasped, nipping roughly at my earlobe and a moan escaped my lips. My body didn’t need much incentive when it came to him, that little move leaving me breathless and imagining all the filthy things we could do instead of hiking. “Tell me,” he demanded, his voice dark and delicious.

I shook my head in a feeble attempt to deny him when in truth this was all I wanted. I’d never miss being alone with him by my side.

He nipped at my bottom lip and then licked it, soothing the sharp sting with his hot tongue and languid heat spread through my veins. An erotic shiver ran down my body, spiking my desire by a few notches; a faint moan escaped my lips.

“Tell me,” he demanded with a dark timbre. A shiver ghosted through me

“I considered,” I breathed, my voice soft. “-maybe we try some other things. Like ummm... stuff you outlined in the contract that we haven’t tried.”

“Fuck, I’m all for it.” His voice was rich and deep, sending all kinds of hot signals through my body. Our gazes collided for a second, desire thick in the air and my heart slowed, then slowly sped up as fire licked beneath my skin.

It would be so easy to start kissing him and beg him to pull over. Somewhere. Anywhere. As long as I could straddle him and feel him inside me.

In the back of my mind, it registered that the song switched. To Carrie Underwood’s, “Church Bells.” My lungs iced over while a ghost wrapped his cold fingers around my throat, cutting off my breath.

Thankfully, I hadn’t lost my head completely.

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## CHAPTER 54

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# GENEVIEVE



Back at Kristoff's mansion, it was just the two of us. Not even the butler bothered to open the door for us.

"Where is everyone?" I asked curiously.

"They're off for the weekend," he stated. "The cook prepared a meal for us before he left. Or we can go out to dinner. Your choice?"

"Do you have a preference?" He was accustomed to eating out but I usually preferred staying home.

"No." He held my hand as we walked up the grand staircase of his house towards his bedroom. "As long as we are eating together. Though staying home gives us more time between the sheets."

"Let's stay in and eat what your cook made," I suggested.

He tugged me into his bathroom, where he removed my sweaty clothes including my socks. His touch was reverential. Soft. I loved the feel of his hands on my skin. I loved the attention he gave me. But most of all I loved the look in his eyes when he watched me.

Starting the shower, he shed his own clothes, giving me a glimpse of his magnificent body. As we stepped into the shower, he washed my body, the look in his eyes as if I was the only woman for him. As if I was perfect.

When my hands fluttered to my C-section scar, he took my wrist and shook his head. "Don't," he rasped. "Every single part of you is beautiful."

A shuddering breath left me as I stared at him. His body was so toned, so big, so perfect compared to mine. Yet, the way he watched me made me feel as if I was *perfect*.

"We have some unfinished business," he murmured, his lips against my neck, licking and nipping my skin.

He ran his finger along my breastbone and an ache pulsed between my thighs, craving his length. He leaned me against the shower wall, water cascading all over us, then his mouth crushed against mine, his tongue forcing its way in as if he waited all day just to do this. I snaked my fingers over his muscular back, my nails scraping against his skin, before raking them through his hair. He groaned into my mouth, the sound almost causing me to combust. My oversensitive pussy needed his length, needing him inside me. I thrust my pelvis upward, his thick length brushing over my drenched, aching spot.

His index finger brushed over my erect nipple and then bent his head to tug on it with his lips. I threw my head back, my eyes fluttering shut as my whimpering moan vibrated through the shower. He lavished my breasts like it was his favorite delicacy. He bit, sucked, and nibbled my sensitive flesh, while his name rumbled from my throat.

I hooked my leg around his waist, aching for him. Ready for him. Both of our gazes lowered to where our bodies connected, his length disappearing inside me and the image forever tattooed on my mind. A long moan rocketed through the air as his cock sank deeper into my pussy at a painstakingly slow pace.

“Fuck,” he grunted against my lips.

Impatient and greedy, I ground against him, wordlessly begging him to increase his tempo. He gripped my soft hips, his fingers firm on them.

“Harder,” I begged shamefully, unsure if I screamed or whispered the words.

He withdrew his cock all the way to the tip, then slammed back into me in one powerful thrust and pleasure shot through me. He increased the tempo with each thrust, the speed rough and had me racing towards an orgasm. His need matched mine, powering into me and making me feel gloriously full. Each time was better than the last with Kristoff.

“Your pussy is mine,” he growled. His hand came around me, his finger finding my back hole, pushing against it. “Your ass is mine. All of you is mine.”

He pushed the tip of his finger into me and my back arched off the tiled wall. “Oh. Oh. *Oh. My. God.*”

Shudders wreaked havoc through me, feeling the impending orgasm as my pussy clenched around his cock. His pace quickened, his thrusts deep

and hard. One hand held me in place, each powerful thrust sending me higher and higher. His mouth was on my neck, sucking, biting, kissing.

“Kris,” I moaned his name as I spiraled, falling over the edge into the abyss of pleasure. My orgasm spread through me like wildfire, uncontrollable and dangerous.

He followed me right over the edge, filling me to the hilt in one last violent thrust and then spurting his hot cum into me. And all the while, my pussy clenched around him, spasming around his length, milking him for every drop of his seed.

My legs shook, his arms tight around me and his green eyes collided with mine.

“You will be my undoing,” he whispered before sealing his mouth over mine.

*And you will be my heartbreak.*

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## CHAPTER 55

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# KRISTOFF



We moved around the kitchen in tandem. Gemma begged for a casual night and I couldn't refuse her. The music played quietly through the speakers, while she stood, cutting vegetables for our salad.

Wearing one of my shirts that came down to her knees, her dark locks cascading wildly down her back and barefoot, she looked magnificent. Like a woman that belonged in my home. Her bare feet moved to the rhythm of the music and my chest grew warm at the sight.

Looking over her shoulder, her gaze met mine. The collar was slipping off her shoulder, giving me a glimpse of her ivory smooth skin.

"How are you doing with the lettuce?" she asked.

I let out a dry breath at her bossy tone. "All done, boss."

Tossing the chopped up greens into her bowl, I walked up behind her and slid a palm beneath the hem of her shirt, then rubbed her bare ass cheek.

"We could eat in bed." I nibbled on the sensitive spot below her ear, enjoying the smell of me on her skin.

She chuckled. "We'll get to bed eventually."

Her voice turned slightly breathy. *Good*. Maybe she felt an ounce of what I feel for her. Satisfied with her salad, she turned around and I cupped her face, then ran a thumb over her cheek.

"We have to feed you," she breathed against my lips, then rose to her tiptoes to press a feather light kiss against my lips. "I want you to be happy, not cranky. Because I like you a lot."

Satisfaction ran through my veins. It was a step in the right direction. I wanted her love, but we'd get there.

"You make me happy," I said, then leaned in to nip at her tempting lower lip. "And I plan on eating your pussy for my dessert all night long."

Her cheeks flushed but she loved those words. She sighed, a contented expression on her face as she leaned further into me. Millions of dollars and diamonds couldn't put that expression on her face, but something as simple as this and she was happy.

Gently, she nudged me to sit down. "Dinner first," she tried to sound stern.

"A toast," I announced as I poured her a glass of wine, then my own. "To many more days like this."

Her warm eyes met mine, slight surprise in her gaze. But she didn't object, just raised her glass.

"Agreed." Our glasses clinked, the air between us charged.

Dinner was relaxed and so was the topic.

"How old were you when you got married?" she asked me curiously.

I frowned. I hated to think about that time. And now, the topic of Jacqueline was even more disturbing since the woman had set her sights on Gemma.

"Too young and it lasted barely two years. It was a mistake all the way around."

Her small hand landed over mine, squeezing in comfort.

"I'm so sorry. It's hard regardless if it's a mistake or not." It was the biggest difference between her and my ex. Heck, even she and I. She'd offer help and sympathy to anyone, her compassionate heart too soft.

"How about you?" I asked, although I knew her age when she got married. I had no facts about what happened beyond the medical report and speculation, but I wanted her to tell me. For her to trust me.

"Just shy of twenty-one," she answered reluctantly. "Sienna came shortly after." Silence swept through the room but I didn't interrupt. I sensed she needed to gather her thoughts. "It was good in the beginning. Then Sienna came. Reality set in, we had to grow up quickly. He refused and things got bad fast."

She averted her eyes, glancing out the window and hiding her gaze from me. "Anyhow, he started having affairs," she continued in a low voice. "I focused on my career and the girls. Truthfully, we should have ended the

marriage many years ago. I guess I kept hanging on, refusing to admit failure. Or maybe I hoped it would turn into what my parents had, which is ridiculous if you think about it.”

“From the moment I laid eyes on you, I saw your strength,” I told her. When her dark eyes flashed in surprise, I continued, “Don’t be surprised. You know your strength.”

“I have my weaknesses too.” I shook my head at her comment. Her children were her weakness, because she’d do anything for them. And in my eyes, that was a strength. “I’m surprised you don’t mind it,” she remarked.

“It’s what I love about you.” Among many other things. *Love*. Was this love? It was laughable that I didn’t fucking know. I just knew that what I felt for was so far past anything I had felt for anyone else in my entire fucking life. It’d be laughable if it was anyone else.

She watched me with those dark eyes, her lips parted and a blush rising to her cheeks.

She leaned over, and breathed against my lips, “There are a few things I love about you too.”

Her soft voice and words sent satisfaction through my blood. We’d take it slowly, I’d take everything she had to give and I’d give her my all. Maybe, we could have this forever.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

## CHAPTER 56

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# GENEVIEVE



**M**y girls were back from their mini-vacation. The days flew by and busy didn't begin to describe it. I'd spent a lot of time working with Samuel Jr.

It turned out I liked him.

A lot. His arrogant façade hid a big heart and a good guy. Much to Kristoff's irritation, we got along great.

Each time he'd find me working on a project with Samuel, his eyes narrowed and flickered with loathing. I didn't like it. There should be no reason for his displeasure and sour mood. Unfortunately, Samuel picked up on it too. And that man was suicidal, going out of his way to agitate the big boss.

I just made sure not to find myself in their crossfire.

Today was one of the days where I found myself right in the middle of it. Running up and down all morning to help Samuel with his assignment, I wasted my time and energy so I grabbed my laptop and informed Kimberly I'd be downstairs on Samuel's floor.

A few floors down, I knocked on Samuel Sr.'s office door.

"Hello." I poked my head in. "I thought this would be easier and faster to finish if we didn't constantly run up and down to discuss. Is that ok?"

"Of course," Samuel Sr. answered.

"That is the best idea I heard all week," Samuel Jr. chimed in, grinning. His smile was relaxed and beautiful, not an ounce of flamboyant playboy in him at this moment.

"Let's get set up at the conference table," the old man suggested. "I just ordered lunch. How do you feel about a working lunch?"

When lunch arrived, we continued working right through it. It was well past 4:00 p.m. when Samuel Sr. excused himself to the restroom. Junior and I got into a lively discussion about the best approach to maximize the return. We often found ourselves challenging each other.

“You are wrong, Gemma,” Samuel Jr. teased.

“I’m not,” I replied, agitatedly. “You know I’m right but too stubborn to admit it. The evidence is right here,” I said, pointing to a breakeven point in the timeline. He leaned closer, peeking over my shoulder to see what I was pointing to on my laptop and his head almost touching mine. “Break Even point in this scenario happens nine months earlier than in the other scenario.”

Both of us wrapped up in our discussion, we missed Kristoff at the door.

“Isn’t this some sight?” His voice was pure ice.

Both Samuel and I looked up from my laptop in sync and my gaze collided with Kristoff’s. My heart slowed and my breath hitched in my throat while his eyes regarded us with distaste. His eyes flickered to Samuel, and narrowed.

The tension filled the room, sickly and bitter. Or maybe it was just me, because suddenly I felt nauseous. I hated confrontations and I felt one brewing in the air, loud and clear. I got caught in the crossfire. It hadn’t even started yet and I was breaking out in a sweat.

“Kristoff.” Samuel Sr. waltzed back in, completely oblivious to the tension. Or maybe he just didn’t care to acknowledge it. “Samuel and Gemma have made great progress. It will be done today. They just have to agree on the best approach.”

Kristoff’s gaze remained on me, the heat of it burning through my skin.

“Well, I have to tell you, Kristoff,” Samuel Jr. started nonchalantly, a challenge clear in his voice. “Your admin definitely has brains and beauty. Hot all the way!”

I stiffened, annoyed he’d egg him on. I didn’t have to look at Kristoff to know he hated his words. The icy temperatures that drifted our way was evidence enough. However, I wouldn’t apologize nor try to pacify the situation. I promised him fidelity. He should at least attempt to trust me.

“Some people don’t appreciate beauty and brains.” Samuel stepped closer to me and his hand came to my waist.

I shook him off. “Stop it,” I hissed. “Stop agitating him on purpose.”

Samuel Sr. chuckled, patting Kristoff on the back.

“Trust me, Kristoff. She can handle him!” I inadvertently winced. That was the wrong thing to say.

Kristoff’s lips pressed into a thin line. I fought the urge to go to him and wrap my hands around his neck, and tell him there was nothing for him to be mad about. But I remained glued to my spot, a battle of wills playing out between us.

“Samuel, I need Gemma for an hour,” Kristoff told the old man dryly. “Then she can finish up with you. But tomorrow, I need her dedicated to me upstairs.”

“Nice of you to share her,” Junior drawled. “If she was mine, I wouldn’t share her.”

I flinched, the anger boiling hot through my veins. Turning to him with a murderous look, I spat out, “I’d never be anyone’s to share.”

Kristoff clenched his jaw and balled his fists. “Watch yourself, Junior,” he growled, taking a threatening step towards him. His gaze was dark on Samuel, I could feel the coldness on my skin.

“Okay,” Samuel’s father drawled. “Kristoff, why don’t you take Gemma? She’s finished the project. I’m going to wrap it up and email you the results. You’re right, we shouldn’t have monopolized her time.”

Junior took my hand and before I could process what he was doing, kissed it in the 15th century gesture.

“Gemma, always a pleasure working with you,” he purred.

Kristoff stormed off, slamming the door on his way out. I was sure it was either leave the room or kill Samuel. Thank God he picked the former.

“That was a dick move, Samuel,” I snapped at him.

“He was asking for it.”

I sighed at his dumb response, then turned to his father. “If you need anything else, just call me or shoot me an email.”

“Thank you.” He eyed me as if he was deciding whether to tell me a secret or not. “Can I give you a piece of advice?”

“Sure.”

“He needs you more than you need him. Don’t let him scare you.”

Unsure what to say, I just nodded and found my way back upstairs. I got back to my desk just as Kimberly was on her way out.

“Are you leaving for the day?” I asked her.

“Yep,” she answered. “He’s been stewing all afternoon. I’ve had enough of him for today.”

“Ugh, I’m sorry.” She shouldn’t have to put up with him like that.

“I don’t let him bother me.” The woman had backbone, I loved that about her. “But he is yours for the rest of the day.”

“Fair enough.”

The elevator door started to close. “Take care of him so he’s in a better mood tomorrow.” She winked and grinned mischievously, then the door closed, taking away my chance at a comeback.

Not that I had one.

Standing in the middle of the floor, my gaze flicked towards the target of my desire, behind a large mahogany door. The silence behind it was almost deafening and I debated whether it was smarter to leave him to calm down or talk to him.

Then with a sigh and cursing my inability to let go, I sauntered to the door, knocking hesitantly.

“Enter.”

I opened the door and poked my head in. “Is it safe to come in?”

Glancing up from his computer, our gazes met. Agitation and something dark pooled underneath those emerald eyes.

“It’s always safe for you to come in,” he said, his voice almost resigned.

He cracked his neck back and forth trying to loosen his tension. Then his hand came up to rub his neck. Every so often, he’d wince from pain and unable to see him suffer, I sauntered to him.

“Here, let me,” I offered as I placed my hands on his neck and started massaging. Silence stretched as I worked on loosening the knots in his neck. There were so many unsaid words dancing through the air that needed to be spoken.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I whispered.

His muscles tensed under my hands. Just as I thought he wouldn’t answer, a heavy exhale left his lips. “Do you?”

“We should,” I said quietly. “Otherwise, we can’t fix it. I promised you fidelity, and I keep my promises.”

“Senior sent over the analysis,” he remarked instead. “You are right, your approach is the right one.”

The praise coming from him meant a lot, but he was avoiding the issue. Leaning closer, I pressed my mouth against his cheek, right by his ear.

“We should really-” I couldn’t keep a strangled gasp from escaping as he pulled me onto his lap. He grasped me by my throat and swallowed my



next breath, his lips rough on mine. Almost desperate.

His mouth on mine consumed, setting fire through me, spreading from my stomach to my toes. The press of his lips against mine caused wildfires to ignite throughout every inch of my body, sizzling my blood with desire.

My arms tangled around his neck and my fingers gripped his dark strands. We should talk, otherwise we'd destroy each other. But I could only muster enough strength to return the kiss, tracing his bottom lip with my tongue then biting it gently. He hissed against my lips, then slid his tongue inside my mouth.

Our heavy breathing and panting echoed in the room. His arms tightened on my waist, then slid down to my butt, grinding me harder against him. I moaned into his mouth, wanting more of him, needing more of him.

I felt that familiar wetness between my legs as his tongue slid against mine. My fingers curled in his hair and I scraped my nails over his scalp. My body melted against his, grinding shamelessly for the pleasure I knew he could give me.

His kiss stopped just as abruptly as it started, leaving me disoriented. I blinked, searching his face. I shook in anticipation, watching his eyes gleam with the possessive heat that consumed me. Set my blood aflame.

We stared at each other. My heart raced. My ears buzzed.

"Why did you stop?" I rasped. His forehead came to rest against mine, and for a moment, it was just us in the world.

"I don't want him anywhere near you," he growled.

My fingers brushed softly over his strong jaw, feeling his stubbly five o'clock shadow. He leaned into my touch, and my heart ached for this strong man.

All other men faded around him. I loved him. But I couldn't afford to be in another relationship, or whatever this was between us, with another jealous man. The anger would grow, turning bitter until it destroyed both of us.

"He's nothing but a work colleague."

"He likes you," he stated simply.

"Would you rather he hated me?"

"I don't think I've met a person yet that doesn't like you," he replied with a sigh. "Even my chef who has never met you likes you because we ate dinner at home."

Kristoff's hands played with my hair, twisting it around his finger. I sat on his lap, studying him.

"I made you a promise," I started gently, then drew in a deep breath. "If you don't trust me to keep that promise, we should seriously talk. And maybe this arrangement isn't viable."

It was the last thing I wanted. I had fallen in love with Kristoff so hard that I couldn't even imagine not seeing him without feeling sad.

"I trust you," Kristoff groaned, locking eyes with me. "It's others I don't trust."

Then his mouth brushed against mine.

"C'mon, let's call it a night. You promised me a hike this weekend. And I want you to be plenty rested."

If only I knew what was coming. I'd have packed my bags that night.

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## CHAPTER 57

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# GENEVIEVE



The weekend came and went.

It was one of the best weekends I'd ever had. We went strolling through the mountains of Western Maryland and then camped overnight by the lake. The kids were so worn out by the time we set up camp and had a fire going, they were out cold before the last ray of sun disappeared. Once we safely tucked the kids into the sleeping bags in the tent, Kristoff and I sat in front of the campfire perfectly content.

"This was a great idea." Kristoff's hot breath against my ear sent shudders down my spine. With my back pressed against his chest and his strong arms around me, we sat facing the fire.

"I have a few great ideas up my sleeve." I shot him a look over my shoulder, a smile on my lips and he bent his head to press his lips against mine. He tasted my mouth and sucked on my tongue. Kissing this man was sinful and sweet.

"We should do this every year," he suggested, and my heart skipped a beat. Or possibly several beats.

"I agree." My voice came through a bit shaky.

"We never finished talking yesterday or ever brought the topic of the contract to conclusion," I started nervously and quickly tried to add a bit of humor into it. "This is my feeble attempt to renegotiate with the toughest negotiator I've ever met."

I felt his teeth, gently nipping my earlobe. "No, we haven't."

I waited for him to continue, but he didn't. Shifting slightly so I could turn around, I knelt in front of him, face-to-face, fire at my back.

"Don't you think we should talk about it?" I asked.

“Do you want to sign the contract?” His voice held humor but his eyes did not.

“Maybe I’m ready to negotiate.” I tried to smile but wasn’t sure if I succeeded.

Pulling me closer, I straddled him, our faces inches from each other.

“You will be my undoing,” he murmured, his voice tight, a tremble in its depths and my blood burned. But it was the longing in his eyes that was my undoing. “I’m trying hard to just hang on to your promise to be faithful and keep the contract out of the game.”

“Oh.”

We stared at each other, confusion swimming through my veins. *He was trying*, my mind whispered. I drew my tongue across his top lip, but before I could explore further, he cupped my face and parted my lips with his tongue. The taste of him was a spice I had come to crave.

Pulling back, I drowned in his green eyes. *He was compromising, for me!* A soft smile curved my lips and hope flickered in my heart.

“I won’t break my promise,” I vowed in a whisper.

He held me in his arms all night. I had never felt more at peace as stars flickered in the sky, watching over us on top of a mountain and world at our feet.

---

MY TWO MONTHS WERE UP.

I woke up to the sound of my alarm and millions of missed texts and calls. Dread settled in the pit of my stomach, though I didn’t know why. But tons of texts never bode well for anyone.

“Good morning.” The voice of my mother-in-law shouting through the house sent me into a move.

“I’m sorry, Laura,” I shouted from the top of the stairs. “We slept in. Summer laziness, I guess.”

She waved her hand. “Let the girls sleep. Do you know your street is crammed with reporters?”

“Huh?”

I padded over the hardwood floor to the front window to find her words true. “What happened?” I muttered under my breath.

Before I even had a chance to check into it, I got a text from Kristoff.  
**\*My car will pick you up. Don't talk to reporters.\***

What?

Me: **\*What's going on?\***

Kristoff: **\*I'll take care of it all. Just don't speak to the paparazzi.\***

Of course, that only made me more curious. So I turned on the local news and my stomach twisted.

"What. The-"

I flipped through the images, over and over again. Pictures of Kristoff and I. Hiking. In Betty's home with me on my knees. Sections of the contract I never signed. I stared at the phone, unable to move. This was bad. Really, really bad. Everyone in the world had access to these pictures.

"Oh my God." Nausea hit me hard and fast, I barely made it to the toilet and emptied the contents of last night's dinner.

Tears pricked the back of my eyes as I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, then continued reading through the articles. Kristoff and I were the stars of every website. At least it seemed that way.

Then an article caught my eye.

*Is a suburban, single mother looking to score big, keeping her eyes on the single billionaires? Has Miss Rose set her sights on the Ashford brothers and Kristoff Baldwin?*

I shook my head in disbelief. These people were nuts... reverse harem.

*Did Miss Rose kill her husband to be with the eligible and filthy rich billionaire?*

I froze and my blood turned to ice. *Nobody knows. Nobody knows.* Fear wrapped around my throat and cut off my breath with a painful throb inside my chest.

My girls. *I can't lose them.* They shouldn't see this. I stumbled out of the bathroom and rushed for Sienna's phone downstairs on the charger.

"What's going on?" Laura's voice came from behind me and startled me so bad, I dropped the phone. I forgot she was here.

I swallowed, shame filling every fiber of me. "Don't turn on the news," I pleaded, barely getting the words out. "Please."

No answer. I knelt down, my hands trembling as I reached for Sienna's phone. "Tell Sienna, I'm getting her a new phone," I breathed as terror crawled up my spine. This was worse than feeling my late husband's punches. This would hurt my girls.

