

The Playboy's Crush



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THE PLAYBOY'S CRUSH
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#1 IN THE MIAMI BILLIONAIRE PLAYBOYS TRILOGY

OTHER NOVELS IN THE TRILOGY:

± THE PLAYBOY'S BRIDE

± THE PLAYBOY'S NEMESIS

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PREFACE

Whatever had propelled him to go after the lady, who didn't look any human but a fallen angel, even after the it's-a-playboy's-thing tease he had made with his friend, Shane couldn't point it out.

He had gone to Adrian Stone's bachelor party, which to him would be far more entertaining than the formal wedding party Adrian planned on having, with his friend, Derrari, who was also Adrian's partner in business. Derrari had been friends with Adrian since either their high school or college days. Whichever it was, he didn't care, and he had known Adrian through him.

Shane sat with his friend, Derrari, and a glass of wine before each of them, both taking into observation each lady that walked by. He swept his tongue over his lip at the sight of a slim, well-shaped brunette with beautiful long legs that moved gracefully in heels.

"Stop staring at her, will you?" Derrari said, his gaze fixed on the lady's swaying buttocks.

"You can't resist her either. She's hot," Shane said, looking away from the direction the lady was headed when she was out of sight.

"Oh! I can," Derrari said. "But I'm sure she can't resist my good looks."

"Quit fooling yourself. You're getting old, man. This," he said, brushing his finger across his face, "is the real pretty face." He sat up, positioning himself with an aura of pride around him.

Derrari sneered. "Pretty face indeed. That doesn't win the game anymore. What scores is the money—the cash. Ladies will line up to get your attention with the abundance of that in your hands."

"But there's no denying the fact that every lady's dream is to have a Prince Charming, desperate to win her love, down on his knee, with a ring ready in his hand," he said with a faux dreamy expression on his face.

"Quit talking rubbish. Women's main foresight is money, and everything about them is money. Money first, then, maybe, Prince Charming."

"I agree with you on that," Shane said, raising his cup to his mouth and taking a drink from his wine.

Derrari's gaze swept through the throngs of people in the bar, both men and women, in a

wild frenzy. Hoots and whistles erupted at the sight of a stripper twirling and dancing seductively on stage.

One of the men staggered up to the stage, grabbed the stripper to himself, and splayed his hands over her body while she danced.

"Wow!" Derrari muttered under his breath as he stared at the lone angel that sat at the counter.

Shane followed his gaze and reacted as Derrari had done, a "Wow!" escaping his mouth as well. Although he could only glimpse a side view of her face, he knew it when he saw something extraordinarily beautiful.

"Stay away from her, Shane," Derrari warned. "You're more bad luck than whatever got her in that pensive mood she's in."

"Says who?"

"Let me approach her. I'm better at this than you are."

"That's obvious." Shane nodded sarcastically.

"I am your mentor," he told him.

Getting off the stool he was sitting on, he made his way toward the lady, taking a seat on the stool by her right while Shane took the one by her left. Everybody was busy drinking and cheering, with the groom kept busy by the half-naked dancers around him. More hollers and howls filled the air as a stripper slid to the ground, splayed her legs apart, and twirled around the iron bars.

"Hi, beauty." Derrari waved to get the lady's attention, hollering over the noise.

Shane hissed under his breath.

Mentor, his foot.

Was that the way to approach a depressed lady?

The lady glanced at Derrari and focused on the dark red liquid before her.

"Real beauty!" Derrari spoke to him over her head.

Shane studied her closely, taking in the view with pleasure and admiration. He raised his glass to his mouth and drank, taking in the angelic beauty of the lady.

"Over here, beauty." Derrari gestured.

Shane hadn't seen it coming. She turned without warning in his direction, giving him a full view of her face. He choked on his drink with a sputter. Holding his breath, he stared at her, but she didn't even seem to notice him. Giving in, he hacked intermittently from his throat, pressing his hand flat out to his chest to suppress his coughs, and nailing Derrari with a death glare as he watched him with an amused smile on his face.

She had the most beautiful face of all. A natural beauty.

Her face was smooth and fresh, with no taint of artificial beautification. She had pairs of lovely, round amber eyes that shone like gold with beautiful, thick, dark, and long eyelashes, and small, round lips that puckered in readiness to be seared with kisses.

Her hair was a rich reddish-brown that pooled down in luscious waves and teasing curls down the frame of her shoulders. Lazy strands of hair hovered over her face and framed it in a state-of-the-art image of Aphrodite in her physical form.

When she looked at him, she paused as if searching his face.

Yeah, he got that often. His looks were irresistible. He was the epitome of a god.

He was handsome and tall, with a face every lady swooned for.

"Are you okay?" she asked in a voice that soothed all the burns in his throat.

"Pardon?" He furrowed his brows.

"You were coughing," she pointed out.