“Okay, I won’t.” Laura’s calm demeanor helped my somewhat rattled state. Okay, completely rattled state.

One hour later, I was dressed in a black Valentino dress with matching ankle strap pumps. Then added a long green cardigan that gave my whole outlook a mature look. I even applied make-up. My eyes were done in thick lines and heavy mascara, then finished with smokey eyeshadow and plump red lips. War colors.

Today I’d need armor.

With a last look in the mirror and my Coach purse, I made my way downstairs. The girls were still asleep. I silently breathed a sigh of relief and thanked God for small blessings.

“A car is here for you,” Laura whispered, probably worried since she never saw me like this.

With a terse nod, I walked taller and chin up to the door. A black Mercedes waited with a driver.

“Gemma,” she called out and I looked over my shoulder. “You’re worth a billion bucks.”

“Thank you.” Despite the trouble I found myself in, a genuine smile appeared on my face. “Keep my girls safe.”

The moment I opened my front door, the driver met my eyes and gave me a polite nod. He opened the car door for me. “Miss Rose.”

“Good morning,” I greeted as I slid into the seat.

He wasted no time getting in the driver seat and getting us out of there. The flashes of the camera had me covering my face. They didn’t need any more pictures of me. *Assholes*. The ride to the office was smooth, though nerve wracking. My thoughts bounced all over the place.

I didn’t expect for my private moments with Kristoff to become public knowledge. Pictures, nonetheless. Fear and shame plagued me, but there was also regret. I didn’t know what this meant in terms of my relationship with Kristoff. Would he write me off now?

A buzz from my phone had me digging for it in my bag. It was a message from Rick.

Rick: **\*Are you okay?\***

Me: **\*I will be.\***

Rick: **\*I’m worried about you. How did the news get pictures of you?\***

I cringed with the knowledge that my friends had seen the pictures. I hated that I couldn't demand everyone unsee them.

Rick: **\*Let's have lunch today.\***

It might be exactly what I needed.

Me: **\*Okay. Panera? Noon?\***

Rick: **\*See you then.\***

The second we pulled up to the W&W building, my stomach plummeted further. The swarm of paparazzi surrounded the building. Security attempted to keep them at bay, behind the barriers that weren't needed before. There were even news vans blocking the street and I wondered if I'd manage to meet Rick for lunch at all. I shoved my phone securely into my purse and shut it tight.

Once the driver pulled to the front of the building, and with a heavy sigh, I pushed open the door. The moment my heels hit the pavement, flashes of camera blinded me and questions shouted from all directions. I clutched my purse as I sauntered my way through the cleared area, the security struggling to keep people at bay.

Screams traveled over the air. *Whore. Gold digger. Slut.*

I tried really hard not to flinch, ignoring the comments. Until the next one came. *Murderer.*

My knees got weaker and my hands shook, but before I could falter, a set of strong hands wrapped around me. The familiar scent. Our gazes locked and I clutched onto his strength and held on to it. His raw masculine authority kept the name calling at bay, but questions curious about our relationship kept coming.

We both ignored them.

Together we made our way through the lobby, and once in the elevator, he pulled me closer into him. "Are you okay?"

The tremble in my hands was obvious as I reached for his tie, twisting it nervously. "How did this happen?" I breathed out. "Pictures of us-" I swallowed hard. "The articles-"

"I've got this," Kristoff whispered, cupping my face. "You're pale."

"Probably makeup," I justified tiredly. The day had barely gotten started and fatigue settled in.

"I'm going to tear that bitch apart."

His presence screamed power and confidence. Mine didn't. I was scared to death. He didn't know my secret, and it would be my girls who'd pay the



steepest price.

Then his words sank in and I blinked, confused. “She?”

“It was Jacqueline,” he hissed, while pulling a strand of my hair through his fingers. As if touching me calmed him. “My ex-wife will be finished in our circles. I’ll make certain of it.”

I gulped. “What about her son and his father? They shouldn’t pay for her sins.”

*Or mine.*

“Those two will be fine.”

Being the enemy of Kristoff Baldwin wasn’t wise. For anyone.

The elevator doors opened at that moment, cutting our discussion short.

Kimberly rushed to me with a worried expression. “Are you okay, dear?”

Leave it to her to be concerned for me. Even after the speculation of me murdering my husband. *Jesus.*

“The paparazzi are leeches,” she continued. “Don’t worry, Mr. Baldwin will get it all handled.” Kristoff nodded, then she added, “Speaking of handling it all, your attorney is here.”

His eyes remained on me, unwilling to leave me alone. “I’m okay now,” I told him. “I’m here with Kimberly.”

“Will you be okay?”

“Yes.” I refused to be weak and let his ex-wife win. “Go and take care of your meeting.”

## CHAPTER 58

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# KRISTOFF



“Sue her for defamation and break her,” I ordered.

The Ashford brothers would rip into Jacqueline too. She fucked up big time when she set her sights on Gemma, trying to destroy her. Pulling the Ashfords into her game, even dumber. She stood no chance.

Landon grinned from the opposite side of the table. Byron found himself here too. “How much for all of this shit to go away?” I asked.

“And just so we’re clear,” Byron grumbled. “Money is no object. I want that shit off the internet and whoever published it fucking destroyed.”

Landon’s smile got even bigger. There was nothing more he liked than ripping people apart. He was a sick motherfucker, so it was good that he worked for me.

“How long until you contain the scandal? I want her pictures removed from the web. She has daughters, and this isn’t something she takes lightly.”

Fuck, she’d surely blame me, and I couldn’t even fault her for it. I pursued her without regard for her privacy. Last night I called Rick and I ripped into him. I was surprised the fucker didn’t run crying to Gemma. How in the fuck could he have let Jonathan’s wife into his home?

Landon squirmed. “Now you know once the shit is on the web, it’s impossible to erase it.”

I tried not to bristle at his patronizing tone. It wouldn’t do any of us any good if I lost my shit. Byron caught my gaze and gave me a silent nod. He had a way. After our time in the military together, we came to understand our wordless looks to each other.

When Landon left, I turned to Byron. “How do we remove all those pictures?”

Byron's lips curved, a slightly sadistic smile on his lips. "Nico Morrelli."

"Fuck, the mobster?"

"Yes, but not to worry. He won't hold it over your head. We just pay him the fee and be on our merry way. I had to handle a few of my father's indiscretions that way."

My lips curled in distaste. "Don't put me in the same basket as him."

"I don't," he assured. "Trust me, I'm not pleased about the published shit either. Though, if I found a woman like her... Fuck, maybe I'd let the whole world see and envy me."

By eleven a.m., I had my share of meetings. I had gone from one meeting to the next, trying to put out the PR fire and protect Gemma.

The most important one was with Nico Morrelli who was tasked with wiping out everything about Gemma. Especially the tidbit about her killing her husband. *Fucking Jacqueline*.

The door to my office opened and I looked up from my laptop.

Kimberly walked in with my coffee and my eyebrows shot up. "I know, Gemma usually brings you coffee," she remarked. "She ran to the bathroom, looking green. She'll never tell you herself, but she doesn't feel well."

"What's wrong with her?" I growled, alarm shooting through my spine.

"I don't know. She keeps assuring me she's fine but one of the ladies from accounting said they've heard her getting sick in the bathroom before."

Something twisted in my chest. Just the idea of her being sick didn't sit well with me. Unfortunately, neither did the guilt that I put her in the path of my crazy ex.

"Please send her to my office when she's back." She put the coffee down on my desk. "Thanks, Kimberly."

Five minutes later, Gemma walked into my office, her make-up gone. She still looked hot to me, and honestly, I preferred her without it. She didn't need any make-up to look beautiful.

"Hey, you wanted to see me?" Kimberly was right. She looked pale with dark circles under her eyes.

"Kimberly tells me you're not feeling well." Okay, my voice came out slightly rougher than I intended and the worry was heavy in my chest.

She rolled her dark eyes, but it wasn't quite as effective with her pale complexion that held a green tinge to it.

I patted a spot in front of me and she made her way to me, her steps slow, but not hesitant. She came around the desk and leaned her butt against it, her eyes never wavering from me.

"How are you feeling?" it was obvious she didn't feel well but I wanted her to tell me why.

"I'm fine." She smiled tiredly.

"You're not." I brushed my knuckles over her soft cheek, then tucking a piece of her dark hair behind her ear. Taking my hand, she kissed my palm then pressed it against her cheek.

"I'm good. Really," she rasped.

"I'm working on having all that stuff removed from the web," I told her. "Give me a few days, and it will all be gone."

Confusion touched her expression. "How?"

There was no way I'd tell her I resorted to paying a mobster to wipe it all out. By now, I knew her well enough to know it would scare her. Up until now, she was the protector, but she was way out of her element with people like Jacqueline. So I'd be Gemma's protector, whether she wanted me or not.

"Let me worry about it," I told her. "You should go home and get some rest." My fingers grazed her cheek again. It was fruitless to fight my urge to touch her. It was a need, like air for my lungs. Her eyes closed and she sighed, leaning into my touch. God, maybe she felt an ounce of what I felt for her. It snuck up on me but I fell hard for this woman.

She was my weakness. Losing her would destroy me.

"You don't need anything?" I shook my head. She still hesitated. "It won't look like I'm a coward?"

The thought was laughable. She came into the office with her head held high and powered through it all. She was the strongest woman in my book.

I cupped her cheeks. "You're the strongest woman ever. Now, go home and get some rest. My driver will take you."

"Thank you."

I hoped by the time the week was over, this would be behind us.

---

AT HALF PAST TWELVE, my driver was the last person I expected to see lingering in the lobby. A few reporters still lingered on the sidewalk but my security was able to disperse most of them. Of course, my and Byron calls to reporting agencies might have something to do with it too.

“I thought you took Miss Rose home,” I asked my driver.

“She’s meeting a friend,” he explained. I stilled. “I told her to take her time.”

A sardonic breath escaped me. “She mentioned the name of this friend?”

He hesitated, then shook his head.

My gaze traveled over the lobby. “Did she mention where?”

I gritted my teeth, the voices of my employees sounding faraway while blood drummed in my ears.

*Fidelity. She made a promise.*

Then why didn’t she mention her lunch plans?

“Panera.”

I inhaled deeply and made my way through the W&W lobby with unnatural calmness. Images of the last time a woman lied to me played in my mind. Except the image was replaced with Gemma’s face and something tightened in my throat. Pain pierced me in my fucking chest unlike anything ever before.

*Why didn’t she mention it?*

One fucking lie, one omission, and I was right back at the beginning. The humid summer air hit me the moment I stepped on the pavement. With each step I took towards Panera, the hollow in my chest grew bigger and bigger.

It was then that I spotted her. With goddamn Rick. His hand tucked a strand of her unruly hair behind her ear. She looked carefree and happy, her eyes shining. She never smiled like that at me.

Then Rick pulled her into a hug and Gemma leaned her head on his chest.

It was what sent me over the edge.

## CHAPTER 59

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



The moment I spotted Rick, my spirits lifted. After all, I've known him for almost two decades. We got along better than Jack and I. He understood me better than Jack.

"You look tired." Rick mumbled into my hair as he hugged me, then spun me around.

I giggled. Probably not a good scenario if caught by the paparazzi.

"Geez, thanks! You don't look so great yourself," I scoffed.

In his suit, he looked much older than his thirty-four years. It was probably why Betty preferred him wearing suits. She didn't want anyone to get wind that he was six years younger.

"I got us some food." He pointed to platters on the table. "Strawberry poppyseed salad, and a Mediterranean sandwich, just in case you're not in the mood for a salad."

Oddly, my stomach churned but I ignored it. It had been a weird day.

"Thank you. How much do I owe you?"

"It's on me." He grinned wide. "I want to hear all the details about what the hell is going on."

I groaned, shooting a glance over my shoulder. "It's a long story."

He motioned with his hand for us to sit down, and we fell into easy conversation, all the while keeping away from the topic of today's headlines.

"Jonathan mentioned his kid is dating Sienna." He trailed off, slightly unsure whether he should continue. When I didn't say anything, he said, "Do you think his ex went nuts because of that?"



I shrugged, my temples throbbing slightly. “I think she’s just nuts,” I remarked, pinching my nose. It had to be the topic of the crazy ex that caused the impending headache.

He nodded. “I can’t believe Sienna’s dating.”

“She’s growing up,” I said with a soft chuckle. “As much as I hate to admit it.”

“Time to pull out the big guns, huh?” he teased.

I rolled my eyes. “Just you wait until your boys start dating. I’m going to give you so much shit.”

“Boys will be lining up in front of your house. Kind of like the reporters.” My smile fell. “What the hell happened, Gemma?”

I swallowed. “Maybe I should ask you the same thing, considering some of those pictures were taken at your house.” The words came out too defensive, and I regretted them the moment they left my lips. They put the blame on him. I reached out and put my hand on his. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.”

A bitter grimace touched his lips. “So he told you?”

“Huh?” Confusion flickered through me.

“Your boyfriend called me last night,” he explained and my heart warmed at *your boyfriend* label. Or simply *mine*. God, my priorities were skewed.

“What did he say?” I breathed.

“So he didn’t tell you.” I shook my head in response. “He ripped me a new one. Basically threatened to leave me penniless if he finds out I let Jacqueline record you and take pictures of you.”

My cheeks flamed. *A recording?* Fuck, what else was there?

“How did she get those, Rick?” I whispered. “I know you wouldn’t let her but-”

“I don’t know, Gem.” I heard sincerity in his voice and saw it in his eyes. “The only thing I could think of is that maybe she came through the adjoining room. It’s a Jack-n-Jill bathroom.”

I blinked. “I forgot about the adjoining room.”

The explanation seemed plausible. Pushing both my hands through my hair, I cursed under my breath. “What a damn mess! I’m mortified about what people saw.”

“What is Baldwin doing about it?”

“I’m scared to know the details,” I admitted. “Honestly, the whole thing’s scaring me.”

I couldn’t tell Rick my biggest fear was speculated on in one of the articles. I stabbed Jack. It was attempted murder and this secret had eaten away at my soul - slowly with claws that dug into its flesh, making it bleed. To this day, I’d never understand why Jack went to the bar with a stab wound.

“Baldwin has the money and power to handle it,” Rick grumbled. “If anyone can help you, it’s him.”

I sighed. Kristoff was handling it, except I didn’t know what it’d mean in the long run. What if his crazy ex came up with shit after we go our separate ways? I couldn’t handle all this shit on my own. I had neither the resources nor money.

He brushed his finger across my cheek.

“It’s about time for you to be happy. Jack only made you miserable.” I stiffened at his comment. There was no sense in denying it. He’d seen plenty of scars and fights. “Jack was my cousin, and we grew up together, but he turned out to be an ass. Selfish, arrogant, and sometimes cruel.” He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. “I worry that Kristoff is not far behind. And that man has money, so it’d be hard to go against him.”

I shook my head. “Kristoff isn’t like Jack.” *Except for jealousy*. But we were working through it.

“You’re like a sister to me. I want what’s best for you and your girls.”

A shuddering breath left me and tears pricked at my eyes.

“What a mess,” I mumbled, our eyes locked as silence stretched. “Who knew life would turn out this messy?” I asked him.

He laughed, reached for my hand, and squeezed it with affection.

“All will be ok,” he assured me and wrapped me in his embrace. I hugged him back and leaned my head on his chest, like I did so many times before when I just needed a hug after Jack’s outbursts.

“I’m sorry, Rick,” I mumbled against his chest. “I love you and couldn’t have survived the last decade without you.”

“I’ll always love you and your girls. As long as we have each other, we’ll be ok.” His words were soft, full of conviction and promises.

“Will it now, Rick?” Kristoff’s face was a blank mask, something dark and volatile in his emerald depths. “Now, isn’t this a touching scene?”

His gaze finally met mine and something about the way he looked at me twisted my heart in a cruel grip.

“Fidelity.” He scoffed the word like it was something dirty.

“Kristoff, we were just-”

“Save it, Gemma.” The cold tenor in his voice froze my heart. The look he gave me stabbed my soul.

Rick didn’t remove his arms from around me, his grip tightening. He released a sardonic breath and it was clear in the way a muscle in his jaw ticked, he was pissed.

“Does your wife know you are here, Rick?” He glanced my way, the possessiveness in his eyes cutting my breath short. “You do know he’s married, right? To your best friend.”

His words cut something deep inside me and froze me to my bones. It felt like I’d just been slapped across the face by a complete stranger with a cold emerald gaze.

One glance toward the back of the shop showed everyone staring at us. Low murmurs spread through the crowd, the topic of the conversation clear. Especially as they pointed fingers at me, realization flashing in their eyes.

“Kristoff, you’re making a scene,” I breathed, fiery anger slowly replacing everything else. Except nausea. That remained, churning in my stomach along with bitterness swelling in my chest.

Happily ever after would never be in my cards. But then I knew that, didn’t I?

Fed up with everything, I stood up to leave. Rick followed suit, grabbing my hand into his and glaring at Kristoff. Thick tension rolled off my boss and his fist tightened. He was furious, the hostile atmosphere turning up a few notches. Kristoff blocked our exit, towering over Rick, challenging him silently to dare and push him out of the way.

Nausea roiled in my stomach, and I released a shaky breath. Slowly and measured, hoping to rein it in. My face paled and bile rose in my throat. Pushing between the two men, I rushed through the exit door onto the pavement. I barely made it to the trash can to throw up everything in my stomach.

A familiar hand came to my back. Fingers grabbed my hair, holding it out of my face as I retched. And all the while, a strong hand rubbed my back, soothing me.

“Are you okay?” Rick’s voice came from my left, too far for me to see him. “I’d come and comfort you but the fucker is glaring at me.”

I puked again, waving my hand at him that I was okay.

Then it stopped, just as fast as it started, while a gut-wrenching doubt nudged at the back of my mind. Something deep inside me quivered and my heart trembled. It fucking trembled, sending waves of emotion through my veins.

*It can’t be*, my reason whispered. *Impossible.*

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and straightened up. Then worried I might still have traces of puke on my face, I went to wipe my mouth again. Kristoff beat me to it, his handkerchief dabbing at my mouth.

“Want me to take you home?” Rick offered.

“Isn’t it time you get back to your shitty job or at least your wife?” I flinched at Kristoff’s icy tone. “If you so much as look at my woman, I’ll kill you.”

I blinked. *He did not!*

“Kristoff-” I hissed but he cut me off.

“Don’t you fucking dare stand up for him,” he snapped. A cold and distant expression on his face. My heart ripped in two broken pieces. This hurt - more than I ever thought it could.

He should trust me to have lunch with my friend. It felt like the worst sort of betrayal to have him doubt me like that. After everything.

Full blown fury of my own reared its ugly head and I shook his hand off of me.

“You. Don’t. Own. Me.” My eyes coasted to his, hoping I portrayed at least some strength. Hurt. My blood drummed in my ears until all I could hear and feel was my own anger.

Rick pushed me behind him. “Listen, buddy. You need to cool off. Then see if she wants to talk to you.”

I cringed at his words, but before I could even blink, Kristoff’s fist flew through the air and connected with my best friend’s face so hard, he staggered back two steps.

Apparently, Rick knew exactly what to say to send my boss over the edge.

Staring at the two of them and disbelieving my own eyes, I remained frozen in my spot. Until Rick went for the punch and I jumped in front of him.

“Stop it, both of you!”

“He fucking started it,” Rick blamed, glaring past me at my boss.

Kristoff took another threatening step towards Rick. “Don’t you fucking dare,” I hissed. Rick’s eye started to swell, a bruise blooming underneath his eyes. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Kristoff?”

Rick hunched over, holding his face and I took a step away from my boss.

“Let me see,” I demanded, pulling his hand away from his face, all the while he kept his good eye on the man behind me.

“It’s fine,” he grumbled through clenched teeth, whether out of anger or pain. “Fucker punches like he’s a boxer.”

“He was in the special forces. You were at a disadvantage.” Then I shot Kristoff a glare that I hoped conveyed how furious I was. Despite the fact that my eyes burned and I had to blink to keep the tears at bay, I was pissed. Damn it!

Kristoff’s response was a bitter laugh.

“I can see how wrong I was to trust you,” he said, then left me without a backward glance. “No wonder you refused to sign the fucking contract.”

“Kristoff.”

He stopped with his back to me, his shoulders tensing. But he refused to turn and meet my eyes.

When I couldn’t find the words to say, he walked off.

Taking my heart and the possibility of happiness with him.

## CHAPTER 60

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” Rick asked for the tenth time since we left D.C. Thankfully, this would be the last time for his question because we were in front of my home. Even better was that all the paparazzi were gone. Kristoff must have come through with his promise of fixing it all. “Betty can stay with you,” he suggested.

Another wave of nausea rolled through me. God, I’d kill for ginger ale.

“I’m sure,” I assured him as I pulled on the door handle of his BMW. He’d need Betty to take care of him. “Have your wife put ice on your face when you get home. Otherwise, you’ll look like Rocky tomorrow.”

He choked out a laugh. “If I was Rocky, your boss would have never landed a punch.”

I leaned over, pressed a kiss on his cheek. “I’m sorry this happened.”

He waved his hand. “It happens every day.”

I rolled my eyes, and exited the car. “Tell Betty I’ll call her later.”

Shutting the door, I watched him drive away. And the entire time my doctor’s words played on repeat in my mind. *Chances of you getting pregnant again are one in a billion... or was it one in a million?*

I couldn’t jump to conclusions. I had an uneasy feeling I wouldn’t have to search long for answers.

For the first time in my life, I prayed that there was no chance in hell I’d be pregnant, despite the fact I always wanted a big family. Because it would mean I lied to Kristoff. Albeit unintentionally. I didn’t think he’d see it that way.

My front door opened and my youngest ran out the door into my arms, putting a halt to all my troubles.

“Gemma.” Laura rushed after Sierra. “You are home already?”

Absentmindedly, I lifted my baby and brushed my lips across her forehead. “Ah, yes. I was feeling a bit sick.”

Nudging everyone into the house, I shut the door firmly behind me. Together, the three of us walked into the kitchen where my oldest two munched on cherry tomatoes and cucumbers out of the garden.

I smiled at the happy picture.

“Is that delicious?” I asked as Saoirse ran to me and gave me a hug, her little fingers wiping cherry tomato juice on my Valentino. *Well, not mine. Kristoff bought it so it belongs to him.*

“Best ever,” she answered with a mouthful of tomatoes. I shook my head, smiling at her chipmunk cheeks, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

“You want me to stay longer, Gemma?” Laura asked. “If you are sick, you should probably rest so you can feel better.”

“Thanks, Laura,” I said, glancing up from my six year old. “I’m feeling better but you are more than welcome to stay and we can hang out together.”

It took Laura another thirty minutes before she finally drove off. I went in search of my phone and shot a quick text to Rick and Betty.

Me: **\*How’s the eye?\***

Rick: **\*Put some frozen meat on it. Poof. Gone.\***

Betty: **\*He won’t tell me what happened?\***

Ugh. I really didn’t want to be the one to tell her. So typical Rick to discount everything.

“Hey there,” I answered the phone.

“He said your boss knocked him out,” Betty rambled. Okay, Rick might have shared an over exaggerated version. “But he refuses to say why? Is it because of the recording of the two of you in the guestroom? Or should I say bathroom.”

I groaned. The whole world must have seen that shit. Talk about privacy out the window. Apparently, my response didn’t come fast enough, because she continued, “Rick told me you got sick. Are you ok?”

“Yes.”

“I took care of Rick,” she announced. “Mentally, physically, and sexually.”

I cringed at that image. “Gross.”



She chuckled. "He needs rest. I'm going to pack up the boys and come over."