"Oh! Thanks," he said. "Shane Williams." He extended his hand for a shake.

She nodded at him.

Forcing a smile, he retracted his hand. "That's my friend behind you," he informed her.

She looked at Derrari.

"Call me Derrari, beauty." He winked at her and flashed that smile of his—which he tagged as charming—at her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said, turning back to her cup and ignoring the two. She raked her fingers through her hair, restless in her seat. She tapped her thumb absentmindedly on the counter surface, her gaze fixed on the wine in her cup.

"Hey!" Shane called, trying to attract her attention. He thought of knocking on the countertop, but it wasn't probable she would hear it over the noise.

She picked out her phone and swiped lazily on its screen. She turned in his direction, but she was staring off into the distance.

He looked back, scanning the room, and saw nothing unusual. "Are you seeing things or what?"

She chuckled softly at that, and he felt his heart swell with happiness. A smile crept on his face.

Why was he happy?

He had succeeded in making her smile, unlike his 'mentor', who had not been able to do a thing.

"Do you want to talk or what?"

Exhaling, she nodded, strapped her bag across her shoulder, and walked off into the crowds partying in that bar.

Finishing his drink with a swig, he tallied after her.

"Wish me luck, mentor," he said with a wink, and he followed her into an empty hallway with dimmed fluorescent lights, devoid of sound except the shuffling of their feet on the floor.

Where the hell was she going?

"I never knew this place existed." His voice echoed in the air.

She whirled around to face him, utterly shocked. "What are you doing here?"

"I should be asking you that. You told me you wanted to talk, and then you brought me to this de..."

"Leave! Now!" she ordered.

Shane arched an eyebrow. The lady was driving him crazy. Was she kidding him?

"Please, leave. My fiance will be here soon. Leave." She resorted to a plea.

What kind of man meets his fiancée in the deserted hallway of a bar? Shane wondered.

"Lara, what's going on here?" A deep, gruff voice resonated from afar, leaving an echo in the air. The sounds of shoes furiously stomping on the floor as they approached echoed in the empty hallway.

That must be the fiance.

"Shane, leave," Lara whispered with a silent plea.

He expected to see her fiancé by then. "Lara, are you...(dating a ghost?)" He wanted to say but choked on his words when he lowered his gaze and burst out laughing, unable to help himself. "Your fiancé is a dwarf." He spat.

Was her taste for men that bad?

What could have gotten into her head to make her willing to be engaged to someone like him?

He was a stout, bald man with edgy, dimmed, and bloodshot eyes and an angry mustache stashed to his lips, which tightened in a grimace. The man was the perfect picture of a walking marionette.

Enraged at Shane's mockery of his stature, he growled at Lara, "Who the hell is he, and what is he doing here?"

"I swear I don't know him, George," Lara whimpered.

"Then, tell me how you knew his name and he knew yours."

"Actually..." Shane butted in but kept mum immediately when nailed with a death glare from George. He turned those beastly eyes on Lara, and she jolted back in fright, a shiver coursing through her.

Beast! Shane spat, as well as being incensed.

He knew he had no right to interfere in the matter, and only heaven knew why he cared, but he had a part in the disagreement, and there was no way he was leaving Lara to be devoured by the dwarf's beastly stares.

"Hey, dude, you're a fool."

George fixed his bloody eyes on him. He squared his shoulders and closed the distance between them, towering over him.

He was no man to fight with, or he would have pummeled his clenched fist into his already ugly face.

Even though he was her fiancé—Shane snickered inwardly at the absurdity of the word—he had no right to make her cry.

"George, please," Lara pleaded. Her eyes were clouded with tears.

Shane hated himself as he saw tears cloud her eyes and spill down her cheeks.

Way to go, Shane. Way to go.

Derrari was right after all. He was more bad luck than whatever had gotten her in a gloomy mood earlier.

"You are a disgrace to men of your ilk," he said angrily.

Lara cried and murmured her pleas bitterly.

Infuriated, Shane shot an angry look in her direction. Will you shut the hell up, Lara? I'm doing you a favor here.

Fuming with an unbridled rage, George said through clenched teeth, "The deal is over," and stormed away.

Lara paled at the information.

Shane couldn't help but snicker at the way George walked off angrily. Turning back to Lara, he breathed. "Hey."

Lara turned on him with a glare as cold as death, furious. "What else do you want from me?" She demanded.

She sucked in a deep breath, crossed her arms over her chest, and bit down on her lips to suppress her annoyance.

Shane took in the sight, his groin insensitively hardening. His gaze lingered on the cleavage that showed, fantasizing how lovely it would feel if they were in his hold to squish and lick. Noticing where his gaze was fixed, she dropped her arms at once. Raking her hands through her hair, she paced at a point.

"Lara." He tried to reason with her.

"What are you?" She turned on him.

What was he?