Gosh, her company would be welcome. Especially with all of the *what if* scenarios running through my mind.

"Wouldn't you rather stay home with Rick?" I attempted, though half-heartedly. I needed a friend right now. And not Rick. I needed a girlfriend.

"No. He wants peace and quiet after he got head. He's all sated, if you get my meaning." She chuckled smugly and I mimicked throwing up sounds.

"Okay, come on over then," I caved. "Could I ask you to pick up something on your way though?"

"Anything."

"Pregnancy tests," I whispered, glancing around me. It was ludicrous. I was a grown woman.

"Gemma!" Betty screeched so loud, I had to move the headset from my ear or risk losing my hearing. "How?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, I could be detailed like you're trying to be or just say that it happened the old fashioned way." Somewhere deep down in my chest the old fears flared. I had my share of miscarriages. And still, excitement fluttered at the possibilities.

Maybe I needed someone to hit me on the head with something hard. Who in their right looked forward to a baby after today's shenanigans? "It's probably nothing."

But even as I uttered those words, I knew it was something. By my calculations, I hadn't had my period in two months. But then, it was never something that concerned me. My periods were always irregular.

"Don't worry. I'll go pick up the pregnancy test, and I'll come over with the boys. The kids can play, and we can do our thing." I chewed on my lip. "Ok?"

"Thank you."

My voice didn't reflect the storm brewing inside me. So many mixed emotions. But one resonated stronger than the other. Why in the fuck did I never demand that he use protection?

---

I HAD SHOWERED and changed into comfortable clothes when Betty finally came through the door. I ordered DoorDash for all of us. The simplest solution I could come up with, while sipping ginger ale.

At this point, I was unsure whether my mind played tricks on me. Because when Betty hugged me, I had to fight my tears from spilling. Hormones had already kicked in.

Or maybe I had finally lost my mind.

“Ok, kids.” Betty clapped her hands. “Delicious dinner, dig in. You can eat anything but alcohol and sweets. Sienna, you are in charge.”

“Where will you two be?” Sienna demanded to know.

“Brainstorming,” I said the first thing that came to mind. “It’s easier to do it in peace.” I turned to Betty and asked with a low voice, “You guys are spending the night, right?”

We headed up the stairs and through the master bedroom.

“Excellent plan,” she grinned. Gosh, my best friend craved drama. “I’ll let Rick know. No more nookie tonight.”

A snort escaped me. “Jesus.”

Her eyes shone mischievously. “I might give him lots of nookie if you got knocked up. To distract him from going after your boss-slash-lover.”

I groaned at her enthusiasm, though it might be exactly what I needed at this moment.

Betty pulled out three different pregnancy tests out of the cheap CVS bag. Dumping them all on the sink countertop, she rushed to lock the door behind us.

“Three, really? Just one will confirm it.”

“I know, I know. I was kind of nervous,” she confessed. *Welcome to the club*. “Just in case, one doesn’t work. We’ll pick the best two out of three.” I stared at her. We both knew what the best results would be. Negative pregnancy test. She realized it too because she just waved her hand and shook her head. “Ok, are you ready to do this?”

I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants, took a deep breath, and then snatched one box off the counter and headed for the toilet. Following the instructions, I pondered on better and cleaner pregnancy tests, rather than peeing on the stick. *Fucking gross*.

I put the test on the sink.

“We should invent better pregnancy tests,” I muttered randomly, meeting Betty’s eyes. It had to be easier to think of inventing a new product

than face the reality. Because I knew deep down, it was about to pee on me.

*Please don't be positive. Please don't be positive,* my thoughts kept repeating over and over.

"Now we wait," she whispered.

She pointed to the test. "I think the wait is over." I followed her finger and stared at two bold pink lines.

"My Ob/Gyn said one in a billion," I rasped, emotions squeezing my heart.

"He was dead wrong." *Obviously.*

"I should try it again." My hands shook as I reached for another one, ripping it open. "This one is faulty. I have never seen the result come up so fast."

Betty chewed her lip. She didn't look convinced.

"Ok, try again." And I did, following the instructions step by step.

"It is positive again." My voice portrayed desperation. Then I tried the third test.

*Positive.*

"Gemma, face it. You're pregnant." I started hyperventilating and slid down the bathroom wall.

Resting my forehead on my knees, I fought emotions and tears burned in my eyes. "How could this have happened?" I muttered over and over again. "He fucking said one in a billion! I'm sure of it."

Gemma joined me on the tiled floor. "Everything will be alright."

She flicked a hesitant gaze to me which matched the tone of her voice.

And I bawled like a baby. Under different circumstances, this would be a dream come true. A family. Something like my parents had - what I always wanted. Yet, it couldn't be more different.

"Calm down," she whispered, hugging me tightly. "When you tell Kristoff, he's going to be thrilled."

"No, he is not," I answered. "After what happened today, I'm sure he won't. He thinks I'm sleeping with Rick."

She scoffed at that. "Men are idiots when they're jealous."

I sighed. She was right about that, but I couldn't risk another failed relationship with a jealous man.

"I never signed the contract," I muttered. "Now he thinks it's because of some crazy love triangle."

Wiping the tears with the back of my hand, for the second time today, I steeled my spine. I had to get my shit together.

“I’m going to demand a transfer.” After all, I made it working for him for two months. He owed me that much.

“Don’t jump to any conclusion,” Betty reasoned. “Sleep on it.”

I shook my head. “There’s nothing to sleep on. If I’m pregnant-” I winced. There were no *ifs* about it after three positives. “Once the doctor confirms, I’ll tell him.” My hand reached for my lower belly. A *baby* - Kristoff’s baby. A tight, warm sensation swelled in my chest. “I won’t work for him. That job was never for me anyhow.”

“Good, we have a plan. I bet he falls down to his knees for you once he finds out.”

With resolve, I grabbed my phone and shot a message to Kristoff. **\*Let me know if moving to another department is still an option. Or if you would like my resignation?\***

*Whatever happens, I can do this.*

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## CHAPTER 6I

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# GENEVIEVE



As I sat behind my desk, I nervously waited for an open window to catch Kristoff. I'd been at work for two hours, but he'd sent a message to Kimberly and I not to be disturbed.

The message I sent him last night showed he'd seen it, but no response came. Only one missed call. From my boss. God, I hoped Kristoff would take the news well. He was good with my daughters, but we never talked about children. It was a moot point since I couldn't have any more. Or at least I thought so.

"How are you feeling?" Kimberly startled me out of my thoughts. "You're still pale."

*It'll be my complexion for a while.*

"Much better today."

I glanced toward the door where the man who stole my heart sat behind his executive desk. Still no word and lunchtime approached rapidly.

I stood up and smoothed down my skirt. Black pencil skirt and white blouse. I couldn't handle green today. My fingers trembled and I interlocked them together. I knocked on the door, determination settled deep in the pit of my stomach.

A muffled chuckle, followed by Kristoff's deep voice. "Come in."

The second I opened the door, I knew it was something I'd regret. Kristoff sat casually in his chair, smiling at a gorgeous blonde woman who couldn't be more than twenty-five, tops.

I stilled.

The two made the perfect couple. Two perfect puzzle pieces, making a picture perfect image. His hand on her hip, and she had a hand on his arm,

like they have just-

My chest tightened. I stood frozen, like someone had just punched me in my gut and stole my breath.

*Don't go there.*

I had to get out of here. "Hello," she greeted me in her melodious voice.

They looked comfortable together. They looked *right* together. The thought slashed through my heart, shattering it like a broken glass.

I finally met Kristoff's emerald eyes. Our gazes locked and time slowed to a standstill. Each heartbeat hurt, sending a raw ache through my chest.

I took a deep breath. And another. Then forced my lips to curve into a smile, as I smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle from my skirt. I hoped he missed a small tremor in my hand.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Baldwin." I reverted back to formality, impressed with how impassive my voice sounded. Or maybe it was the fact that buzzing in my ears was too loud. "I forgot to put my doctor's appointment on your calendar. I have to leave-" Now. "... soon."

A frown formed between his eyebrows. "Everything okay?"

Asshole actually sounded concerned, while another woman was touching him.

"Yes, just a normal checkup."

Averting my eyes, I focused on the blonde. It was easier this way. It was too easy to drown in his gaze.

"Sorry for the interruption. It should be fairly quiet for the rest of the afternoon. Mr. Baldwin's calendar is clear." I couldn't resist one last look at the man who swept me off my feet. "Goodbye."

It wouldn't be a final goodbye. Not with his baby growing inside my belly. But it was a goodbye to a fleeting dream, hope. Whatever it was. It all turned to ashes.

Then without another look, I turned around and shut the door to his office behind me. For the last time.

---

GRABBING MY PURSE, I dug out the keys to the Range Rover and threw it on the desk. I didn't want anything from him. Nothing that money could buy anyhow.

“I’m so sorry, Kimberly.” I was hanging by a thread. “I have to go. I want to make sure I don’t hit any lunch traffic.”

I couldn’t bring myself to lie to this darling lady. My vision blurred and she startled me when her hands came around me. I blinked hard and fast, keeping the tears at bay. Her hug tightened and I sniffed, fighting the urge to wipe my nose with the back of my hand. *Jesus, too much crying.*

“Everything will be ok,” she murmured softly. “Men are stupid and slow.”

I made a *hmm* noise. “Thank you for everything,” I rasped, tearing myself from her comfort.

As I ran down the stairs, all my emotions from the past few days slammed into me like a hurricane. I cried until my eyes burned and my muscles ached from sobs. I shot a text to Betty, asking her to pick me up and then I curled up on the step as I cried. Wretched, soul shattering tears stained my face as my heart shattered piece by piece.

Something inside me broke. I *needed* Kristoff with a longing I knew it’d be impossible to shake off. But I had to, for my girls. For the little life growing inside me.

So I steeled my spine and wiped off my tears.

I’d weather this storm. I was strong; I survived worse than a little heartbreak.



## CHAPTER 62

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# GENEVIEVE



“Thank you for picking me up,” I said again.

Betty drove like a goddamn maniac but it was better than taking Kristoff’s car. Regardless of whose name was on the title.

“I want to kill the fucker,” she growled, though it looked a tad bit comical.

“I knew Dr. Packard would see you right away,” she continued, abruptly changing subjects. “At thirty-five, you’re at a higher risk.”

I sighed. “Thirty-four.”

She waved one hand, then glanced at the clock. “We’ll have five minutes to spare.”

We were ten minutes away from my OB/GYN.

“Not if you kill us with your driving in the process,” I muttered.

I had to wonder about life’s funny ways. It took me years to get pregnant with Saoirse, and took three years to get pregnant with Sierra. But apparently with Kristoff it took no time at all.

“I’m just so fucking mad,” she continued. “I could spit fire. I don’t understand why you’re so calm.”

I turned to gaze out the window, the blur of trees in my vision. “It wouldn’t be good for the baby to get upset.”

Silence.

“So you’re keeping it?” The hesitancy in her voice hinted at bad decisions.

“Yes.”

“Hmmm.” I should ask what her *hmmm* meant, but it was my decision. Well, technically mine and Kristoff’s but he had moved on.

Another tightening in my chest. *Maybe it's heartburn.*

"Whatever you decide, Rick and I will be here for you."

I should be grateful. Except that the first thought was that I only wanted Kristoff to be there for me. For *us*.

---

I LAID on the table with my legs sprawled and Dr. Packard between my legs. In the most professional way possible.

The idea presented itself as I stared at the white ceiling, wondering how many women watched it as their uterus was being checked for a human being. The idea was almost too perfect to work.

Summer vacation. In Croatia.

Away from the compromising pictures and *him*. The kids wouldn't know any better, and it was not the first time we'd spent summer weeks there. With the recent development, I wouldn't work for Kristoff or any of his companies. I'd make do with something else. I'd saved a good portion of my salary since I started working for him.

Dr. Packard continued his probing and prying. And then the vaginal ultrasound, and just like with all my previous pregnancies, successful and unsuccessful ones, seeing the little peanut of a beginning life, I choked up. It was love at first sight.

"Hmmm." Dr. Packard's voice shot anxiety through my veins.

"Is everything ok?"

"All good." He didn't meet my gaze and worry swarmed me. I had wine over the last few weeks. And lots of sex. "Nauseous?"

"Yes, pretty bad. It hits me at weird times. Not just in the morning."

"You're carrying twins." I'm pretty sure my eyeballs popped out of my sockets as my gaze darted between the screen and him.

"I don't believe it!" I exclaimed, shocked. "Are you messing with me?"

"No, I'm dead serious." He leaned closer to the screen and pointed. "See here... and here. Two babies... two heartbeats."

I blinked, unsure whether I saw the same thing as him. *Twins*, I thought with awe.

"They are sharing the same embryo, and everything looks just perfect. We'll have to make sure we put you on vitamins and prenatal supplements.

I'll send a prescription today so it would be best if you pick it up today. I should have your lab results within the next forty-eight hours."

I just nodded, unable to tear my eyes off the screen.

"Do you remember when your last period was?"

I shook my head. "My periods have been so irregular lately. "

"It looks like you are about eight weeks."

Kristoff managed to knock me up on the first try. Go fucking figure.

When I remained silent, he continued.

"Not planned?" he asked, suddenly seriously.

"To tell you the truth, Dr. Packard, I think I am still in shock. Definitely not planned. I thought you told me after Sierra I couldn't have any more kids. You said one in a billion."

He smiled. "Yes, I remember that," he commented. "But these kinds of things are usually the best surprises."

If he only knew the entire story. Dr. Packard might have been the only creature on this planet not to see the explicit photos on the internet.

Back at home, Betty and I exited the vehicle. "Don't say anything to Laura, please."

It'd wait for the right time.

"What about Rick?"

I sighed. "Let's just be the two of us to know tonight."

She nodded, then disbelief crossed her expression. "I just can't believe it. Freaking twins." I understood the feeling. I couldn't come to grips with it either. "When do you want to go to Croatia?"

"As soon as possible," I told her. "With him moving on, I can't fight the paparazzi on my own."

"But surely, he wouldn't be such a dick to leave you to bear the consequences. It was all his fault."

I shrugged. "I want nothing from him." At least I know in that little village in Croatia, nobody knows jack crap about this scandal."

She tilted her head pensively. "I can come too, if you want."

My eyes lit up and I turned to face her. "Seriously?" She smiled. "You and the boys?"

"Yes, but only if you want." Her smile turned into a grin, when I started vigorously nodding my head. "It will probably be cheaper than our long distance, international calls."

Suddenly the day was looking up.

“Let’s go eat pizza and give the good news to everyone.”

That night, I laid in my bed, watching my toddler slowly drift off to sleep as I ran my hand through her blonde curls. As if sensing my distress, she cuddled further into me and it made my throat tighten.

God, these hormones would be the death of me. Yet, I felt the strange kind of peace wash over me with the decisions I’ve made.

Was I running? No question about it. But I’d have a small part of Kristoff forever with me. Once I shared the news with him, it would be up to him to either be part of the twins' lives or not. No expectations.

Except for one. Love them no matter what.

My eyes flickered to my cell laying on the bed next to me. No calls. No messages. I knew this new development would create a different kind of connection to Kristoff Baldwin. It’d hurt to see him, but I’d get over it. For my babies.

My eyelids grew heavy, exhaustion that had been lingering finally winning. I’m not sure how long I slept when constant vibration nudged me to open my eyes. My cell phone. Without bothering to check who it was, I answered it.

“Hello?” I murmured, my voice raspy from sleep.

“Are you sleeping?” Kristoff’s voice, low and smooth, came over the line.

“Ahmmm... yes.”

My eyelids were heavy, I felt disoriented from exhaustion, my thoughts enveloped in a fog. It was on the tip of my tongue to share the news. *Happy news*. I kept telling myself he’d think of it as happy news but honestly, I wasn’t certain.

I thought he cared. He didn’t. Now, I questioned whether the ‘*Kristoff*’ I knew had ever existed. Or was he just a figment of my imagination?

“I’m sorry to wake you.”

“No worries. Everything ok?”

“Yes. How did your doctor’s appointment go?”

“Good, everything’s fine with... everything.”

Before I could say anything else, Kristoff spoke up. “I’m going out of town until Sunday evening. Kimberly’s taking the rest of the week off. You should do the same. Also, there is a bonus payout happening this week to you and Kimberly for a job well done during and after the acquisition.”

“Oh.” It felt wrong to accept it, especially knowing what I was getting ready to do. “Thanks, I guess.”

I earned it. *Didn't I?*

“Don't thank me. You worked hard for it.” The line remained silent between us, so many unspoken words traveling through the silence.

Finally, he broke it. “I want you to slot Monday morning for us on my calendar. I want to talk to you about the message you sent yesterday.”

Two heartbeats. “Ok.”

It sounded like an ‘*I'm firing you*’ message. It didn't matter because I wouldn't be there on Monday. I would be thousands of miles away. And I took this extra time off as a sign from the universe. I was doing the right thing.

“I'll let you go back to sleep then. Good night.” His voice sounded like a caress, making me crave him. His touch. I preferred his sharp, cold tone.

“Good night, Kristoff.” *And goodbye.*

I didn't hesitate to push the end call button as a single tear made its way down my cheek.

I'd survive this. For my girls. For the two little bundles of joy growing inside me.

## CHAPTER 63

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# GENEVIEVE



Friday. Departure day. Putting the past behind me.

It was a little past noon when Rick came through my door.

“Hey beautiful girls,” he greeted. Everyone screeched and ran to give him a hug.

“Are we going now?” Saoirse asked, ready to get her adventure started.

“We have a few hours,” he kneeled down as he responded. “Go through your room and double check you haven’t forgotten anything.”

She nodded and sprinted up the stairs. Rick sauntered to me, pecking me on the cheek. His eye was still bruised.

“Hey there, Rocky.”

“I wish I could say you should see the other guy, but I never punched him back,” he mused.

“I know,” I patted his cheek gently. “You took the high road.”

“So, what are you and Betty up to, taking off to Croatia?”

“Kind of spur of the moment, you know,” I answered blushing, uncomfortable with my lies. “Thanks for letting her join me in a few weeks.”

“Ahmmm,” he added pensively. “I don’t buy it. Why don’t you try again?”

I glanced at him exasperatedly. “You are such a pain sometimes.”

“I know,” he confirmed. “But that’s why you love me. Now, tell me.”

I glanced around to ensure none of the kids were around, then answered him with a sigh. “I’m pregnant and Kristoff has moved on.”

His look turned furious. “That fucking, piece-” he spat out, unable to find a bad enough word for my boss. *Ex-boss*, I reminded myself.



“It’s all good,” I interrupted him quickly.

“The fuck it is,” he snapped. “You told him you are pregnant and he moves on. When I get a hold of him, I’ll kill him.”

“I didn’t tell him.”

He gave me a blank stare as if he didn’t understand. “What?”

“I didn’t tell him I’m pregnant,” I told him calmly.

“What?” he asked again.

I sighed deep. “I didn’t…”

“I heard you the first time,” he cut me off. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

I shrugged my shoulders, glancing away from him. “Well, I was going to. But then he had a woman in his office, and I decided it’s best I don’t say anything until I’m closer to my due date. So I bought myself twenty weeks.”

He shook his head. “Gemma, you have to tell him.”

I stared back at him stubbornly. “I will. When I’m ready.”

“Gemma, you know you have to tell him,” he reasoned with me. “You know that’s not right! He should at least know. You should give him a chance.”

I blew out an exasperated breath. Didn’t he hear me say I’d tell him - eventually?

“Whose side are you on?” I hissed. “He fucking punched you in the eye. And I did attempt to tell him; it’s not my fault he blew it before I even got a chance to tell him. So now, he’ll wait until I’m ready.”

It was his turn to glare at me. “Fuck,” he cursed quietly. “You must have fallen for him hard.”

“I didn’t.” The words were bitter on my tongue, recognizing it as a bold face lie.

“Then tell him,” he challenged me. “You would have never kept the girls from Jack and he was a fucking bastard to you for years.”

He left the silence linger between us proving his point. Of course, I knew he was right.

We locked eyes and I took a step towards him, wrapping my arms around his waist. “What would I do without you and Betty?” I mumbled against his chest.

“Well, we won’t have to find out,” he patted my head. I actually had to laugh. “Are you laughing?”

“Yes,” I chuckled against him. “You patted my head like I’m a dog or a little girl.” This time he chuckled too. “I’ll send him a note but I’m still leaving for Croatia with the girls. And you guys will still join me, right?” I raised my head and met his eyes.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he replied.

In two hours, the business of the airport reminded me of another difference between Kristoff and I. He traveled like a king. I traveled like a peasant. Rick walked me in and went through checking in our bags.

As we prepared to enter the security line, he hugged all the girls and saved me for last.

“Don’t forget,” he reminded me. “Text us when you get there.” I quickly nodded and before I managed to walk away from him, he pulled me back. “I know you’re hoping I forgot about our discussion. I don’t like the fucker, but he has a right to know.”

Ugh, stubborn ass.

“Tell him,” he demanded.

“Fine,” I mumbled with an exasperated breath. I reached out for my phone and started typing. *Type. Erase. Type. Erase. Type.*

***\*Dear Kristoff,***

***I’m pregnant. Having twins.***

***I don’t want to work for you anymore.***

***I’m going on a summer vacation.***

***I’ll be in touch before I give birth.***

***Take care,***

***Genevieve”***

“Here,” I showed him the text as I pressed the send button.

“Real mature,” he grumbled.

“I am sick and tired of being the mature one,” I snapped in a hiss. “And he’s mature, huh?”

“Maybe you’re both immature and blind,” Rick said, annoyed.

“Want me to send the text or not?”

“Yes.”

I pressed the send button, the sound of the text leaving my network and making my connection to Kristoff permanent.

“Happy now?”

“Yep,” replied simply. “You’ll thank me one day.”

“Mmhmm.” I hugged him one more time and kissed him on the cheek.  
“I’ll see you, Betty, and the boys soon.”

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## CHAPTER 64

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# KRISTOFF

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## TWO WEEKS LATER



I miscalculated. Misjudged. Bottom line, I fucked up.

Staring at the text message, I was left hollow. *Empty*. For a week straight, I'd gone back to the message and read it again and again.

*Pregnant. Twins. Left.*

My gut wrenched. My chest cracked.

I pushed her too hard and wanted too much. My jealousy. My fucked-up, arrogant ways. My temper. My blind jealousy. I fought so hard to keep her and lost her anyway.

After that text, I drove to her house to find it fucking empty. I called her. Over and over again. I had private investigators looking for her. Her house in Croatia, the one she let my mother use. *Nothing*. The town where she lived with her parents. *Nothing*. I even went after Rick and Betty, until those two disappeared too. They landed in Zagreb and then fucking nothing.

The day she walked out my door replayed over and over again. Every look. Every word.

She'd said goodbye that day. Except I was too stupid to hear it.

I recalled the way her dark eyes flashed with hurt when she entered through my office door to find me with Sailor McHale, the reporter who offered to help wipe out some of the data from more reputable sources. She was Byron's friend who offered to help with her news company. Nico Morrelli had issues clearing their data.

I needed her help. For Gemma's sake. For her girls.

Though the fucking ass I was, I wanted Gemma to taste jealousy. I wanted her to know how I felt to see her with Rick. It backfired. There was

not an ounce of jealousy in her whiskey gaze. Just the faint light of hope leaving her eyes.

*She left me.*

The knowledge sliced through me like a razor. Of course, my gut feeling warned me she was about to make a move. Not only because of her fucking text message she sent me the night I punched her best friend. But because she left the keys of the car I bought her on her desk. Because no other personal belongings were left on it. And then of course, Gemma's resignation letter that came from an untraceable IP.

I closed my eyes, letting shadows overtake me. They had won. Fucking Jacqueline had won. I put my ex's sins on Gemma and now I'd lost her. It didn't matter that Jacqueline had so many lawsuits, it'd take her five lifetimes to settle it. It didn't matter that she had been cast out of society for what she'd done.

Without Gemma by my side, none of it mattered.

I leaned back in my chair, irritation coiling in my stomach. A vein throbbed in my temple. Memories of the last time I had Gemma with me in this very plane laughed at me. It was where I gave her the first taste of my jealousy over her best friend.

She didn't take any shit back then either.

My heart twisted into a knot, imagining her alone in Croatia. I should be there with her. Be there for her.

Dread uncoiled in the pit of my stomach.

*What if something happens to her? And our babies.* All because I was being a stupid fucking ass.

I reached for the phone, ready to dial Nico Morrelli, and offer him every single building in D.C. just so he could track her down. I didn't give a shit what the mobster wanted. Whatever he wanted, it'd be his.

My phone rang at that moment. Unknown number.

"Hello," I gritted out.

"Hello, old pal." I recognized the voice of my ex best friend. Jonathan.

"I don't have time for your bullshit."

"You might want to reconsider." He sounded awfully smug. Fucker.

"Reconsidered. I still have no time for your bullshit."

My finger was on the end call button. "I know where Gemma is."

My hand stilled and I stiffened. How in the fuck would he know where she was?

“Where?” Anger boiled beneath my skin. If he went after her, I’d tear him apart. Consequences be damned.

“I’ll tell you, but I want your word,” he started. I waited for him to set his terms. I didn’t care what they were, he’d get them. But there was no need for him to know it.

“Go after Jacqueline, but keep my son and my company out of it.”

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

“Deal.”

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## CHAPTER 65

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# GENEVIEVE



The little village of Brsečine on the Dalmatian Coast in Croatia was where I found myself.

The old stone dwelling gave off dreamy vibes and the dwelling held so much history.

A decade ago, I fell in love with the 16th century old stone villa, which was a summer residence to a celebrated local Renaissance artist, situated in a valley-like spot on the way to Dubrovnik. The house had thirteen bedrooms, some inhabitable currently. Eventually it'd be ridiculously too large for our family, but I clung to this dream of one day having a large family and having reunions with all the people I cared about and loved.

And then there was the dream of turning it into a small beach rental with an exit right to the beach and a magnificent terrace with a view of the sea. The beautiful courtyard reminded me of the story about Romeo and Juliet. The whole place just had so much character. From almost any point in the house or the yard, you could see the Adriatic Sea stretched for miles and a protected beach in a secluded and quiet bay. Although a large and famous city was close by, you'd think you were all alone in the world. The little village had very few inhabitants.

The house was in bad shape when I bought it so it was almost a steal. The big benefit was its clear title, in a corporation name that was established just for the purchase of that home. Untraceable, unless you knew I had set it up. It was perfect. Except, it had been undergoing renovation for the past ten years. My little pet project whenever I could afford it from the moment I laid eyes on it. As the years went on, the villa was slowly getting back to its original state. It started looking more and

more like the beautiful villa that it was back in the 16th century. Jack wanted nothing to do with coming to Croatia so I never told him about this place and bought it secretly.

This would be our first time sleeping in this house. Usually we always stayed at the small house I inherited from my parents. It was the very same house I offered to Kristoff's mother.

I laid awake in my bed, with the door to the terrace open. The sound of the waves crashed against the rocky beach. The light summer breeze smelled of salt water and it swept through the open terrace door soothing my broken heart.

I laid my hand over my lower belly, I slowly drifted off to sleep with Kristoff on my mind. It was the same every night. Every morning. Every day. Every breath, it was always Kristoff on my mind, wreaking havoc on my fragile heart.

Nights were torturous. I tempered my yearning and desire for my ex-boss during the days, but nights were quite simply hell. My mind replayed every single moment with Kristoff - every kiss, every hug, every touch, every word. I missed his smell, his hard body against mine, his stare and those rare smiles. He plagued my every dream and I'd wake up, then run a hand across the side of the bed where he'd be sleeping and an intense yearning swelled in my chest. Then I'd lay in bed in the dark, listening to the steady sound of waves. I'd think back to the day I met Kristoff. That first damned interview. He swept me off my feet from that very moment.

He'd soon become a memory, another lifetime, another me. Except, with the twins, our lives would forever be intertwined. Emotion clogged my throat. It was inevitable that I'd have to see him eventually. Although I didn't think I could bear it.

Rick, Betty, and the boys settled in habitable rooms and our summer days were filled with laughter. My bank account after Kristoff's general bonus payout was healthy and large enough to keep us comfortable for a very long time, even by U.S. standards.

Inhaling deep, fresh sea air entered my lungs, but I missed the scent of a very specific cologne. The hard body pressed against mine. I needed this constant ache in my chest to go away.

*Call and hang up. Just to hear his voice.*

"Don't be stupid," I said out loud to the dark ceiling. "That's so high school."

Besides, I kept my cell phone turned off the entire time and got a local burner phone. Pretty clever, if you asked me. Of course nobody did. I just knew that I'd meet up with Kristoff on my own terms.

Not his. Never again, his.

---

THE MORNING CAME TOO SOON.

We spent the day being lazy, hanging out on the beach. Sienna was at the point where she counted the hours until Kai would arrive. Yes, I was quite a modern mamma allowing my daughter's boyfriend to tag along. Even his father. Especially considering who they were.

Jonathan swore on his child's life that he had nothing to do with the scandal. His relationship with his wife was distant and strained. He and his son lived in a separate household from Jacqueline.

I sat at the table on the upper terrace, never growing tired of the unobstructed sea view while Betty and Rick still hung out at the beach with the children.

I glanced down at my phone. It was always turned off. Not that Kristoff could call me even if it was turned on. I blocked his number after sending him the most important text message of my life. It was immature and my only excuse was that I really needed this summer to get over him. I had to get him out of my mind and heart.

Staring out at the sea, my thoughts traveled across the ocean to the man that invaded my dreams. The man who probably paced his large office in the fancy building of W&W, dealing with the powerful, ruthless, and rich. I could picture him, standing in his expensive tailored suit, in his office, straight and tall, looking like a million dollars.

God, how I missed him! His smell. His deep green eyes and how they darkened in the throes of climax. I missed his touch, and those few little tender moments we'd had.

At this moment, with the sea breeze in my hair, I could convince myself he was just a faraway dream. But then, on the other hand, it was as if I just felt his touch yesterday.

*You felt his touch in your dreams, you dolt!*

My hand rubbed my little bump. I started to show, especially in a bathing suit. Although it could easily be mistaken for a little belly fat. Good thing it was a perfect season for loose and light summer dresses that covered my little bump perfectly.

The part that worried me was how to explain this to my girls. They'd been frequently asking about Kristoff, but I'd just brush off their questions. I told them he had a company to run and lots of work. This was a perfect example why I should have kept my distance.

Lines became blurred. Hearts got broken. And life got so much more complicated.

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## CHAPTER 66

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# GENEVIEVE



Kai and his father arrived.

Sienna ran past all of us and threw herself into Kai's arms like she hadn't seen him in a year. I couldn't quite decide whether to cry or roll my eyes. *Cursed hormones.*

I strode out of the courtyard behind her, approaching Jonathan.

"Hello Gemma," he greeted me with a wide smile.

"Welcome," I smiled back. "How was your trip? You must be tired."

"Trip was good but long," he replied. "Quite a hideout you have here."

I glanced over to Sienna and Kai who looked like two lovebirds in heaven. Young love had never looked so naive and romantic. Geez, I wasn't quite sure whether I was ready for this.

*Ready or not, it's coming.*

Jonathan's chuckle pulled me back. "Makes me kind of feel old," he commented.

"Agreed," I muttered. I hoped my daughter's love story would go better than my own. *And make it platonic*, I added mentally. "I'm not ready for my daughter to seriously date," I countered.

"I understand that completely," he replied. Silence followed, lingering thick in the air. It wasn't uncomfortable silence, yet it wasn't exactly a comfortable one.

"Gemma, I've been meaning to apologize."

I tilted my head, my eyes locking on him. "About?"

"The way Jacqueline treated you. I wasn't much better." I waved my hand, but he continued, "It wasn't right. Kristoff and I used to be best

friends. Jacqueline destroyed that, but even more, she managed to make my life hell and extremely difficult for our son.”

Somehow I wasn’t surprised and I felt sorry for Kai the most in this situation. “You probably wonder why I stayed with Jacqueline. We have an agreement to do it for Kai, until he goes off to college.”

“Maybe Kai would be better off without such a strained parental relationship.” Although who was I to judge him? I stayed with Jack when I knew I should have left.

“I’m starting to think that,” he agreed. “You know, I envy Kristoff.” I frowned, confusion clear on my face. “The way he looks at you, I have never looked like that at my wife. He cares about you a lot.”

Pain slashed through me. He was wrong, but I didn’t bother disagreeing with him. It was a moot point. Besides, it was something between Kristoff and me, and nobody else.

My expression must have been telling of my feelings, because he changed the subject.

“This place is amazing.”

I turned to gaze at the little old villa as we walked towards the courtyard. “It’s pretty cool, right?” I commented proudly. “I fell in love with it as soon as I saw it.”

“That view,” he agreed. “Everything about this place is perfect.”

“My happy place,” I whispered, the images of big gatherings with people I loved around me. “C’mon, let me show you to your room so you can get situated. I hope you’ll be ok with sharing it. It’s large enough for the two of you to share. The view from it is great, but none of us spend a lot of time inside.”

---

LOCAL FOLK MUSIC played softly from the terrace radio.

It was hot, but the steady breeze off the sea made the temperatures comfortable. Soft lights hung off the pergola, hidden among the grape vines, giving it a romantic atmosphere.

Low chatter, laughter, and the scraping of silverware filled the terrace. Everyone seemed to be having a great time. Jonathan and Rick got into a lively discussion about football. Sienna and Kai talked about music and the



caves around here they planned to explore, the children entertained themselves with games and stones, while Betty and I talked about the upcoming school year.

"I want to stay here forever," Betty sighed, drinking a sip of wine. "Everything's better here. Food, beaches, water, wine. Everything!"

My eyes twinkled. "I told you, we could always make this a bed and breakfast and run it together. As long as I'm not cooking, we'll succeed."

"Was that the reason you got this place?" Jonathan joined our conversation.

I shook my head. "Truthfully, no. I fell in love with it, saw potential, and the price was a bargain." I spread my hands wide. "And here we are."

"Come for R&R at the Happy Place," Betty teased. "It kind of rhymes."

I chuckled. "It does. We'd be here all year, eating good food. Kids can run around, maybe help with a cow or two."

Betty choked on her wine. "Wait. What? Where are the cows?"

I couldn't resist teasing her. "Somewhere in the field," I continued. "They could go fetch them, bring them to the barn." I pointed to the opposite side of the cove. "That's the barn. Milk them, pasteurize the milk, and voilà. Fresh milk."

My grin ruined it all. "You're messing with me," she grumbled.

"Or you come and work for me, Gemma," Jonathan chimed in. "Seems easier than milking cows."

"Have you tried?" I questioned him. He shook his head. "Yeah, me neither," I admitted laughing.

"I'm serious about working for me," Jonathan tried again. "We wanted you on our team before and the hiring process was interrupted. But if you want it, we're ready to proceed."

I drank a sip of my water. "Thank you, but I'll pass for now." Thanks to a generous bonus from my last boss.

"But," Rick jumped in. "It's not bad to know it's on the table for you, Gem. Especially now since you resigned and with the babies on the way."

The tension was louder than the waves crashing against the shoreline. Betty and Rick cast me cautious glances, while Sienna's eyes widened. Now, I'd have to explain something I wasn't ready for. God, I didn't even know where or how to start.

Thankfully, Sienna returned her gaze to Kai, resuming their conversation about music. If I knew my daughter, and I did, she'd let me

come to her on my own terms and explain. Because she wanted the same.

Being grown up just sucked sometimes.

My eyes skimmed up an inch to find Jonathan's gaze on me and his face expressionless. Maybe he didn't hear it.

"You're pregnant?" *And hope was gone!*

"Yes," I replied. *Short and sweet, right!* Hopefully, it was also curt so he wouldn't ask any other questions.

His eyes pensive, he rubbed his jaw and muttered, "Son of a bitch."

I had no idea what he meant and I wasn't about to ask.

For the remainder of the evening, we pretended my pregnancy was never brought up.

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## CHAPTER 67

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# KRISTOFF



“You can do it.” Sophie’s voice traveled through the closed door of the hospital room, mixing with whimpers, cries and the shuffling of efficient nurses as they prepared for the delivery of a newborn.

I’ve never witnessed the delivery of a newborn. Never imagined I’d have a chance. Yet now, fatherhood was within my reach, but the fear that inched itself into my chest the moment I read that message refused to subside. What if I had lost her?

The weeks following Gemma’s last text were hell. I’d called her so many times that I’d be easily labeled a stalker. I thought about her every second of the day and night. I swore I could smell her perfume - on me, in my home, in my car. I lost my shit with the driver when he had the vehicle cleaned. Because her perfume faded.

*She left me.*

I fucking blew it but I refused to accept defeat. I would find her. I’d make it right and show her how much I fucking loved her. Our babies. Her girls and the twins - they were all ours.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled to her last text.

**\*DEAR KRISTOFF,**

***I’m pregnant. Having twins.***

***I don’t want to work for you anymore.***

***I’m going on a summer vacation.***

***I’ll be in touch before I give birth.***

*Take care,  
Genevieve”*

I PUSHED my hand through my hair for the hundredth time. In my entire life I kept my composure. I kept my cool in combat, in a multi-billion dollar acquisition. I didn't lose my shit when I caught Jacqueline in bed with my best friend. I beat the crap out of Jonathan, but I was *always* in control.

Until I met Gemma.

Fuck, I wanted her. Just her and our family. I fucked up and wanted to make it right. For her. For our kids. For us.

*Our kids.* It still sounded too un-fucking-real. It was hard to believe that I'd get so goddamn lucky. I didn't deserve it; I knew I didn't. Yet. I'd cherish it forever. I refused to let this chance slip through my fingers. To have Gemma as mine forever and our family. I'd be hers - fuck, I was already hers.

I finally had her location. After I had multiple investigators searching for her, the information with her location came from the most unlikely place. My ex-best friend.

A baby's scream pulled me out of my thoughts and the sound was as thrilling as it was terrifying. I had only one shot at this. I had to get it right - show Gemma I'd be good to her and our children.

“Well, well, well,” Sophie drawled. “Who have we got here? My cousin actually found his way to my hospital.”

I rose to my feet, towering over my red-haired cousin. Sophie was Gemma's age, but it was her bossy personality that made her appear older and had men running scared.

“How is my favorite cousin?” I asked her, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“I'm your only cousin,” she snickered.

“And there's that,” I drawled.

“What are you doing here Kristoff?” she asked. “You have all my nurses in a frenzy. I told you not to come to my hospital and distract the nurses. I'll have to treat ‘drool’ all afternoon.”

I shrugged. “Can't I visit my favorite cousin?”

“Of course you can. But considering I see you once every few months and I only saw you last month, this is a bit unusual.”

“I need your help.” I might as well get right to the point. I’d beg on my fucking knees if need be. Gemma was worth it.

Sophie’s eyes filled with surprise and her mouth parted.

“Sure,” she answered quickly. “You never ask for help so this must be important.”

“Very important,” I assured her.

She waited for me to continue, and when I didn’t, impatience flickered across her expression. “Can you elaborate?”

“I need you to come to Croatia with me,” I demanded.

Her brows furrowed. “Like a vacation?” She shook her head. “I can’t go on vacation now. And what the fuck? You bother me at work just to demand I go on vacation with you?”

I rolled my eyes. She had a knack for theatrics sometimes.

“There is a woman I need to find,” I clarified. “And she’s in Croatia.”

It was her turn to roll her eyes. “What does that have to do with me? And why are you looking for her?”

“She’s pregnant,” I said, unwilling to explain further. Though when Sophie gave me a blank look, I added, “The babies are mine.”

“Babies?”

“Yes, twins.”

Sophie’s eyes narrowed into two slits. “I get the sense you are not telling me something important. I won’t be strutting around Croatia while you hunt for some woman. Pregnant or not.”

I groaned inwardly. Sophie could sometimes be too much.

“There’s nothing else you need to know,” I assured her.

“Yeah, right,” she snickered. “I know how stubborn you are. You never make any exceptions for women.”

“For her I would,” I grumbled, annoyed at her observation.

“How many exceptions would you make for her?” she demanded to know.

“As many as needed. All of them. She is my *exception*.”

“So corny.” She rolled her eyes. “You can’t muscle me into doing what you want done, Kristoff,” she warned, but then I knew that already. She was the biggest pain in my ass when she wanted to be.

“She left me,” I admitted. But I’d get her back, even if I had to spend the rest of my life proving to her every day that I could do better. No more

contracts. No more jealousy. Okay, that might remain but I'd keep a tight rein on it.

"No woman ever leaves you," she remarked. "Why did she leave you?"

"I punched her best friend."

She blinked, then blinked again.

"Are you nuts?" she hissed under my breath. "You can't go around punching girls."

"It's a guy," I grumbled. I'd have to be okay with Rick being her best friend. Both him and his corny wife. But now I knew she was mine, she'd have my babies and I'd make it all up to her.

"Do this for me, Sophie." I worried about Gemma. The medical records outlining her issues plagued me and had me googling medical phrases day and night. "She's been diagnosed with cervix issues and I need an Ob/Gyn on standby in Croatia. Only until I convince her to come back."

She would come back. I'd prove to her that I'd be a better man. For her. For our kids - all five of them.

"How long? I have a job," I told him. "I can't go scouting through Croatia in search of your love interest and then caring for her while she considers whether she wants to come back."

My lip quirked. "I'll buy the hospital and put you on indefinite leave."

"It better be a paid leave," she retorted dryly.

"Of course," I agreed.

"So what's your plan with this woman? Kidnap her?"

"Hmmm, that's not a bad idea," I muttered. "But no. I already blackmailed her into taking a job. This time, I'll just convince her."

My cousin scoffed, shaking her head in disbelief. "Jesus, you're too much. And I like her already for leaving you." I narrowed my eyes, warning her. She just waved her hand, completely unperturbed. "What's her name?"

"Genevieve Rose." Fuck, I missed the woman. Her soft brown eyes. Her scent. Her soft voice and smiles. "I'm going to beg her for forgiveness, and I'll prove to her I'll be a better man until she agrees to come home with me."

"And if she doesn't?" It was a possibility.

"Then I'll stay there," I told her. "Help her raise our children. Help her with the girls. Anything she'll let me do."

"You're whipped."

She had no idea how whipped I was. I didn't give a fuck; I'd take any crumbs she'd give me because without her, life was hell.

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## CHAPTER 68

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# GENEVIEVE



The slight breeze coming off the sea felt great on my skin. We spent so much time outside, all of us sported a tan. I could never get tired of this view, the smell of the sea. It was unlike anywhere else in the world. Heaven in the tiny village, off the beaten path. And it was all mine.

The atmosphere was comfortable and lazy. The water was cool against our sun-heated skin. Nights might have been a torture for me, but at least the days were filled with sunshine and were good for the soul.

Sienna and Kai swam away to one of the caves, hidden by rocky cliffs. We discovered it within a few days of arriving and she staked her claim, checking on it every day. Kai humored her and went with her daily.

Wearing a one piece strapless black and white bathing suit and a large white straw sun hat and sunglasses protecting my eyes, I sat on the pebbled beach, my feet in the crystal blue water. I gazed over the horizon, the warm sunshine on my face, and frowned again. A black luxury yacht way out in the sea obstructed my magnificent view. The damn boat screamed money and power, blocking my exquisite view, and I detested it.

Only a few feet away from me, Betty sunbathed on her beach towel. She hadn't said anything in a while and I suspected she'd dozed off. We had gotten lazy; it was Croatia for you.

My girls and her boys played in the shallow water, building a rock castle and giggling each time the waves crashed through the castle. Honestly, I'd be pissed because I took it as a metaphorical destruction of life.

Jonathan and Rick sat with me, one on each side. They seemed relaxed, but I almost wished they'd go and explore, get a drink or anything. Ever

since the pregnancy bomb was dropped, Jonathan constantly fretted over me. Rick wasn't much better. They were both getting on my nerves. Betty picked up on it pretty quick. Probably the reason she thought it was better to take a nap.

"I wish that damn yacht would go away," I said to nobody in particular.

"That's a pretty cool yacht," Rick commented back. "I think it's one of the Benetti yachts. Probably worth more than forty million."

"I don't give a crap whose yacht it is or how much it's worth," I grumbled annoyed. "It's ruining my view."

"Okaaaay." Rick chuckled wholeheartedly. "Someone's in a bad mood. I don't want to make a pregnant lady grouchy."

"Don't pay attention to him," Jonathan interrupted, smiling, trying to help the situation. "I didn't notice you being grouchy at all."

"Thank you, Jonathan," I replied graciously. "At least someone knows how not to agitate the pregnant lady."

Then shot an annoyed glare at Rick. "I think I'll go build castles with the kids," he teased, as he rose to his full height. "I don't want to get my name on the shit list today."

I rolled my eyes behind sunglasses, glanced away from him and back to the sea, as if my stare would make that damn yacht move out of my sight.

Uncomfortable silence fell over us and my thoughts drifted to Kristoff's ex-wife and Jonathan, wondering about those two. He seemed so nice that I had a hard time imagining why he'd go after someone else's wife.

As if he read my thoughts, he offered his explanation. "I never intended to seduce Jacqueline. I have regretted that night ever since. Kristoff's and my friendship was ruined because of it and it is something I have sorely missed."

"You could try to call him and explain," I suggested. "Maybe after all these years, you two could get past it."

I could understand how difficult it would be to lose a close friendship, thinking back to Rick and Betty.

"Maybe," was all he mumbled, lost in his thoughts.

I got up to go sit on the towel next to Betty, leaving Jonathan to his thoughts.

I lightly tapped her on the shoulder. No movement. She was completely out. I laid back, supporting my upper body on my elbows and continued to stare out into the sea with the goddamn black yacht.

Inhaling deeply, I scolded myself at my snippiness. Maybe a nap was in order. I felt exhausted. Kristoff kept plaguing my dreams and some nights they felt so real, I'd have sworn I felt his hands all over me. His length inside of me. No matter what I did or tried, I couldn't get rid of this craving for him. I woke up with my heart racing and my desire burning for him. I thought about him as I reached down my nightgown, brushing my finger lightly over my clit and I had to bite my bottom lip to stop the moan from escaping me. I was so turned on I had to dig out my vibrator but the satisfaction wasn't nearly the same.

My burner phone rang, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Hello?" I spoke into it, my voice raspy from thinking about what I did last night while thinking about Kristoff.

"Hello, Gemma." A woman's voice greeted me. "It's Lena, Lena Baldwin." I froze. It was Kristoff's mother. How did she get this number?

I swallowed hard. "Hi there." I perspired, my imagination kicking into overdrive as I glanced around me. "Umm, how did you get this number?"

"I have my ways," she said softly. "But I didn't share it with my son, I promise."

Okay, this was a bit odd. "It's nice to hear your voice," I remarked.

She chuckled. "I'm relieved to hear you say that," she replied. "I was worried you'd hang up or not want to talk to me."

I laughed uncomfortably. "I wouldn't do that. How are you?"

"I'm well," she mused. "My gang wants to see you again and thank you for letting us use your place in Croatia. We had such a great time!"

"I'm so glad." Remembering the photos they texted me, I couldn't help a soft chuckle. "Thank you for sending me pictures. They made me laugh."

An uncomfortable silence followed.

"I hope we'll see you soon," Lena added.

I wondered whether Kristoff told her about the pregnancy. Once the twins were born, they would connect me to Kristoff and his mother forever. I wouldn't keep the twins away from them, but to keep my sanity, I'd keep my distance. Somehow - because seeing Kristoff with another woman week in and week out would slowly kill me.

"Gemma, are you there?" Lena's voice shook.

"Yes," I answered quickly. "I'm sorry, my thoughts wandered off. Hope we see you soon too. We are spending summer away but maybe in the fall."

"Kristoff told me you're expecting twins," she hesitantly stated.

*And there was my answer.*

“Yes.

A slight pause, and then she started, “I know he can be stubborn and difficult. I hope,” her voice trembled as she continued. “...whatever happens, you two will work it out. And if you don’t, I beg you. Let me be a part of your life and my grandchildren’s lives.”

Thick emotions filled my chest. These damn hormones would be the death of me.

“Lena, you don’t even have to ask,” I rasped into the phone, feeling a bit emotional myself. My pregnancy hormones made my emotions dance all over the place. “I won’t keep you nor Kristoff from the twins. I promise.”

I heard sniffles over the phone. “Thank you so much. It’s a dream come true.” At least someone agrees. “I love them already.”

“As soon as we’re back,” I promised her. “I’ll give you a call. We just needed this summer away.”

*Before I have to face reality and Kristoff,* I thought.

“I understand,” she replied. “I have a good feeling. I can’t wait to see you all. How are your beautiful girls?” she asked.

We chatted a bit longer. She gave me feedback on all the plants, talked about her gang, and I smiled asking questions. If nothing else, I knew the twins were going to have an amazing grandmother.

I hung up and looked out into the sea. The black yacht was still there. I really couldn’t understand why it didn’t continue further south.

I glanced at Betty and debated whether to wake her up. I leaned over and tapped her gently on the shoulders. When she didn’t move, I tried again with a bit more force.

“Hmmm,” she mumbled. “What?”

“You’ll burn if you don’t at least turn over,” I warned her.

She turned over and rubbed her eyes. “I would die happily just having days like this.” Her voice was lazy and relaxed.

I chuckled at her. “Yes, this puts life into perspective, doesn’t it.”

“Yes, it sure does.”

“I have some work to do around the house. Maybe a catnap so I can be in a better mood.” My guests wouldn’t be safe as the day went on and I got no sleep. “You want to stay on the beach?” I asked her.

“No, I’ll go back with you. I can get the kids ready and maybe we can go get ice cream while you do your thing. Unless there is something I can

help with?”

“Nope, I got it.”

Naptime it was. After all, this mamma needed her beauty sleep.

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## CHAPTER 69

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



I returned from the beach to find my patio, terrace and first floor of my home filled with a boatload of flowers.

Standing in the middle of an indoor jungle, I stared at it all. The air smelled of flowers and the salty sea breeze. It was a Mediterranean climate in turbo mode.

“What the hell happened here?” I muttered under my breath, then glanced around again. But there was nobody around. I stood on the upper terrace and my eyes drifted to the sea. The large yacht, reminding me of the devil’s transport, still floated, waves crashing against it.

Shaking my head, I returned my attention to the problem at hand. Getting rid of this mess. Whoever had the bright idea of doing this took every single empty space with these plants. Someone must hate me because now, instead of taking a nap, I’d have to clean this jungle.

“Murder in the near future,” I grumbled under my breath as I started gathering the plants and moving them around. Some I put outside the courtyard to welcome people as they came in, others by the beach, fully aware they’d probably die of heatstroke.

“Sorry, I’m running out of space,” I mumbled as I lifted the big pot. “Blame whoever had the stupid idea of doing this.”

“What the hell are you doing, Gem?” Rick’s voice behind me startled me so bad that I dropped the pot.

“Can’t you announce your presence?” I held on to my chest, my heart beating hard. “You scared the daylights out of me.”

“What are you doing?” he yelled. He ignored my outburst.

*Maybe I’ll murder Rick first, I mused.*



“I’m moving these damn flowers around,” I answered him with a raised brow. “And why are you yelling? I haven’t lost my hearing yet.”

“You can’t do that in your condition,” he protested.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m pregnant, not disabled,” I told him. “Besides, some idiot had the bright idea of creating a jungle in my outdoor space. Did you want to eat dinner with plants in your face?”

“Who sent them?” Rick inquired curiously.

I shrugged. “No card. I thought it was either your or Jonathan’s idea of a joke.”

They both shook their heads, flabbergasted expressions on their faces. “I wouldn’t send you flowers,” Jonathan grumbled. “I don’t need to experience the wrath of a former special forces team member.”

Huh?

He didn’t elaborate and got to moving the plants around.

With an aching back, I lowered myself down into the seat watching the sun lower over the horizon, sun rays reflecting off the surface. The black yacht anchored amidst the peaceful cove shone like a black diamond in paradise sure to bring trouble.

I narrowed my eyes at the hideous sight. It had to be a mode of transport for Hades.

“Where do you want this cactus?” Rick grumbled.

“Desert?” I asked dryly. He didn’t find it amusing, so I pointed to the opposite side of the terrace. “By the way, it’s not a cactus. It’s Bear’s Breeches. *Acanthus balcanicus* in Latin.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

I got to boss them around for the next few hours. I even snuck in a shower and changed into a strapless green dress, its soft material brushing against my skin lightly. As if I wasn’t wearing anything at all. I left my feet bare, enjoying the cool marble under my feet.

The atmosphere was relaxing, the soothing sounds of the constant lapping of the waves against the shore slowly seeping into my soul.

A warm breeze drifted in off the sea and I closed my eyes, enjoying the soft caress across my skin. Kristoff haunted my thoughts, day and night, constant like the flow of the rivers. I wondered what he was doing right now. Whether I crossed his mind, or if he’d be happy about this pregnancy. I rubbed my belly absentmindedly, hoping he wouldn’t hold this surprise pregnancy against the twins.

God, from all the miracles, this had to be the most amazing one. No matter what, I'd have a small piece of that man in our babies. I stole it, although unintentionally. I just wished-

I stopped the wishing and put my left hand behind my neck trying to ease the tension, my eyes closed and the sounds of everyone faded into the background.

In my whole life, I had never felt anything so strong for a man. It took Kristoff's blackmail to learn that this kind of love was the kind that came once in a lifetime. It was what my parents had, except theirs was a mutual kind of love.

And ours?

I wasn't entirely sure what ours was. I loved him; he didn't love me back. Simple as that; or complicated as that. Fluttering in my belly had me smiling, despite my situation. By my calculation, I'd gotten pregnant the very first time Kristoff and I had sex. Somehow it seemed fitting for the obsessive man.

"Where do you want this one?" Rick's voice pierced through my thoughts and I opened my eyes to find him standing and trying to balance a large plant in his arms.

My eyes roamed the patio and I found the empty spot for it, then pointed to it. Just as Rick set it down, the squealing brakes of a truck pulling in front of the gate caught my attention. I followed the movement and like a nosy neighbor wondered what came in for them. Because I hadn't ordered anything.

The slamming of the doors and a hot Italian dude exited the truck, wearing a white t-shirt and black shorts.

"Jesus, did he just step off the runway?" I muttered. *Too bad he's too young for me.*

Staring, unashamed, as he sauntered around the vehicle to the passenger door, he opened it and grabbed a tower of boxes. I grinned, watching him balance it all in his arms, his muscles bulging.

"Jesus, is he for real?" Betty showed up out of nowhere. "I'm drooling." I snickered. When wasn't she drooling? "I think you might be too. And you have hearts in your eyes."

I rolled my eyes. "You mean cougar eyes. The kid is at least ten years younger."

"But the stamina," she panted. "And the Italian in him. A stallion."

I cringed. “And the moment is gone. Stallions just don’t do it for me.”

“Signorina Rose.” Both of us jumped, as if we’ve been caught red handed. Our heads whirled around to find *the stallion* in front of us. “Bella Rose.”

I blushed and the afternoon heat had nothing to do with it. He smiled and my blush turned into a hot sensation. Hormones getting out of hand. I had to find a better vibrator. The handsome Italian took my hand and kissed the top of it. While his head was bent over my knuckles, I passed a wide-eyed glance to Betty who was fanning herself.

“I have gifts for you,” the Italian boy announced as he straightened up.

A hot sensation trailed down my spine, like an itch in the back of my neck, and I glanced around in search for something that would cause it. It couldn’t be this dude. Right?

“Ummm.” I couldn’t find the words.

He placed the boxes on the nearby table and opened the first one. “To start the night with a dessert.” The words shot something languid through my veins. “And diamonds for the rare beauty.”

“Jesus Christ,” Rick muttered. “What the fuck is going on? Is he proposing?”

He handed me a large velvet box. I hesitated and Betty nudged me with her shoulders.

Reaching out, I took it, murmuring a soft, “Thanks.”

Then I opened it and gasps sounded around while the buzzing in my ears faded everything to white noise. In my hand, I held the most gorgeous diamond choker necklace.

“Holy mother of God,” Betty rasped. “I have a feeling those are real.”

My fingers trembled as I lifted a single satin card. *Wear this for me. Please.*

I dropped the box, my eyes frantically searching around. He was here. Nobody else had ever said those words to me.

Betty rushed to kneel down and pick up the velvet box. The Italian guy pretended my reaction was the most natural thing ever as he reached for the next box.

I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

The hot bastard ignored me and pretty much shoved the next box into my hands. As if in a daze, I opened it. A tiara that dazzled with diamonds almost blinded me. I snapped the box shut.

“Take it all back,” I demanded, my heart racing in my chest. Kristoff sent gifts. He didn’t need to sign the cards. His name was all over it. Oh my gosh, he knew where I was.

He shook his head. “Mi dispiace.” He was sorry? “You must take all.”

I pushed the boxes his way. Before he had a chance to do anything, Betty grabbed them. “Not to worry, pretty boy,” she announced. “We’ll take it.”

I groaned, while the pretty boy happily dropped the boxes on the table and left us behind like dust in the wind.

“He wasn’t *that* good looking,” I said, suddenly feeling fatigued and crankier than before I came back home.

I lowered myself on the closest chair. Someone turned on the stereo and the soft Dean Martin tune “That’s Amore” played over the speakers. The atmosphere felt romantic, Italian and-

Well, it would be perfect if a certain billionaire with an emerald green gaze shared the moment with me. God, the man had ruined me for anyone. He ruined me, period. He had awakened a part of me and there was no turning back from it. A loving husband shouldn’t be too much to ask for. Yes, there’d be hard days but just as with my parents, as long as we were together, we’d be able to handle it all.

I walked over to the medieval stone wall surrounding the terrace admiring the sunset colors reflecting on the surface of the sea. The same large multi-million dollar yacht docked in our little bay dominated the cover. I was surprised it was still there. Usually yachts like that didn’t visit this old fishing village. They all went south towards Dubrovnik or further north towards Pula. On my way back from the beach I heard the locals, a whopping one hundred of them, speculating who it could be. Guesses ranged from Saudi Arabian princes, the Croatian president, to the U.S. president.

I narrowed my eyes on it. Could it be-

Shifting I caught Jonathan looking over the horizon. I followed his gaze to the yacht, his brows slightly furrowed.

“Locals have been speculating all afternoon who it belongs to,” I remarked, keeping my eyes on the horizon too. “I think the latest guess was that it belongs to the U.S. President. What’s your guess?”

He made a small noise of amusement. “I couldn’t even begin to guess.” His jaw ticked in thought, then he met my eyes again. “Want to dance?”

I blinked at the abrupt topic change, glancing around.

“Now?” I asked. “The song’s about to end.” And as if on cue, the music ended but before I could say ‘told you so’, it changed and Lana Del Rey “Love” came on.

“Nothing beats going from Dean Martin to Lana Del Rey.”

He extended his hand and I lingered for a bit, before placing my hand into his. With the slow tune humming on the radio, I followed his lead, laying my arm on his shoulder, moving my body with him.

“You’re a good dancer,” he flattered. “Light to lead.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I retorted back but before I could say another thing, he twirled me away from him. He paused suddenly, causing me to stumble into his chest.

“So much for a smooth dancer,” I teased, taking a step back.

His son whistled in encouragement. “Did he step on your feet, Miss Rose?” Kai joked. “My dad has two left feet.”

I chuckled. “I have two right.”

“My fault,” Jonathan said. He resumed swaying, our steps slow. “So when are you planning on going back?”

I shrugged my bare, golden shoulder. “When I feel like it.”

The truth was I’d have to be back before the school year started. I felt like I was on borrowed time. So many things would have to be resolved. The twin’s room, baby clothes, girls’ school clothes and school supplies, infant care, schedule, arrangements with Kristoff.

God, that last one just gutted me in all the wrong ways.

## CHAPTER 70

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# GENEVIEVE



We danced in silence until the song ended when Rick stepped in.  
“Can I cut in?”

“You already have,” Jonathan grumbled.

I just chuckled and took Rick’s hand just as Daughtry’s song “September” came on. “Not exactly a dance song.”

“That’s ok,” he told me, putting his arms around me. “We can just slow dance.”

Our bodies in sync, we danced slowly, just as we did back in our college years. So much has changed. Almost two decades, time wasted on my late husband. Catch twenty-two though, because if I regretted those years, I wouldn’t have my daughters.

Opting not to think about Jack, I focused on the words of the song. And damn if that wasn’t just as bad. The words tore at my chest and fragile heart. *Since songs never made me tear up before*, I mused. This self-revelation would be the death of me.

An ache bloomed in my chest, remembering moments with Kristoff, like snapshots for perfect moments. Damn hormones. Tears burned the backs of my eyes, the ache traveling through my veins to my heart and soul.

“You alright?” Rick asked quietly.

“Mmm.” I waved my hand as if it was nothing that my heart still bled.

Something flickered in his eyes. “Liar.” I cocked an eyebrow. “You’re not fine.”

Two steps back; two steps forward.

“It’s just my hormones playing tricks on me.” Once the hormones were gone, so would these feelings. *Keep lying to yourself*, my heart mocked.

“Are you sure it’s the hormones, Gem?” Rick was the only one that called me that, ever. I leaned my forehead against his chest.

I shook my head against his chest. “I keep waiting for this lump in the pit of my stomach to ease. I feel like I’m dying on the inside.”

My admission filled the space between us the moment I confessed that. The words slipped out. Or maybe they hadn’t. They were stuck in my throat, waiting for me to spit them out. Admission was the first step to recovery. Right?

“Finally,” he mumbled, his lips against my hair. “Finally admitting everything is not peachy. Now tell me, what do you want?”

I sighed. It didn’t matter. My chest had been doing so many weird things, I seriously debated going to the cardiologist. Maybe they could fix this problem and things could go back to the way they were before Kristoff.

I’d take the money problems, just to make this ache go away.

“What do you want, Gem?” Rick repeated, his voice firm.

“I want him.” The words flew out. This night, this atmosphere was to blame. The sun setting over the horizon, the orange glow, making you believe in love. “I need him so much it hurts. I liked it better when I felt nothing. When I didn’t want anyone. Just the girls and me.”

My pulse raced, adrenaline pumping through my veins. This was harder than running a marathon, harder than the hardest yoga pose my body could handle.

My blood pulsed in my ears. My heart thundered wildly. Admitting you needed someone was a weakness. They could use it against you.

“I know it’s scary,” Rick rumbled. “The girls will grow up; they can’t be your only purpose. You have nothing to lose by going after what you want and everything to gain. You don’t want to wonder for the rest of your life how it could have been with him.”

“Easy for you to say,” I grumbled.

“That’s your pride talking.”

I swallowed. “You know, my parents always said needing someone gave you strength. But all I experienced with it was weakness.”

“Your parents had a good marriage.” I nodded. “And I tend to think, they probably knew more about how to make it work than we do.”



A choked laugh escaped me. “Probably.” I met his gaze. “They say you live and you learn. But what if the learning process could cost you your life. Or his.” He frowned. Fuck, I was scared that if things got bad, I’d stab another man. It was so goddamn easy to push that knife into Jack. I had never hurt a single person in my life. And yet, that day, I felt like I could have murdered him.

Then deciding the topic was too heavy, I switched subjects. “Did you just quote Daughtry?” I remarked, then continue to quote the words, “Nothing to lose, but everything to gain. How things could have been.”

Rick smiled sheepishly. “It seemed appropriate.” He took my face in both of his hands, and I couldn’t help but to compare it to the way Kristoff cupped my face. When he did it, my whole body buzzed in anticipation. Kristoff’s touch was a craving so deep that it rattled my bones. “You are one of the strongest women I know,” Rick continued. “It doesn’t make you weak admitting you need him.”

“Maybe.” My chest burned with emotion, the lump in my throat making it hard to speak. “But Kristoff doesn’t need me.”

No other words were needed.

Silence swept through the terrace as Rick and I danced, both of us lost in our own thoughts. A prickling feeling on the back of my neck had me fighting the urge to turn around. Instead I focused on my breathing. The warm summer breeze that swept through the terrace, plastering the dress against my body.

*Kristoff doesn’t need me.* The lump in my throat grew bigger.

I had always been enough for myself. Some girls needed many friends to feel important. I didn’t. Some girls needed assurances from boys. I didn’t.

But I *needed* Kristoff. I *craved* him. I wanted him.

“I know you’re worried about trusting someone after Jack.” Strained silence enveloped the small space between us, before he continued, “Kristoff’s nothing like Jack. Yes, the fucker punched me. But it was out of jealousy.”

“And that makes it okay?” I snickered, though it came out more like a whimper.

“Jack never went after men he was jealous of,” Rick uttered the words I knew to be true. “He took it out on you. There’s a big difference.”

I lifted my eyes up to him and found him looking over my head with a slightly disturbed expression. I followed it. My steps faltered. My heart hitched, then stopped for two seconds before it resumed its beat.

Dark forest eyes. Broad shoulders. Strong hands that had a way to make my body hum with pleasure.

My skin ignited and my pulse sped up into an unhealthy tempo. It had to be bad for the babies. Yet, I couldn't stop it.

My heart danced. My ears buzzed

The man I loved stood barely five feet away in a white shirt and black dress pants. He looked better than I remembered. My breathing shallowed as his gaze trailed over my body, lingering a moment longer than needed on my belly.

"Genevieve," he said softly and my body instinctively leaned forward, eager for his heat without consulting my brain. Or my heart.

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## CHAPTER 71

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



“Kristoff,” I breathed. “What a surprise to see you here.” *Lie.*  
Ever since the gifts, I knew deep down he was coming. Nothing and nobody would keep that man away when he set his mind on something.

“No matter where you go, I’ll find you.” The deep sound of his voice did things to me I had no business feeling. Then the words sunk in. *Unhealthy*, my reason whispered.

A loud, delighted screech and the moment evaporated through the summer breeze. Saoirse ran through the terrace. Kristoff knelt down before she threw herself through the air into his arms. Sierra followed, her eyes shining like the sea under the bright sun and the biggest smile her little face could muster.

My heart stilled, the image burning right into my soul.

*Family.* God, this felt like family.

Our eyes collided, my heart slowed and the world ceased to exist. Just Kristoff and our kids. No, no, no, *my* kids.

It was only then I noticed the woman beside him. A gorgeous redhead, wearing a classy white Greek summer dress with golden clasps that matched the gold of her sandals. She reminded me of a Greek goddess. She hadn’t moved or said a word, but I knew, just *knew*, she’d be a perfect match for Kristoff.

Barefoot average me could never compare to someone like that. Not that I wanted to.

*Damn him.*

I looked away, suddenly fighting a case of nausea that I hadn't experienced since I set foot in this country.

I shifted closer to Rick. "Did you tell him?" I muttered under my breath. He shook his head in denial. "Scratch everything I just said."

I didn't need a man. I didn't need someone who'd show off a different prize each time I saw him. Ugh, except I had two bundles of joys growing inside me. Maybe it could be a stipulation of our visitations. Whenever we were scheduled to see him, no women around.

*How damn sad.* Stipulation and all.

I refused to show him my feelings. With a plastered smile on my face and Rick at my side, I sauntered over to Kristoff.

"C'mon, girls," I said, my tone a tad bit too sweet. "Give him some space. It's not like you haven't seen him in years."

Taking my youngest's hand, I gently pulled her back from him.

"We haven't seen him for a long, long time," Saoirse whined. "We missed you. Mommy missed you too."

"I absolutely did not," I protested. Too defensively. *Unbelievable.* I had to defend myself to my own children.

Kristoff's eyebrow shot up, though a subtle glow of amusement lit up his beautiful eyes. Maybe our kids would inherit his eyes.

"Sienna said so." My middle child was more than happy to throw blame. "She said you're sad because you missed him and he works too much."

I rolled my eyes, then turned to glare at my eldest. "What is this?"

Sienna just shrugged. "I just made a guess, Mom. What else was I supposed to say?" Her tone was nonchalant and just for emphasis she blew a bubble and popped it.

Kristoff rose to his full height, towering over me. Except he didn't feel threatening. More like a shelter and *home*.

"I've missed you all too." Kristoff's heated gaze burned through my skin and set me on fire. *Don't believe it. Don't believe it.* "And I missed your mommy. So much that I had to come and see you all."

My youngest two squealed in delight again. Maybe I let them watch too many fairy tales.

"Ok, girls." I clapped my hands, ushering them. "Go back and play please. Bedtime in an hour."

It was that easy to dismiss my girls. Just the mention of bedtime and they disappear faster than the hummingbirds. Or the roadrunner in those old cartoons with Wile E. Coyote.

Turning my attention to his companion, I extended my hand out to hers to shake it.

"I'm Genevieve," I introduced myself, impressed with my measured voice. "This is Rick." Then I waved my hand in the general direction of the remaining guests. "And the rest of the family."

"I'm Sophie." Her eyes were crystal blue pools shining with amusement as she looked us over. Her fiery red hair fell in luxurious waves down her shoulders. With a slim, but curvy body, she stood about an inch taller than me. "I've heard so much about you."

*Interesting.*

There was nothing but pure curiosity in her eyes and I almost regretted that she was likable. Her soft heart was reflected in her eyes.

"Nice to meet you." Jealousy was an ugly thing. Yet, I couldn't stop it from slithering through my veins. Curse this man; it was all his fault. "Hope you're enjoying your visit to Croatia."

I had to make an attempt at being a good person. A better person.

"I am, thank you. The coastline of this country is beautiful." I nodded my agreement, and she continued on, reinforcing her nice persona. "I thought our best views were from Kristoff's yacht, but it's even better from the land."

I sighed. It would be the last time I ignored my gut feeling. My eyes skimming over the sea to the black yacht I complained about all day.

"That yacht is hideous," I said dryly. "It's like a *Star Wars* ship amidst an oasis." That yacht had trouble written all over it. Sophie stifled a chuckle, amusement plain on her face. Ugh, I really liked her.

Kristoff's eyes pulled my attention back to him, our gazes burning down the Adriatic coastline.

The invisible pull was so hard to fight, I decided he had to go. Right now.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him, agitated for making me all hot.

"A holiday." His shoulders tensed. "My mother insisted this was the most beautiful country she has ever visited. So I decided to come and see it for myself." His eyes trailed over my body again and I had to fight the

shudder. "I can understand the fascination now. Besides, I miss my personal assistant."

The insinuation didn't escape me. Was he really flirting with me in front of his date?

"You and I have some *things* to discuss." He emphasized the word. Emotion clogged my throat but still a deep, empty ache pulsed between my thighs. There was some miscommunication going on here.

*Damn traitorous body!*

"We'll discuss it when I'm back in the States." I stood my ground. "You should continue to the south of the country, away from *here*."

Yes, I wanted him. But all of him. Not his stupid scraps. And I certainly wouldn't entertain him with his new girlfriend. What the fuck did he think this was? *Ménage à trois*.

No, thank you.

Meeting Sophie's gaze, I continued, "It's the most attractive part of this country and everyone raves about it. You'll love it."

She'd be easier to convince than the stubborn man in front of me.

"Actually, Gemma, we're going to stay here." *The hell you will*. "Could we rent two rooms from you?" he inquired casually. As if he was ordering a scoop of ice cream. *Damn him!*

"No." *Don't lose your shit*. My heart ached, but I didn't have to show it to him. "All the finished rooms are occupied." I uttered the words with more gusto than necessary. I was practically gloating. "Sorry."

A sweet, fake smile appeared on my lips.

"You're not sorry at all," he retorted dryly.

"Of course, I am," I lied.

Sophie's gazes ping-ponged between Kristoff and me, curiosity in her blue depths.

"We don't need anything fancy. Whatever rooms you have, even with the holes in the floor, we'll take it." He was so confident he would get his way.

"The answer's still no." I tilted my chin and I raised a brow in challenge. His gaze narrowed at the corners, holding mine. *You won't get your way this time!* I swore.

Tension swept through the terrace, like the calm before the storm.

"Name your price, Gemma." His eyes flickered with a challenge. "Or are you too scared?"

“There’s no price. You can’t buy your way in this time.” I refused to give in. The damn man always got his way and I didn’t want my peace disturbed while he was here. He could take his ass back to his ugly yacht. “There’s no room for you here. Did you not hear me the first two times?”

His jaw ticked.

“I’m willing to pay a good price for the rooms.” Of course, he would. He thought he could buy the world.

“What is wrong with the rooms on your yacht?” I asked.

“We want to stay here. I’ll pay whatever price you name.” Why did this feel like déjà vu. The handsome arrogant ass refused to admit defeat. So I’d make it an unreasonable price.

“Fine, have it your way,” I said, blowing a piece of hair out of my face. “You want a room.” His beautiful lips curved into a triumphant smile. Bastard. “The cost is \$20,000 per night, per room.”

“Oh, shit.” A winning smirk already formed on my lips. “I thought you’d go for more. We’ll take it.” He didn’t even bat an eyelash.

“I’m sorry. Bad English. I meant \$50,000 per night.”

“Sold.” Asshole.

“\$100,000 per room, per night. Payable in advance.”

No gasps. No reaction. Just a smug gleam.

“That’s fine.” Ugh, agitation flared tenfold.

“How many days, Kristoff?” I gritted.

“I’ll take them for the rest of the summer.” I groaned out loud. “Until September, whatever day you’re flying out. Because we’re flying back home together. You, the girls, the twins growing in your gorgeous body, and me.”

His eyes burned with conviction, but a flicker of conflict lurked in his gaze.

“You’ll ruin my entire summer,” I complained, my teeth clenched so hard my jaw hurt. The truth was, I didn’t trust myself around this man. With each breath, I had to fight the magnetic pull to him. In the same house, every second of the day, I feared I’d cave in.



## CHAPTER 72

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# GENEVIEVE



I rushed out of there like the devil was at my heel.

Rick trailed behind me. “I don’t know how I’ll survive seeing him every day,” I whispered as I glanced over my shoulder.

Kristoff’s intense gaze remained on me, the heat of it burning through me with promises of passionate nights, rustle of the sheets and filthy words against my skin.

I shook my head, hoping to clear the images creeping up my mind. “I should have said a million per night, per room.”

“He would have paid it,” Rick declared confidently. “Maybe it’s good that he is here. You can decide if you want to go after him.”

I glared at him. “Did he look alone to you? Did you not notice that seriously gorgeous redhead next to him?”

“I did.” He shrugged casually, tucking his hands into his pockets. “But I also noticed he wasn’t looking at her. His eyes were on you the entire time.”

“That’s because he wants to talk about the pregnancy. When that man gets something in his head, he doesn’t let go. I’ve seen him in negotiations.”

“Talking about anyone I know?” Kristoff’s voice came from behind me, and I whipped around almost bumping into him

“Damn it, Kristoff,” I hissed. “You can’t sneak up on people like that.”

“I think he’s worried you’ll take off,” Sophie interrupted jokingly, following behind him, and winked at me. “So I hear you are pregnant with twins?” she asked, smiling and then added, “Congratulations!”

“Stop broadcasting it,” I warned Kristoff in an exasperated tone. “Seriously, it’s bad luck.”

“I didn’t broadcast it,” Kristoff replied matter-of-fact. “I just told my family.”

I snickered, glancing over to Sophie, before returning my gaze to Kristoff. “Did you get married in the last few weeks?”

Just to say those words cut me like a knife.

“No, I didn’t. Are you offering?” His eyes and tone of voice were serious and intent; the moment reminded me of our drive home from his mother’s birthday party. When he asked me whether I was offering to be his girlfriend.

I flicked a curious look Sophie’s way to find her studying us curiously. “I’m his cousin,” Sophie explained.

A glimmer of hope swelled in my chest, but I quickly tamped it down. Instead, I shrugged my shoulders pretending I didn’t care what they were to each other.

“Want me to show you where your rooms are?” I asked tiredly, laying one hand on my back and the other over my little bump, feeling little flutters. I realized it was too early to feel the babies, but I couldn’t help but love those little signs of life growing inside of me.

“Are you alright?” Rick questioned. “You’re holding your back like it hurts.”

“What?” Kristoff’s alarmed voice pulled my gaze to him. He cut in front of Rick and took his place, crowding me. Raising my hand, I pushed my palm against his chest and instantly the blood rushed through my veins so fast my hand felt unsteady against the wall of his chest.

My fingertips buzzed, urging me to roam his chest. Instead, I gently tried to push him away. For naught. You couldn’t move this muscle of a man with a push.

“I’m fine,” I began exasperated at both of them. Then I glanced at Rick, and added, “And you have to stop panicking. It’s driving me nuts.”

“You must be tired.” Sophie came to the rescue. “I know I am. I’d love to see my room.”

“I’ll stay here,” Kristoff told her, but he was looking at me. “You go ahead. I want to talk to Rick.” I raised my eyebrow and glanced suspiciously between the two.

“It’s all good, Gem,” Rick assured me. “If he throws a punch, I’ll be better prepared and land one back.”

I rolled my eyes and with that I led Sophie to her room, leaving the two behind us.

"The rooms are not bad," I started as we climbed the stairs. "Just not modernized."

I didn't bother telling her that these two were the closest to my room. The other ones were occupied between Rick's and Jonathan's family. I had a few extra ones, but those were in worse condition than these. After all, for the price Kristoff was paying, I couldn't stick them into a dump.

*No matter how tempting.*

The two rooms allocated now to the billionaire and his cousin were joined by a large balcony that was literally over the sea crashing into the rocky shoreline.

Opening the door, I motioned for her to enter.

Once inside, she strode to the terrace and her gasp was the reaction I expected. Everyone loved that balcony.

"You and Kristoff can decide who gets what room," I told her, although I secretly hoped Kristoff was closer to mine. I really had to make up my mind, either I wanted him close or I didn't.

*You do*, my heart whispered.

"Look at that view!" she marveled. "I have never seen anything like it."

I smiled following her gaze out into the sea. "It's something, isn't it?" I agreed with her. "I never grow tired of it."

"I can understand that." She never looked away from the horizon and I took a moment to admire her profile. She didn't look anything like her cousin. Though they were both beautiful, in their own way. For some dumb reason, my mind resorted to the old soap series my mother used to watch. Everyone in those soaps was rich, famous and beautiful. Well, except for the maid.

My brows furrowed. Me renting this room to them didn't make me a maid. Just a smart business woman. I might have bought myself another year or two of no worries by renting the rooms.

Maybe I could be a stay-at-home mom, watch soaps, fold clothes and cook. Well, the latter two I already did. I only needed to conquer the former two goals. Although, I enjoyed working and the independence it afforded me.

"Ok," I told her, shaking my silly thoughts away. "I'll leave you to it. Hope you enjoy it here."

“I will.” She smiled knowingly.

I left her in the room and made my way down the stairs, just in time to catch the sight of Rick, Jonathan, and Kristoff whispering among themselves. My eyes narrowed suspiciously. Why would Rick and Jonathan be talking to Kristoff? Jonathan and Kristoff were sworn enemies after what happened with his ex-wife.

And Rick - well, he was my friend, not his.

I approached the group of men, keeping my steps silent as a cat sneaking up on a mouse. Ah, the benefits of being barefoot. They clearly discussed something, their whispers too hard to understand.

Unfortunately, Rick spotted me and fell silent. I could swear for a blink of an eye guilt flashed across his face. But it was gone so fast, I couldn't be sure.

“What's going on here?” I asked all three.

“I'm offended you invited everyone but me to your little rendezvous,” Kristoff complained. “Not sure if I should take that personally or not.”

Rick mumbled something under his breath I didn't quite catch. Jonathan's face kept his expression blank, though he wouldn't meet my eye.

“Go ahead and take it personally,” I said, locking eyes with Kristoff. “There is still time for you to go back to your yacht and just stay there. What's it going to be?”

His jaw ticked in thought as if he was seriously debating it. If he sent me the money, no refund. Sucker.

“Nothing will stop me from staying here.” His face filled with something dark as sin, matching the tone of his voice. I studied his face and for the first time since he slammed back into my life, I noticed a slight hint of his stubble, his hair not quite as immaculate as I was used to seeing and something tired behind his eyes.

But the look he gave me grabbed hold of my heart and refused to let go. It promised sweet retribution, two sweaty bodies between the sheets, filthy words in my ear, and rough hands on my body.

He leaned closer to me, his scent overtaking all my senses.

“When I leave, you'll be coming with me. You have a contract to fulfill,” he whispered hoarsely, as if the same images played on his mind.

Shivers ghosted down my spine. My body demanded I give in to him. I shouldn't want him so much. I could blame my wild hormones, but

truthfully it was all me. My heart, my body, and my soul wanted *all* of him. I didn't care about his money, his status, none of it mattered to me.

I wanted his trust. His fidelity. His love.

Taking a step back, suddenly overwhelmed, I looked away. "I'll never sign your contract. Get your new blonde admin to sign it." I purposely kept my eyes averted, scared he'd see my jealousy and my own fears in their depths.

"Fuck the contract," he hissed. "I came for *you*."

The man was confusing me and my eyes locked on Jonathan and Rick who watched our interaction with fascination.

My eyebrows shot up. "Something to see here? Please do share."

Jonathan chuckled, earning himself a glare. His hands shot up, as if he surrendered.

"Relax," he answered defensively. "I'm just enjoying the show."

*Men!* I exhaled in resignation. You couldn't win a battle with them because women were from a different planet.

"Kristoff, you want me to show you to your room?" His body brushed against mine and a wave of longing swept through me, making my hands tremble with the need to touch him. This had to be what withdrawal felt like. "I don't want to waste my evening. It's late and I still have to get the kids to bed."

As if on cue, all the children swept through the foyer like a hurricane, ready to blow down the house. Or at least, break some of the furniture. Their laughter and giggles filled the air and my heart.

"I'm ready whenever you are, beautiful." Kristoff's lips brushed against my ear and I jumped as if burned. When in the hell did he take a step closer?

"Make sure it's just the room he's seeing, Gemma," Jonathan cracked, the little lines around his eyes crinkling and a dead giveaway. Another glare.

Kristoff's eyes never wavered from me. As if he was putting a spell on me.

"Want me to show him to his room?" Rick offered but before I could refuse him, Kristoff beat me to it.

"No. She'll show me to the room." The glare Kristoff gave Rick promised of another black eye if the latter said another dumb thing.

"I can do it," I assured Rick. "I guess for what he's paying me, the least I can do is show him his room."

"You got this," Rick replied with a wink and a twinkle in his eyes.

I exhaled feeling like they were all up to no good. I had no energy for this tonight.

"Hurry up, I have better things to do than wait on you," I said, glancing over my shoulder and having to crane my neck to his towering frame.

My legs moved on their own accord, as if eager to get him to the bedroom. Or maybe to get rid of him, I couldn't decide.

We moved across the foyer, his hand on my lower back, his touch offering comfort. *Just like before.* My gaze flicked to his to find him watching me, consuming desire in his eyes, overwhelming me and swallowing me whole.

Once we were far enough from everyone, his mouth brushed against the sensitive spot below my ear, sending shivers through every fiber of my being. "I'll be sure to keep you so busy, I never get off your to-do list," he rasped.

I stumbled, but his hands wrapped around my waist, catching me. The moment my body pressed to his, the familiar, sizzling attraction that could power 4th of July fireworks flooded through me. Unable to resist the temptation, I leaned into his body, soaking up his heat and those muscles that could make my body quiver. His breath against the flesh of my neck caused goosebumps to break out over my skin.

"Gemma, no more running." His voice was low, and his gaze burned with determination. His hands on my waist tightened, not allowing the space between us. My hands flat against his chest, familiar hard muscles under my fingers. I lifted my eyes to that gaze that lit me up from the inside. "I know I fucked up." I scoffed, but remained silent. "First the leak of the pictures and the contract. Then I punched Rick." I pushed on him slightly, needing some distance between us. But he wouldn't allow it. "I want to start over. The right way. For you. For me. For our kids. I miss you all."

I blinked hard, fighting the tears threatening to come. Why in the hell did those tears always have to spill?

Shaking my head, I couldn't get the words out past the lump in my throat that grew bigger and bigger.

“I was an ass. I asked for a chance and blew it.” I clenched my teeth so hard my jaw hurt. I was desperate to hold on, not to give in to him nor my emotions. If I broke down, I’d be sobbing my night away. “Nothing ever felt as right as you and me. Us. With the girls.” His hand reached for my round belly. “And the babies. The seven of us.”

“The scandal-” I whimpered. “It’ll always be there.”

The fucking scandal was the furthest thing from my mind. But it was the only thing I had. Admitting to him that his ex was so close to unraveling my secret wasn’t an option. Neither was admitting how much I loved him.

“I took care of it. Everything has been wiped out.” I shook my head in disbelief. “I promise you, it has. The last bit I handled with the blonde in my office. Sailor McHale is a friend of the Ashfords and a reporter.” None of this made sense. They looked cozy. “The idiot in me wanted to make you jealous. So you’d feel an ounce of what I felt.”

The anger flared in my heart. “That was a shitty move.”

“It was,” he admitted. “I let jealousy get the best of me. You’re all I want. I’ve never wanted something so bad that just the idea of losing it feels like I’m dying inside.”

My heart stilled at the deep emotion in his voice. His gaze grabbed hold of me and refused to let go. Images of our late nights, office days, amazing weekends filled the void in my heart.

But was it true?

“I’m not able to think with you in my personal space.” It meant to sound firm but my voice came out shaky.

He stroked his knuckles gently over my cheeks. “Deep down, you know we’re meant to be. You and the girls are my world. Without you in it, I’m just an empty shell.” His mouth brushed over my neck and an involuntary moan passed through my lips. “You might think this is just physical. It’s not. It’s so much more. But if I have to, I’ll use this desire until you admit what we have. What we could have.”

“And what’s that?” I rasped.

“A happy life. Together.” Goddamn him, why did he have to make it so hard?

With the last ounce of my will, I nudged him away from me. “Your room is here.” I opened the door, then whirled around to leave. But both of his hands came to rest against the wall, trapping me in. “I’ll let you fool me again when hell freezes over.”



A girl had to show some strength. Maybe? Except, he said all the right words that had my throat tighten with feelings and possibilities.

Until they crushed you all over again.

“Then hell is freezing over,” he whispered. His one hand came off the wall, giving me a chance to escape. Except I stood still, waiting. He held my face and then kissed me. Soft and slow. Deep and consuming. Heat burst in my chest, sending fire through my blood. A moan escaped my lips and he swallowed it and it was all the encouragement he needed. Our bodies flush together, his lips trailed down my jaw, then skimming softly down my neck. My fingers tangled up in his hair pulling him closer. My body collapsed. The addiction, needing his hands and mouth on me, won.

His mouth came back to mine, as if he couldn’t stay away. The kiss was possessive, desperate, consuming. Heart wrenching.

“Gemma,” Betty’s voice pierced through the lust-induced haze.

“Fuck,” Kristoff mumbled against my lips, his hard body pressed against mine. The hard bulge in his pants pressed against my lower belly, making my pussy throb with an aching need only he could sate.

With a shuddering exhale, I nudged him away from me.

It was then that she spotted us and stopped in her tracks, glancing back and forth between Kristoff and I.

“Maybe you two should go into the room and continue,” she suggested, humor coloring her voice. I groaned and her laugh filled the dark hallway, long after she disappeared from our sight.

“I think that’s an excellent idea.” Kristoff’s voice was full of promises.

I shook my head. “No.”

No more caving into him.

“We need to talk,” he remarked. “About the pregnancy and our plans. In private.”

“No,” I breathed, but I stood firm. “We wouldn’t be talking and you know that.”

His intense gaze dropped to search my face as I drowned in the deep emeralds. “You can’t avoid me forever. We are connected for life now.”

Pushing him gently away, I walked away from him before I caved in to the temptation and entered his bedroom.

I found Betty in her bedroom. “Thank you for tucking the kids in. You’re the best.”

“I know.” She grinned. “Besides, you had better things to do.” *Better maybe, but not smarter.* I remained quiet. “Are you ok?”

“I should have known the gifts came from him. Well, I did know. But I didn’t think he’d find me.” Silence stretched between us, both of us lost to our thoughts.

“What are you going to do?” she questioned.

I scoffed softly. “Get some sleep and then think about it tomorrow. I mean he’s not wrong. We’re connected for life.” My palm rubbed over my small bump. “I just don’t want another relationship to turn sour because of-” My secret. His jealousy. Our ghost. Fuck, just pick one.

“Just tell him how you feel,” she insisted softly.

The sound of a wave crashing against the shore timed it perfectly. It was like the grand finale with a revelation right around the corner.

Emotionally and physically exhausted, I bid her goodnight and headed for my room. And all the while something thick and heavy weighed down on my chest. Even if we’d overcome all the problems, it’d still leave me with a heavy secret that could ultimately destroy him. I didn’t think I could do that to him. Yet my heart longed for the happiness his words promised.

But they were just words. Then why did they sound so sincere and clawed at my chest to give in? Half a day and I was caving in.

With my head bent down and deep in thought, I ran straight into a hard chest. *Kristoff.* I glanced up into his beautiful face and grimaced inwardly. Life was determined to throw temptation my way.

Sinner and all, destiny probably knew I was a sure thing.

“What upset you?” Kristoff demanded to know, taking my chin between his fingers. The intensity of his gaze drilled into me and right down to my soul.

“Nothing.” My past. My sins. My actions.

“I hate seeing you upset.” Kristoff’s deep voice rumbled close to my lips and deep into my heart. “Who upset you?”

“Nobody,” I retorted a tad bit too defensively. “I’m just tired.”

His face was so close to me, all I had to do was lean forward slightly and our lips would touch.

“You know there hasn’t been anyone else for me from the moment you walked into my office.” The comment came out of left field. It disoriented. It confused. It offered hope.

The sincerity in his voice and his eyes grabbed onto me and demanded I fight. For him. For us. For our family. But it would require trust on my part. It would require an end to the jealousy.

“Kristoff,” I started before I lost my nerve. “I have to tell you something.” He stilled and I inhaled deeply, praying that I was doing the right thing. Otherwise it’d cost me so much. Too much. “Jack was jealous. Extremely jealous. Ironically, he was the unfaithful one, but it made him paranoid that I was cheating too. I told you it wasn’t the best marriage. In my book, it was the worst.” *I shared my body with Kristoff, but sharing this was so much harder.* I was letting him see *all* of me. “I- I was partly to blame. The first slap across my face should have been the last. The first degrading word should have been the last.” A shuddering breath rattled the air between us, ghosts flickering in my soul. “But I had this stupid notion my parents instilled in me. Marriage is for life. So I tried to make it work.” I swallowed. “You say I’m one of the strongest women you know. The truth is I’m one of the weakest. Because a strong woman would have walked away from that bullshit.”

Tears rolled down my cheek and I let them. His thumb brushed over my lip, smearing the tear tasting of salt and bitterness.

“He didn’t deserve you,” he rasped. “And if he was alive, I’d kill him”

A bitter laugh escaped me. “The last day, when I had enough, h-he-” God, it was so much harder to say the words out loud. This was the reason people saw a therapist. To heal, instead of letting all this shit fester inside me. “He attacked me. He forced himself on me and almost raped me.” Kristoff’s entire body tensed, anger so strong rolling off of him, I could taste it on my tongue. “I stabbed him.”

Bu-bum. Bu-bum. Bu-bum.

My heartbeat drummed beneath a frozen fear, threatening to crack at any moment.

“I wanted to kill him,” I whispered, my voice raspy. “In that fraction of a moment, I debated plunging that knife into him again and again, until his heart stopped beating. I envisioned it, but instead, I ran. I stabbed him, and as I ran out of my home, I prayed it would kill him.”

He cupped my cheek, his nose brushing against mine and my lip trembled. Jesus, and this man thought me strong.

“But you didn’t kill him,” Kristoff grumbled. “He deserved to be tortured, long and hard. And then thrown off a boat into the ocean so he

could drown.” When I just stared at him, he continued, “The bottom line is *you* didn’t kill him, Gemma.”

“By sheer luck, he met with his mistress and the two got into a car accident.” I took another deep breath, the pressure in my chest slowly lifting. “After his death, I promised myself I’d never let that happen again. And then I met you. You made me feel things I had never felt before. You made me feel wanted, desirable, and sexy. And you respected my opinions. But you also scare me with your jealousy. It takes me back to the hell I lived through. I don’t want to find myself there again.”

For a moment I thought Kristoff was going to say something but he remained silent. As if we instinctively knew this was the turning point for both of us. The question was which way would the road take us.

“I’m not yours to own and control, Kristoff. It’s my choice to give myself to you, and regardless if we’re together or not, I need your trust. We are having babies together and despite our own painful past experiences, we’ll need to trust each other. For our children’s sake.”

“Does anyone else know?” Kristoff asked quietly.

“No.” Averting my eyes, I felt lighter than I had in a very long time. But also drained, as if saying all that took it all out of me. “Betty and Rick knew about his physical abuse but nobody knows what happened that day. Just me, and now you.” I swallowed hard again, aware that my future now lay in his hands.

“I’m really tired,” I whispered. “Think about it all.”

I left him standing as I entered my room and shut the door behind me. I just hoped I didn’t shut the door to our future too.

## CHAPTER 73

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



The next morning, we found ourselves on the beach early.

Kristoff and Sophie eventually joined too. It was the downfall of a small village. It took all of ten minutes to reach all four corners of the entire village.

“Hi, Mommy.” Sierra ran towards me with her chubby hands outstretched. “Mr. Paolo gave me an extra scoop.”

I missed the days when the world revolved around ice cream.

“Me too,” Saoirse exclaimed.

“Free scoops are always the best.”

“So this is where you’ve been hiding?” Kristoff sat next to me. Saoirse and Sierra left to play with their cousins to build yet another stone castle in the water.

I glanced down to my bathing suit and regretted not wearing a one piece. The two piece white bathing suit revealed my little bump and next to Sophie’s knockout body, I felt a bit self-conscious. Although I had the best reason for it.

“Hi there,” she greeted me. “I hope you don’t mind that we joined in.”

“Of course not,” Jonathan replied before I could. He had eyes only for Sophie.

*Interesting*, I thought to myself.

I leaned closer to Kristoff to ask him and he met me halfway. “Is Jonathan eye-fucking your cousin?”

He never removed his eyes off me. “Probably. They used to be an item.”

“Really?” I sensed a story there. Kristoff just nodded and I glanced over their way. “He doesn’t stand a chance though.” *Yep, definitely a story there!*

The light breeze swept through, brushing my hair into my face and before I could reach out, Kristoff tucked a strand behind my ear. "Gemma, about yesterday," he started quietly, his eyes boring into me. "I'd kill the bastard myself if I had a chance. When I blackmailed you into taking the job, hinting at what happened with your husband, I did it because I wanted you. I'd never use it and if someone attempted, I'd kill them."

"You did?" I gasped in shock.

He nodded. "The same day you had broken your arm and had bruises all over you, he died. But the fact of the matter is he died in an accident. Nothing more; nothing less."

I locked eyes with him and suddenly it felt as if the current swept my ghosts away into the sea. Never to return.

"If you want to talk about it, you talk to me," he said softly, tucking the same unruly piece of hair back behind my ear. "You never say those words to anyone else."

Bum-bum. Bum-bum. "Do you think-"

I couldn't finish the sentence.

"I'll kill anyone who tries to do anything to you and our kids." I felt the intensity of his words in my soul. Because it was the same sentiment I had. These raw feelings shook the walls I have started building up and his gaze caressed my skin without even touching me. "Are you happy about the pregnancy?"

I frowned at that unexpected question. "Is that a trick question?"

"No."

Looking at him pensively, I tried to answer as honestly as possible. "It's not exactly what I planned for myself at this stage of my life. Or the ideal way of it happening." I hoped it wouldn't come off wrong. "But then nothing in life usually ends up the way I plan it, and it works out for the best. So yes. I'm happy about it."

His hand shook slightly as he brushed it against my cheek and I leaned into it, closing my eyes for a moment, enjoying it.

"Why do you ask?" I wondered.

Silence stretched and I thought he wouldn't answer.

"When my ex was pregnant," he started in a voice void of emotion and I looked over to him. "-she wasn't happy about it. She hated it. Even before I found out the baby wasn't mine, she complained about it. After I found out, she hated it even more. I'm sure Jonathan had it hard."

My hand was on his cheek before I realized I moved. "I'm so sorry."

He leaned into my hand, just as I always seemed to lean into his touch, and put his big hand over mine, as if to ensure it stayed there.

"I can promise you," I whispered low. "-no matter what, I love them."

Gosh, between last night and now, we were airing out all our laundry.

"I remember you telling me birth control was non-negotiable when you offered me the job," I started hesitantly. That lunch in D.C. seemed like ages ago. "I thought I couldn't have any more pregnancies. Turns out, I was wrong." Duh, obviously! Damn it, I was so nervous. "What I'm trying to say is, I know we didn't plan this, and if I'd just accepted that birth control clause, we wouldn't be in this situation, and-" I let out a frustrated breath. "I'm just saying, I didn't plan it. I promise, I'd never trap you like that."

"I'm happy it happened." Simple words, but his eyes shone like the brightest stars, captivating me. "If I knew we'd end up pregnant, I'd have found you sooner." His gaze filled with something dark and satisfied. "So I could have you even longer."

"It could be perceived like I trapped you."

A half-smile pulled on his lips. "I don't give a shit. Because we both know it was me who trapped you."

Seeds of hope started to flourish. I could have stayed away from him for years and I'd still love him. There was no getting over him. At least he was happy about the pregnancy.

"Twins, huh," he rasped with admiration. "Can you feel them yet?"

I chuckled low. "It's too early, but sometimes I swear I feel something." I beamed at the feeling of it. "It's probably an upset stomach although I did read that with later pregnancies you can feel it as early as thirteen weeks."

His hand reached out to touch my slightly rounded belly and he stopped mid-air so I took it and put it there.

"Ok, now wait," I told him gently. "When I feel something, you tell me if you feel it too."

We remained, and I enjoyed the moment, his touch over the lives we created and I knew he'd be a wonderful father. My heart fluttered but the twins didn't. They had a mind of their own and probably decided to nap during the moment between mommy and daddy.

"Maybe it's not such a great idea. We could sit like this for hours," I whispered, melting on the inside.



“I wouldn’t mind it,” he rasped. His fingers gently circled my lower belly and just like that I was turned on.

“You said it’s not the ideal way it happened,” he repeated my earlier words. “What is the ideal way?”

“Well, you know,” I replied while his fingers still circled my skin, branding it. “The normal way.”

He raised his eyebrow. “I think we conceived the normal way.”

I blushed to the roots of my hairline and I rolled my eyes. “Seriously,” I grumbled. “Like I wouldn’t know that. I was there.” I rolled my eyes, but the blush was ruining the effect.

“I want to know what you meant,” he persisted.

“The normal way is you meet someone, you date, you get married, buy a house then have kids.” I blew an exasperated breath. “Not get a job, sleep with your boss, then have a baby.”

He never removed his hand from me, his fingers not missing a beat as he circled my belly. “So marry me then.”

## CHAPTER 74

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# GENEVIEVE



Tonight's dinner. At my favorite restaurant. With people I loved.  
I loved him. He was part of me, just as my girls were.

Kristoff's words playing in my mind. Over and over and over again. Marry me. Just like that? God help me, I wanted to, but I wanted his love even more.

"Look, Mommy... we are beautiful!" Saoirse exclaimed, pulling me away from my thoughts. I caught her watching herself in the mirror, not an ounce of modesty on her face.

"Girls, you're going to turn vain if you continue looking at yourself in the mirror." Then because I couldn't resist, I smiled. "And yes, you look beautiful."

My little ones whirled around one more time.

"Ok, lovebugs," I murmured while hugging them. "Go play."

I smiled as they disappeared and I went to get myself ready. A quick shower, even quicker blow-dry, some mascara, and I was ready. My hair had gotten longer and even thicker with my prenatal vitamins. I couldn't help but smile as I looked at my image in the mirror, the move reminding me of my daughters. My hair was pulled into a high ponytail, quite happy with how it kept the hair out of my face, and highlighted my cheekbones. The white strapless dress that fell just to my knees and flowed loosely around my body, highlighting my beach glow, and I finished off the look with a simple pair of white, flat sandals.

*Barefoot would have been better,* I mused.

I hurried down the stairs to the terrace where everyone waited. But Kristoff was all I saw. His hot gaze on me.

“Finally,” Betty exclaimed, as she saw me walk out of the terrace door. “Wow, Gemma.”

The little ones, along with Kai and Sienna, chased each other while Kristoff, Jonathan and Rick stood in a circle.

“What?” I laughed. “Not bad for a pregnant woman?”

“Everyone ready?” I looked around noticing Sophie wasn’t here. “Is Sophie coming too?”

“She went ahead of us,” Jonathan answered.

“We’re all ready then?”

Betty started quickly matching up people since we had to go in several vehicles. Jonathan with Betty, Kai, and Sienna. Rick took all the little ones. Which left me with Kristoff.

“Kristoff put his hand on my lower back and nudged me to start walking. “I think you should drive since you know the area better.”

“Okay.” I answered breathlessly. Feeling his hand on me got me all tingly and made me want to drag him back upstairs into my bedroom, and forget about dinner.

*Maybe I’m all mellow towards him because I am pregnant with his babies. Baby daddy and all that.*

I thought back to his proposal at the beach. Did he mean it? Or did he feel obligated because I was pregnant? I wished I knew for sure. He said there hadn’t been anyone for him since we met. There would be nobody else for me.

He was the one I wanted to grow old with. I’d share my happiness with him as well as my sorrows.

He opened the door to my Jeep, and I slid onto the seat, my dress pulling up accidentally exposing my thigh.

His eyes caught on the flesh, lingering there as they darkened into something sinfully exciting. The time stilled and my thighs clenched at the intensity of the want in his eyes.

“We could ditch the dinner?” he rasped.

I wanted to, I really did. Did I forgive him too soon? I didn’t know, but I knew it was him I wanted. But knowing my children, they’d come and hunt us down.

“We have a dinner to go to.” I tugged on the hem of my dress and flashed him.

He shut the door and came around to sit in the passenger seat, then casually wrapped his arm around my seat. His fingers played with my ponytail, wrapping my hair around them.

We were parked and getting out of the Jeep in five minutes. As we entered the restaurant, Sierra, Saoirse, and Sienna all ran towards us and hugged Kristoff even before they hugged me.

"I'm so happy you came too, Kristoff." Saoirse beamed.

"Ok, everyone. Why don't we all go and sit down?" I suggested and turned to the restaurant owner who was approaching us.

"Hello, Mr. Giovanni. Sorry for the last minute change. Could we add one more? We can all squeeze in together," I asked in Croatian, smiling at him apologetically.

"Not to worry," he answered in broken English. "We find seats."

"I'll take a seat next to Gemma and the girls," Kristoff requested, showing clearly he was used to getting his own way.

"I understand. We make it happen," Mr. Giovanni responded, all beaming smiles, as he walked away to get us all situated.

Sophie showed up too and it took us no time to get situated around the table. I got a spot with the best view, Kristoff and my girls beside me. It felt so damn right, I could have cried. *Happy tears*, I think. When we were together, it felt like we were a family.

His attention was on Saoirse and Sierra, while Sienna chatted with Kai. Betty's and Sophie's attention was on me and as if in sync, they both winked with a gleam in their eyes.

I shook my head, rolling my eyes. They both laughed. Betty's eyes darted to Kristoff then came back to me and a wide grin spread over her face. I ignored her and took a sip of my water.

*Get laid tonight*, Betty mouthed and I promptly choked on my water. She burst into a fit of giggles, like we were back in our twenties, fanning over a hot boy.

Everyone's interest captured, their eyes ping-ponged back and forth, trying to pick up on the joke.

"Are you two done making inside jokes?" Rick chimed in.

"Yep, we are done," I answered, smiling sweetly at him. "And don't be jealous. It's not a good look on you. We can't help that we are so much cooler and funnier than you."

"Babe, you haven't seen my funny yet," he retorted.

“Oh, I have, and it’s not that funny.”

“Then can you ladies tell me what’s so funny?” he demanded to know with a boyish smile.

“No.” His wife smacked him gently against his bicep.

“They’re probably having some secret language about Gemma’s pregnancy,” Jonathan jumped in.

“You pregnant?” Mr. Giovanni beamed happily. “Bambinos.” He motioned his hand, making a circular round belly in the air. “Come fat.”

A snickered silence followed, and I bit my lip to stop from smiling. Or maybe growling, I wasn’t sure.

“Dude, you NEVER say that to a woman,” Rick said, shaking his head but the comment went above Mr. Giovanni’s English.

Kristoff’s smile widened and I turned my glare at him. “What’s so funny?”

“One less competitor,” he grinned. Like Mr. Giovanni could ever compete with Kristoff.

Everybody burst into laughter and I teasingly bumped my shoulder against him. “I swear. You’re crazy!” I smiled at him like a fool.

Everyone seemed so relaxed. All the kids found little rocks on the ground to play with, lost in their own game and imagination, Sienna and Jack were in their own bubble, and the adults kept enjoying the wine that was flowing all throughout the table.

I turned my eyes over the edge to avoid the stares and admired the sight. God, I’ll never get tired of this view. It felt like you were in heaven, watching down on Earth. The view took my breath away every single time.

“I can see why this is your favorite restaurant.” Kristoff’s voice startled me out of my thoughts. He was close to me, peeking over me enjoying the view. “The view’s incredible.”

“Isn’t it?” My voice sounded dreamy. “Do you want to sit in my spot? I’ve seen this view plenty of times, and I want you to enjoy it from the first row.”

“No, that’s ok. I can see it great from here and I have a front row seat to look at you which is the most beautiful view in the world.” Happiness boomed in my chest right alongside hope for the future. With this man.

“What’s your favorite part of this restaurant?”

“Definitely the view. I mean, don’t you feel like you are in heaven from up here?” I breathed.

“I’m in heaven when I’m inside you,” he murmured against my ear. “When I’m next to you. When I talk to you. When I laugh with you. You, Gemma. You’re my heaven.”

The sunset behind us lit up the sky in an orange glow, matching the glowing in my chest, threatening to burst out of me like a blinding star.

Emotion filled the air between us. It was there, open for me to reach for it and grab it. Our gazes locked in a timeless space, he smiled. The kind of smile that could mend or break your heart.

“My mother keeps asking about you,” he added softly.

“She called me a few days ago,” I admitted. “I don’t suppose you know how she got my local number, do you? I don’t mind her calling,” I assured him. “I was just curious.”

The expression on Kristoff’s face was telling before he even explained. “Byron got it for me.” And there it was. “I figured my mother couldn’t resist calling you,” he added. “She is excited about being a grandmother.”

The music turned up a few notches and both of our heads turned to see Betty and Sophie dancing, breaking out some hip moves.

“Come dance with us?” Betty yelled like she was on the football field, and I was on the opposite side of it.

“I think I’ll take a rain check on this one.” Betty lowered down, shaking her ass. “You better be careful, you two! At our age, we could break a hip dancing like that.”

And sure as hell, Betty got stuck in her squat position. “Ah fuck,” Betty grumbled. “This was much easier in our twenties.”

I chuckled while Rick hurried to help her.

Kristoff stood up, his hand reached out to me. “Can I have this dance?”

The loud music stopped abruptly, and I glanced around curiously. And a few seconds later, Jason Aldean’s song “Got What I Got” came on. Kristoff pulled me closer to him, our bodies a perfect fit despite the disparity in size. Together we moved to the sound of the love song as one. Like we’d danced together a million times before.

His eyes never left mine. “Gemma, come home with me,” he pleaded.

“We *are* all going home together,” I answered, trying to resort to humor. “You rented rooms for the rest of the summer. For quite a decent amount, if I might say so. Remember?”

His lips twisted into a charming smile, his gaze never wavering from me. “You are a tough negotiator.”

"I learned from the best," I muttered against his chest.

Loud laughter gave me a good excuse to look away from him.

"I want you to come back with me so we can work this out," he whispered. Kristoff's voice was like a caress, making my resolve weaker. "Anything you want, it's yours. My wealth means nothing to me without you."

I needed words of love, not wealth.

"I need you." His voice was a soft caress, the summer breeze ruffling his dark hair.

"I'm not signing the contract and you seem to need that to trust me."

I waited a few seconds, hoping he'd tell me otherwise, but instead he laid a feather light kiss on my cheek.

"Marry me," he asked for the second time today.

I wanted, scratch that *needed*, to hear him tell me he loved me. "Why do you want to marry me? Because I'm pregnant?"

"No," he replied, his voice firm. "Because you are everything I want and need. You ground me, you complete me. I love everything about you - your big heart, your smile, your determination and most of all, you. Just you. The girls, you, and the twins are my family. From the first moment our eyes met, I was yours whether you wanted me or not."

His words hit home. My heart stilled. My breath cut short. And my soul sang. I stared at this man, his words a whisper on the breeze around us, hearing them on repeat.

Sierra's whiny cry pulled me out of my stupor and I sought her out. She wasn't hurt, just cried from a long day. All the younger kids rubbed their eyes, yawning and cranky.

"Mommy," Saoirse whined.

It was time to go home. *Home*. This man was home. Glancing at Kristoff, I wanted to tell him he was everything I wanted and loved. But this wasn't the right moment.

"I'm going to take the kids back home. It's way past their bedtime," I told him, my voice slightly nervous. God, I wanted him, I wanted him so much it hurt. "I can leave my Jeep with you. I'll call a taxi."

"No, I'm going with you. I'll drive."

"But-"

"I'm going with you." He used his non-negotiable tone. "My place is by your side, just as yours is by mine."



We walked over to the kids. The sea, beach time, and fresh air made them all early bed-timers.

Kristoff knelt down along with me, as I asked them all, “Who’s ready to go home?”

They all jumped at the opportunity, including Kai and Sienna.

“Alrighty then,” I mumbled. “Guess we’re all going home.”

Sierra came to me and reached her hands up. Lifting her up carefully, I ensured she sat on my hip so she didn’t push against my baby bump.

Kristoff picked up Saoirse, and the rest of them just walked. Rick strolled over, ready to go along with us.

“Rick, why don’t you stay and bring the others?” Kristoff said. “You are the only one that hasn’t had any alcohol. We’ll take the kids, and tuck them all in.”

Rick’s eyes flickered my way, and I just nodded.

“Ok, then,” he said to Kristoff. “We’ll probably see you both tomorrow.”

It took two minutes for all the kids to fall asleep in the back of the car, a total of five minutes to get back home, and another five minutes to put all the kids to bed.

Pulling a light sheet over Sierra knowing she liked to sleep covered, I turned to leave the girls’ room to find Kristoff waiting for me. Leaning against the door frame, his arms crossed over his broad chest, he was the epitome of handsome.

As I sauntered to him, he shifted into the hallway. I pulled the door shut behind me. Nervous energy buzzed beneath my skin. You’d think I was being walked home after my first date. His hand came on my lower back, gently nudging me to our rooms. As we walked in silence, my heart thundered so hard. I wanted him so much. I have never wanted a man as much as I wanted him but part of me was scared.

He told me almost everything I wanted to hear so why was my internal debate ongoing. I needed his trust too. That if doubts arose, he’d come and talk to me.

We got to our rooms, both of us stopping at the same time. I slowly turned to face him, glancing up at his handsome face.

“Gemma.” His voice sent a warm tingle down my spine. Unable to look away, I held my breath as I stared at him. “I trust you, fully and wholeheartedly. I knew there were things from your past you were holding

back. I understand why. Please give *us* another chance. For you. For our children. For us. For me. Because I can't let you go."

Heat burst in my chest, sinking into my blood. It felt so close to the words of love, but not quite. Those hooded green eyes were hungry for me, and my body was so attuned to him, wanting him. His big hand gently took the nape of my neck, while his other was on my back, gently pulling me closer. He bent his head down, his lips slowly reaching for mine.

My hands on his chest, I felt his strong muscles, and his strong beating heart under my fingertips. My body decided on its own. I closed the distance between us and kissed him gently. *Hesitantly*. As if that was all the permission he was looking for, his hand around my back pulled me even closer, my body flushing against him. My heart pounded hard, desire overwhelming me. His head came down and his soft lips touched mine. My eyelids fluttered shut, enjoying all the sensations brought by his body so close to mine. His tongue brushed against my lower lip, and I eagerly opened to let him in.

"I need you, Genevieve," he whispered against my lips. "My breath. My soul. My everything. It all belongs to you." My arms went around his neck, and I pressed my lips against his. His touch felt like heaven and his scent was familiar.

He swallowed my moan. I was at the point of no return. My eyes remained closed, refusing to see any kind of reality.

I wanted *everything* when it came to him.

And still my body refused to obey and pressed harder against him, feeling his hard body against mine. I'd enjoy it for a bit longer. The heat of his body stole my breath. Every muscle in his body pulled taut.

"Please, don't stop," I begged.

His control snapped, and he lifted me by grabbing my butt. I wrapped my legs around him. His kiss was hard, his tongue exploring my mouth, teasing. His mouth moved to my neck.

"I missed my woman," he rasped against my skin. "I missed your pussy clenching my cock, your moans, your voice. Your fucking everything. There's nobody else for me. Ever."

"Ditto," I breathed.

In a haze, I registered that he was walking and heard the door shut. He laid me gently on the bed, spread my legs, and his hands were climbing along my legs and up my thighs.

He pushed my dress up, pulling it over my head, leaving me only in my bra and panties. My fingers reached for his shirt and started unbuttoning it with shaky fingers. My body was on fire, enjoying his hot touch all over my skin. It felt like he was branding my skin everywhere his fingers caressed, making me his all over again. His mouth was again on mine, while his fingers moved over my swollen sex. I knew he could feel how wet I was while his fingers were on my panties.

His lips left mine, moved down my neck to my breasts, and continued over my no longer flat stomach. He kissed my slightly rounded belly, and a fleeting thought crossed my mind, wondering if he minded my baby bump.

His fingers on my clit rubbed and teased, and the thought vanished just as quickly as it came. I felt his hot lips on the inside of my thigh. His tongue licked to my panty line, and I moaned softly. His fingers went under my panties, exposing me to his touch.

“Oh,” I sighed. He removed my panties, and his hands moved my legs further apart. His mouth, hot and wet, covered my most sensitive part. His tongue flicked my clit in lazy circles, his fingers parting me and dipping in. I was holding on for dear life. He sucked on my nub, and I found myself arching into his mouth, wanting more of him, his tongue working me harder, faster. My panting increased, low moans breaking the silence.

“Kristoff,” I whispered, licking my lips. As if he understood, he increased his suction. The pressure in my body increased, and was so intense, like never before. I knew I was close. My body exploded into an orgasm, and I shook against him, consumed by extreme pleasure.

His belt jingled as he got rid of his pants. My heart started to thump wildly in its cage. I wanted him inside me. I knew this wasn’t a smart move but I didn’t care. I needed him. I was sensitive everywhere. I opened my eyes, looking at him through heavy lids. His gaze on me, he leaned in and kissed me on the lips, I could taste myself on his tongue.

“Yes?” he asked in his raspy voice.

I wrapped my hands around his neck, my fingers in his hair. “Yes,” I answered in a husky whisper.

His tip touched my wetness and slowly slid inside, parting me, nibbling at my neck, my earlobe. His hands held my hips possessively, not allowing me to move. His thighs pushed into me.

“Kris,” I panted. “I need more.” *So much more.*

“Tell me.” His voice was soft in my ear. “Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” I breathed. “Please fuck me.”

As if the last thread of his control snapped, he pushed his cock hard, filling me to the hilt, stretching me. He filled me completely, and a sigh escaped my lips.

Feeling my need, he sped up, matching both of our urgent demands. He pulled out almost completely before pushing forward again, hard. He pushed faster and harder, again and again, his thrusts powerful and all consuming. He was hammering into me, the bed complaining underneath our bodies. His strength was holding me on the edge, my heat throbbing, needing the release. I was almost there.

“Oh my God,” I moaned. “Harder!”

His mouth close to my ear, his silky command undid me. “Come with me, beautiful.”

A wave of pleasure hit me hard, running through my body. His name on my lips, I held on as a wave of sensation was shaking through me. I shivered and moaned under his strong body, as he shuddered above me. He groaned in my ear and gently kissed my mouth. His arms were wrapped around me, holding me close.

While he held me, only our heavy breathing broke the silence. I felt happy, feelings of hope flowering inside me and pushed all my thoughts away. He rolled onto his back and pulled me over, holding me close, tucking me gently to his side. As our breathing slowly came back to normal, I drifted off to sleep enjoying his warm body next to me. I snuggled closer to him, feeling content for the first time in weeks and fell asleep.

## CHAPTER 75

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# KRISTOFF



My woman.  
Fucking *mine*.

I watched her sleep, her naked body a sight to behold. I'd never tire of watching her. Not in five years. Not in twenty. I'd grow old with her. Love her. Worship her.

I fucking loved her so goddamn much that just the thought of losing her brought me to my knees.

Tucking her body into me, I skimmed my lips against her temple. A small sigh left her lips but she didn't stir. Jonathan said she tired easier.

It turned out my best friend sleeping with my ex-wife was the best goddamn thing that could have happened to me. Our differences were settled, although I still refused to trust him.

But I trusted Gemma.

"You're in my blood, beating in my heart. You're my life," I whispered against her temple. "My everything. Life without you would just be existing. I love you. In this life and the next."

Her dark eyes fluttered open and our gazes connected. Confusion and exhaustion lingered in hers.

"Did I wake you?" I asked.

A breath of silence.

"I wanted to make sure you were still here," she rasped. "That it wasn't just a dream. Like so many nights before."

My chest grew full and I realized this love for her had been so deep beneath my skin, I'd never be able to stop loving her.

"I love you."

She raised herself up on one elbow, her eyes never wavering from my face. Her other hand came to lay on my chest, her touch sending a small shudder down my spine.

It was always like this. Her touch made my head fuzzy and my throat tight, because I had never needed anything. But I needed her.

When she remained quiet, I continued, “I was such an idiot, so sure I’d make you love me. I was willing to use my money and power. But I realized, money doesn’t move you. Yes, you needed it, but unlike most others, you just wanted it to survive. And my panic set in. That I had nothing to offer you and you’d walk. My jealousy kicked into overdrive.”

She leaned over, her lips brushing against mine. God, the hold this woman had on me. She still didn’t know how deep my obsession with her ran.

“I love you too,” she murmured. “So damn much.”

I nipped her bottom lip and she sighed in my mouth.

And then, I made love to her again.

## CHAPTER 76

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# GENEVIEVE



Right light streaming through the window woke me, and I slowly opened my eyes, blinded by it. I hadn't felt this relaxed in weeks, and I smiled to myself. I went to move and felt strong arms wrapped around me. I remembered last night.

Too much emotion burned.

I swallowed and turned to see Kristoff's handsome face. My heart swelled at the sight. I brushed my fingers over his dark hair, the words from last night dancing through the air. I loved him. My body nor my mind would ever want anyone else. He was *it* for me.

My eyes roamed the space. We ended up in my bedroom last night.

He said he loves me. My pulse fluttered remembering his words.

I slowly shifted out of his arms, ensuring I didn't wake him. I got up and tiptoed around the room grabbing my clothes out of the closet, as quietly as I could, and went into the bathroom to pee. As I shut the bathroom door behind me, I exhaled and leaned against it. My reflection stared back at me, the mirror reflecting a dreamy smile and thoroughly satisfied woman with a blissful expression. God, what that man did to me!

I quickly put on my clothes, washed my face, and brushed my teeth

I used the toilet and wiped myself when I noticed blood and froze. "No, no, no," I kept muttering. "God, please no."

"Gemma?" Kristoff must have been right in front of my bathroom door. "What's wrong?"

I knew what this meant. I quickly flushed the toilet. "Gemma?" he called again.

“Come in.” My voice shook, my hands trembled. He didn’t even wait for me to finish the word and he was already by my side.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in a worried voice.

Tears pricked at the back of my eyes, threatening to spill at any moment.

“Don’t panic, ok?” I sniffled. “I’m bleeding, just a little bit.” He stared at me numb. “It could be nothing, but I should probably find a doctor.”

“Sophie is a doctor, Ob/Gyn,” he claimed and I wondered why he’s so calm. “She’ll take care of you. That’s the reason I brought her with me.”

“Ok,” I muttered. Lifting me into his arms, gently, he strode back into the bedroom and he laid me onto the bed.

“Don’t get up,” he ordered. “I’ll go get her. All will be ok. We are having those babies.”

A tear trickled down my cheek. “Ok.” But panic started to choke me. Cramps. Bloody sheets. Loss. It gripped my throat, threatening to steal my breath.

His arms wrapped around me. “Please don’t cry. It hurts to see you upset. I won’t let our babies leave us. Sophie will take care of everything.”

I nodded, although if it wasn’t meant to be, I knew it wouldn’t.

He left and came back moments later with Sophie who was still in her pjs. She had her doctor’s bag with her.

“Hi there,” I tried to greet her cheerfully, but my nose was already stuffy from trying to hold back tears.

“No reason to panic,” Sophie assured me with a smile. “Sometimes slight bleeding happens after intercourse.”

My cheeks were on fire. I put both my hands on my face embarrassed.

“You told her?” I asked Kristoff in shock. He just shrugged his shoulder and came to sit next to me.

“No need to panic,” Sophie added matter of fact. “After all, that’s how you got pregnant.”

“Oh my God,” I grumbled. “Can I die now please?”

She threw back her head and laughed. “Not on my watch. Ok, we’ll do a routine checkup and then I’ll examine your uterus.”

I glanced at Kristoff. “Are you sure you want to stay?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he replied with a stubborn determination. “We are doing this together.”

I shook my head and mumbled, “I should have sworn off sex.”

Kristoff squeezed my hand gently, the touch comforting, our eyes locked and I held his gaze focused entirely on me. God, I was glad he was here with me.

“By the way, how did you find me?” I wondered slightly frowning. I needed a distraction, anything just so I wouldn’t think about a potential miscarriage.

“Jonathan.” From my peripheral I noted Sophie glared up at Kristoff but didn’t say anything. “I had one of my yachts in Italy so when he sent me a message, I bought the hospital Sophie worked at and brought her with me to Venice, then took the yacht here.”

“Well, it was either that or losing my job,” Sophie grumbled, though her smile didn’t escape me.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I admitted, his grip on my hand tightening. “Both of you.”

“Me too,” Sophie responded.

She was efficient and went through all the routine, normal stuff - took temperature, took blood pressure, even took some blood and then she was ready to perform a vaginal exam.

“This is too embarrassing,” I muttered.

He cupped my cheeks and kissed me on the lips. “We are doing this together.”

Sophie glanced curiously between Kristoff and me waiting for my signal. I finally nodded and she went right to work snapping her latex gloves on and went on poking and prodding. It took her all of two minutes and she was done.

“Everything is fine,” she announced when she was done. “Those babies are not going anywhere. The bleeding is very slight, as I suspected, probably caused by the intercourse.” And just as I thought I couldn’t be more embarrassed, she added, “You two might want to ease up on hard core sex. Try a lighter version of it.” She chuckled like it was the funniest joke ever.

“Jesus.” I was ready for the earth to swallow me whole because this was embarrassing. I couldn’t even look Sophie in the eyes.

“Just joking. All is good with those babies.”

Kristoff let out a heavy breath and wrapped me in his arms. “Thank fuck.”

Sophie cleaned up her stuff and was out of my room in no time.

“Those were the worst few minutes of my life,” he mumbled against my head. I glanced up at him and noticed the stress on his face. “I might have aged a year or two.”

“I’m sorry.” He didn’t need more stress. Neither one of us did. “I panicked.”

“It’s good that you said something and now we are sure everything is okay.” I guess I didn’t realize just how much he wanted this too. We remained wrapped up together like that for a few minutes.

“Gemma,” Kristoff started off quietly. “Why won’t you marry me?”

I snapped my eyes to his and his face was serious. He had proposed twice in a matter of days.

I averted my eyes. The truth was I wanted to marry him. For all of us to be a family. He said he loved me but worry still lingered. His hand took my chin gently and forced me to look at him.

He held my gaze with such intensity, as if both our lives depended on it.

“Tell me,” he commanded.

“I didn’t say I don’t want to marry you,” I muttered, our gazes locked together. “I’m worried you are driven to marry me because I’m pregnant. You switched from the contract to marriage and I’m struggling with the mixed signals.”

He regarded me pensively. “I wanted you to sign the contract to keep you just for myself. I wanted to be the only one for you.”

“You were,” I told him quietly, and added. “You *are* the only one for me. You’ll probably be the only one for me regardless of whether you marry me or not.”

“I want to be the only one for you until my dying breath.” His voice was a low grumble. “I want to be your all, like you are my all. I want your body and soul, but most of all I want your heart. Because you’ve had mine since the moment I laid my eyes on you. I didn’t recognize it at first. Call me an old fool.” He pulled me closer. “I’m happy about the babies because now I have you trapped. I’d kill anyone that dares to touch you. Regardless if you marry me or not. But if you’d marry me for me, because you want to, I swear to God, I’ll make you happy. Every goddamn day, I’ll thank God on my knees to have brought you into my office.”

Tears pricked in my eyes. I could feel his fast and strong heartbeat. He rested his forehead on mine, his familiar scent cocooning me.

“Say something,” he groaned.

“I love you.” A tear rolled down my cheek. “I want you for better or worse. So deep and raw that it scares me.”

He stilled and then a rough sound rumbled in his chest. “You’re mine now.”

“Stupid hormones.” I wiped my tears.

“Beautiful hormones.” His mouth skimmed over my face. “I love you. Raw and deep. And I’ll spend the rest of my life showing you how much.”

His lips brushed across mine, and he said in a deep voice, “Marry me because I love you. Marry me because you want to be mine forever and I want to be yours forever.”

I loved him. And he’d be mine forever.

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## CHAPTER 77

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# GENEVIEVE

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## SIX WEEKS LATER



“Stop fidgeting,” Betty complained. “You are messing up your hair.”  
“Forget my hair,” I retorted with a wide smile. God, I was so happy I could burst. “It’ll get messed up anyway. Kristoff gets a bit rough in the bedroom. We’re trying out some kinky stuff after the ceremony.”

I winked, a playful smile on my lips.

“Jesus, why would you tell me that?” Betty giggled. “What happened to my reserved best friend?”

I shrugged my shoulders, glancing at the woman staring back at me in the mirror. My brown hair fell in thick waves down my back, sunlight coming through the yacht window highlighting the warm tones in it. My whiskey brown eyes sparkled and reflected back at me with a happy gleam. Slight makeup accented my eyes, lips, and cheekbones. My beach tan was enough. It contrasted against my simple, white, strapless baby doll wedding dress that came to my knees and matching two inch heels. My baby bump was getting bigger by the day.

I couldn’t believe I was getting married. To Kristoff. Part of me was still paranoid because I was so happy. I was just waiting for something to hamper my happiness.

We were still in Croatia. Kristoff pulled a few strings to get us married on his yacht by a U.S. judge. If it was up to him, we’d have been married already.

Sienna, Saoirse, and Sierra burst into the room where Betty and I were getting ready. They all ran to me for a big hug.



“It’s time,” Saoirse exclaimed. They were all flower girls, wearing sky blue matching dresses, and Betty’s boys were ring bearers in summer dress suits. One for Kristoff’s ring and one for mine. Both Kristoff and I opted for no best man or maid of honor. Just witnesses.

“Mommy,” Sierra placed her hand on my belly. “Baby sister and brother today?”

I smiled. Kristoff and I had talked to the girls about the baby brothers or sisters they would soon have and the conversation couldn't have gone better. They were thrilled about it, all of it. And they couldn't wait to get back to the States so we could all live together. Kristoff and I agreed we'd live in his...correction...our house in Bethesda and spend weekends at our place in Pasadena.

“No, not today,” I answered my youngest. “We have a while longer to go.”

They all cleared the room leaving me alone. With a final glance in the mirror, I walked out of the large bedroom on the yacht and made my way onto the large deck. The timeless song “Canon in D” was already playing as I made my entrance down the aisle, made up of chairs and flowers on each side of the aisle. Kristoff flew his mother in who was over the moon that things worked out. He also brought his mothers’ close friends from her birthday party that visited my grandparents' old cottage and Laura, my first mother-in-law. Rick, Betty, and Jonathan never left, helping with wedding preparations and Sophie came back just for the wedding.

But nothing mattered right now except for Kristoff waiting for me at the end of the aisle. His eyes never wavered from me as I walked towards him with fluttering butterflies in my stomach. I focused on that beautiful face I loved so much and with each step I took, his smile got bigger.

He reached out his hand towards me, and I took it with my shaking fingers. For once, I was shaking from happiness. He gently squeezed my hand, a promise he'd never let me go.

As we stood in front of the judge announcing our vows, all I remembered was us saying, “I do,” followed by Kristoff taking my face into his hands as he gently locked his lips with mine and my hands holding on to him.

Applause broke through and he reluctantly ended the kiss.

“I love you,” his first words as my husband whispered against my lips, causing a shiver to run down my spine.

“I love you too,” I gushed in a raspy breathless voice.

“This is the best contract you could have ever given me,” he uttered and bent his head into one more kiss. “You are the exception to all my rules and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

My heart fluttered and my eyes burned with happy tears. “How could I say no?” I joked in a soft voice, the happiest I’ve ever been. “To the best negotiator.”

He pulled me closer to his body, his arms enveloped my frame as love shone through his green eyes. “I don’t give a damn about any titles. The only one I care about is being your husband, Gemma Baldwin.”

All I cared about was this man and our growing family. He was mine and I was his.

I couldn’t wait to start my future with him.

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# EPILOGUE

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## KRISTOFF - TWO YEARS LATER



The moment my driver passed through the gate, I couldn't help the smile curving my lips. The immaculate lawn wasn't so immaculate anymore. The quiet estate wasn't so quiet anymore. The home wasn't a lonely place to lay my head.

Gemma and my home boomed with laughter, loud voices, occasional tears and arguments, but it was all worth it. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

"Seems the kids had a good day, sir," my driver remarked.

He was right. If the driveway marked with chalk full of colors, bikes, and a kiddie pool were anything to go by. I still didn't understand the need for a kiddie pool when we had a perfectly functioning real pool, but Gemma insisted it was better.

So we went with it. She dragged me to Target and picked out the cheapest pool she could find. I'd do anything to keep her happy. If she wanted me to drain the Olympic size pool, so be it. As long as she continued smiling.

The car came to a stop, and I grinned. Gemma sat at the doorstep of our mansion, wearing jean shorts, exposing her long, beautiful legs, and my t-shirt that swallowed her frame. She had never looked more beautiful. And *mine*.

My chest grew full as I watched them all. Her dark hair fell down her shoulders, messy and wild, but she didn't care. Her big smile and the love that shone through her eyes as she took care of our children was priceless.

She held one of the twins in her arms, our son. He was a mamma's boy. Sienna held our daughter, while our other daughters ran around the driveway chasing each other with a sprinkler.

It was a madhouse in the best possible way.

Gemma's caramel eyes flashed happily at seeing me and she rose to her feet. "Look, it's Daddy," she told our son.

All the girls' heads turned my way in sync and suddenly ran my way, ready to tackle me.

"Daddy, daddy, daddy." I'd never tire of hearing that.

I knelt down to hug Sierra and Saoirse, who almost tackled me down.

Then lifting them both up, I kissed Sienna on the forehead and bent my head to kiss my almost two year old. Just a few more months.

"Look at all my princesses," I drawled. "Any prince out there better watch out, because this Pappa is about to kick some butt."

Sierra and Saoirse giggled. "You said a bad word."

I winked. "Don't tell Mommy. She doesn't like it when I say bad words."

Both of them put their fingers to their mouths. "Shhh." My youngest mimicked them and it just made me all fucking mushy inside.

My wife reached me at that moment and she lifted on her tiptoes to press a kiss to my lips while our son flopped his hands and legs, ready for a takeoff.

"Hello, love." I murmured against her lips.

"Yuck, so gross," the girls exclaimed.

"How was your day?" I asked her. Most of the days, she worked from home. We had a nanny come daily and help her out, but Gemma insisted on participating and being around.

"Little bit of puke, guts, and glory." Her mouth skimmed over my cheek. "And lots of tears," she whispered so only I could hear her.

"One of those days, huh?"

She nodded. "Here let me take him," I offered, extending my hand. "I know your back hurts."

Smiling gratefully, she handed me our son. "And how is my boy that's going to protect all his sisters?" I cooed at him, his attentive eyes watching me. "We'll have to kick butt all the time, little man."

"Kristoff!" My wife scolded me. "The children." All my girls' eyes turned my way, twinkling mischievously. Then Gemma groaned. "Ugh, you already said those words to them, didn't you?"

"Absolutely not," I lied, then smacked her ass gently to get her going. "Now, what's for dinner, wife?"

She rolled her eyes. “Why are you asking me? Ask your chef?”

“I hope he wasn’t flirting with you,” I joked. “I know how much he loves you for making us all eat at home.”

She shrugged, glancing over her shoulder, giving me a saucy look. “He’s fixing me a special dessert. Why would I ever go out?”

“Ah my wife’s a homebody,” I purred. “That’s the bottom line.”

The moment we stepped inside, commotion filled every square foot of my twenty thousand square foot home. You wouldn’t think it was possible for little people to overtake a home.

Trust me, it was totally possible. Because my kids did it. And I’d build them another twenty thousand square feet, just to keep them happy and safe.

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## GEMMA

I sat on the couch in Kristoff's library, my feet tucked under me and my head on his chest, as we watched a show. An old BBC show. The children were finally asleep and we both enjoyed the quiet before bedtime.

It was amazing how fast the years had flown by. Every single day was better than the last. Even when disagreements happened, and they did, there wasn't a day that I regretted my vows to my husband.

He was my prince. My happily ever after. My everything.

I had found what I've been looking for and I'd never let it go.

"Why do you like this show?" Kristoff asked, breaking the comfortable silence.

I chuckled. "It's simple. And funny. It's us when we're grey and old. Nothing really matters when you're that age, but we'll have each other. And our family. Everything else will just be background noise."

His mouth brushed my forehead. "Us against the world, my little romantic."

The show ended and I was about to press for the next episode when I froze.

"What's the matter?" Kristoff asked, alerted to all my moods.

I met the eyes that he passed on to our twins. "When was the last time we had sex?"

His deep chuckle rumbled through his chest. "Seven days and eighteen hours."

"Oh my gosh," I exclaimed. "How can that be?"

"You have been exhausted," he murmured against my hair. "Taking care of the girls, the twins, and helping with the accounting and finance at W&W."

"But don't you want sex?" My husband hadn't initiated sex in seven days and eighteen hours. Did he not want me anymore?"

He cupped my cheek. "I want you every second of the day. But not at the expense of your exhaustion."

I brushed our noses together. "God, I love you."

His beautiful mouth curved into a smile. "I love you more. So fucking much there are days I'm scared I'll wake up and find this damn house

immaculate. And empty.”

She chuckled. “I think it’s safe to assume it won’t be empty for a very long time.”

His fingers tangled in my hair. “We can watch another episode. I enjoy doing this with you.”

I shook my head. “No, no, no,” I protested. “Tonight, we’re gonna get wild.”

“Oh, tell me more, baby.” He stood up and lifted me into his arms. “Tell me what kind of wild you’re in the mood for.”

“Your kind of wild, husband.” I giggled and blushed like a schoolgirl. “Please don’t strain your back.”

“If you make a reference to my advanced age, wife, I’m gonna have to spank you.” He leaned down and gave me a gentle nip on my lip. “Actually, on second thought, I’ll have to spank you for that one.”

“Ohhh... can’t wait.” I remarked all giddy.

Kristoff’s firm stride never ceased as he carried me to our bedroom. My palm pressed flat against his chest, feeling his hard muscles underneath my fingers, I pressed my mouth on his neck, skimming them over his hot skin.

“I love you so much,” I rasped.

My lips raised to his mouth and his lips eagerly met mine as he took control of the kiss, deepening it, his tongue in search of mine. I moaned into his kiss, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck, my fingers in his hair.

He sat me down on the bed, then pulled my shirt over my head in quick, eager movements that matched mine as I scrambled with his pants and his shirt. I lifted my hips off the bed as he took my pajama shorts off, leaving me in my bra and panties.

“My woman,” he rasped, his gaze hot on me.

His hand gently brushed down my neck to my cleavage, light like a feather, down my flat stomach and ending between my thighs. He could feel my hot wetness, even through my panties. His fingers teased through that thin piece of fabric, my back arched in need to feel him inside me. He hooked his fingers in my panties and pulled them down my legs. Next my bra was gone too.

“Open for me, love.” My husband’s voice was gentle but commanding, sending shivers down my spine. I slowly opened my thighs, exposing my pussy to his hot gaze, my face burning hot.



“Beautiful,” he murmured. Having him watch me, staring at my most intimate part like he couldn't get enough of the sight, turned me on more than anything. His fingers grazed my pussy. A shiver ran through my body and my head fell back with a moan. His finger found my clit and started circling it, faster and faster. I was so wet for him. I could feel the slick desire running down my thighs. My eyes fluttered shut, my breathing grew heavier.

“Watch me get you off, wife,” Kristoff commanded. My eyelids heavy, I forced them open. “I want you to look at me as you orgasm.”

I licked my lips as I locked eyes with him, my heart beating wild. He consumed my every heartbeat, my every breath, my everything. I was his and he was mine.

Kristoff increased the speed stroking my clit, my body humming as I arched my back eager to get more of him. His one finger slid through my drenched folds, while the other kept just the right amount of pressure on my clit. My eyelids grew heavy.

“Kristoff...” My voice was husky, breathless.

“Don't hold it back,” he rasped. “Come for me.”

That was all it took for pleasure to burst through me, my body trembling. I came for him hard, drenching his fingers. Our eyes still locked, he brought his fingers to his lips and sucked on my juices, never wavering his gaze from me.

“I want you inside me,” I pleaded, my body shuddering from the release. Nothing felt better than sharing pleasure with him.

“I want to fuck you hard,” he groaned. “So hard you'll feel me every time you move for days after.”

“Yes,” my voice came as a whisper. My heart pounded against my chest.

“Open your legs.” My legs opened wider at his commanding voice.

He poised himself at my entrance, and I whimpered my complaint. “Don't make me wait,” I whimpered.

In one forceful thrust, he pushed deep inside me, filling me to the hilt.

“Ahhhh,” my voice came out in a moan. Without giving me time to adjust, he started moving, thrusting deep and hard. Fast and deep. His fingers gripped my hips and I felt every inch of him inside me, filling me. He always gave me everything.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” My moans came out in screams. “Please, Kristoff.”

“You’re made for me.” His voice was a grunt, as he claimed me. “Only for me. Mine.”

I arched my back as he continued thrusting into me. I was so close, and my body in tune to his, I knew he was close too. His length grew bigger, filling me and my fingernails scraped his back, holding on to him as my anchor.

“Fuck, Gemma,” he groaned, his voice now a rumble. “Come with me.” His fingers went for my clit and just his hard touch made my orgasm explode. My eyes rolled into the back of my head, white stars behind my eyelids.

My body shuddered from the intense orgasm, and my pussy gripped his cock, milking him for all he had.

My husband wrapped his arms around me, still buried deep inside. Our labored breathing filled our bedroom, his mouth showering my neck with kisses and words of affection.

“Amazing,” he whispered into my ear.

“Yes,” I murmured, my voice still breathless. With him, every time felt amazing and new. I pushed my face into his neck, brushing my lips over his skin. Inhaling his scent that always calmed me, even during our disagreements.

“I love you, my beautiful exception. Forever,” he vowed.

I had everything I needed right here.

THE END

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my friends and family for their continued support.

To my alpha and beta readers - you are all amazing. This one went through so many changes and reiterations, and you've been so patient with me. Y'all are amazing!

Thank you to **Susan C.H.** and **Beth H.** who always have my back. I don't know how I'd get through some of these without you!

To **Christine S., Denise R. and Jill H.** - you ladies rock! And to a countless number of others - THANK YOU!

My books wouldn't be what they are without each one of you.

To my editor, Rachel at **MW Editing**. Thank you for enduring my wild ideas.

To my rockstar cover designer **Eve Graphics Designs, LLC**.

To the bloggers and reviewers who helped spread the word about this book. I appreciate you so much and hearing you love my work, makes it that much more enjoyable!

And last but not least, **to all my readers!** This wouldn't be possible without you. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for your amazing and supportive messages.

Thank you all! I couldn't have done any of this without you!

*Eva Winners*

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