What sort of question was that?

"You have ruined me." She hunched her shoulders in a helpless gesture with a shudder. "Thanks a lot for that, okay? Because now I have to lose it all," she snapped angrily at him and attempted to bypass him.

Shane caught her by the wrist, a low hiss escaping through his teeth at the softness of her skin.

She snagged her hand out of his grasping as quickly as he had held it, hissed, and stormed off, leaving Shane confused about the entire scenario.

ONE

Shane had never been more embarrassed than he had been the previous week. He had been shunned by a lady—an extremely beautiful lady—who didn't even think twice about drowning in his good looks. Derrari hadn't helped matters either. He had laughed to his fill when he heard of what had happened, but that wasn't what really bothered him. He couldn't get his mind off Lara. His mind kept replaying what she had said, much to his annoyance.

You have ruined me. And thanks a lot, okay? Because now I have to lose it all.

What could she mean by that? Was she trying to imply that she could have all she wanted with that ugly dwarf of a man?

It was incredible. Preposterous.

There had to be more to it.

He recalled what George said about a deal being over. That attested to the fact that whatever was going on between the two wasn't based on attraction but more on intimidation, of which Lara was undoubtedly the victim.

Why did he even care? He had no idea who she was.

Brushing aside his thoughts about her, he settled back on his work but was unable to focus as his mind kept visualizing Lara's tearful face at George's words and what she had said about her life being ruined over that.

Frustrated, he shot up from his desk and walked to the window. He needed to stop thinking about her. He looked out the window, taking in the activity of the busy road outside—the swift movement of cars, people perambulating here and there, the gentle

breeze of the wind caressing his face—yet his mind flickered to Lara.

Heaving out a sigh, he made his way back to his seat. He needed to gain control of his mind again and forget about her, and there was only one way that could be possible.

Picking up his cellphone, he dialed Derrari's number while shutting down his laptop. "Are you up for a drink?"

"No problem," Derrari replied.

A few hours later, he was in 'The Broken Shaker' with his buddy, swigging cups of beer.

"Man, I can't believe you haven't gotten over the lady yet. I'm really disappointed, though. I already made a bet that you would have gotten over your obsession with her and gone back to shagging bitches by now," Derrari said.

"You can't understand." Shane took a drink from his cup.

"Yes, I can't," Derrari agreed, his voice laced with sarcasm, "as I've not been bewitched as you have been. There are hundreds of ladies out there, all ready to be at your service."

"Made-up beauties," Shane corrected. He leaned back with a sigh. "There's just that thing about her."

"She's exceptionally beautiful; you can't set your mind straight, blah-blah." Derrari rolled his eyes. He had heard those words without counting over the previous week. "Although, truth be told, she is ethereally beautiful," he admitted. "I can't believe a man like that," he chuckled, "is her fiance." He laughed, recalling Shane's description of the man. "Man, you're good." He could picture the man in his head in the explicit way he had been described by Shane.

Shane looked pensively, ignoring Derrari's jest. "She needs help," he thought aloud. "She needs to be helped."

"Alright. Prince Charming to the rescue! Am I here to be bored with your silly talks about your infatuation with a stranger, or to have fun?"

"Both," Shane answered. "I can't stop thinking about her, and I need to get my mind off her. The only way that can be achieved is this." He raised his cup in the air in Derrari's direction and took a long gulp, emptying the contents of the cup and refilling it with another serving from the bottle.

"Suit yourself, then," Derrari told him, tipping his cup in his direction before swigging its contents down his throat. "Ah!"

Despite all Shane's attempts to drown out the thoughts of Lara, his mind kept torturing him by bringing up images of Lara's tearful face, his subconscious mind never ceasing to remind him that he was to blame for it. After futile attempts at trying not to care, he finally threw in the towel.

He had gone back to the bar and requested an audience with the owner, who had helped him source the CCTV footage from the night.

Upon sighting her, he directed the man to zoom in on her and had her picture saved on his phone. Tipping the man handsomely for his help, he thanked him and employed his private investigator to find out what exactly was the deal with her and why her life would be ruined over the fact that George cancelled the deal between them.

★ ★ ★

Lara counted the money she had with her with a heavy heart as she approached the place texted to her by George's henchman to make the rendezvous. She grumbled at how crazy it was. Someone else had taken up the loan; someone else had died over it; and she was stuck paying a loan she had never obtained.

She had known her father from childhood to be a good-for-nothing and irresponsible fellow. He never took part in taking care of the household or funding her education. All he ever did was splurge the little he was able to get on drinking, gambling, and chasing after 'chicken-legged and pork-hipped ladies'.

If only her mom had listened to her advice and divorced him, she could have lived and as well spared her the misery of toiling around, trying to pay a debt she couldn't dream of paying up—if ever—with the menial jobs, from which she earned meager incomes, she had, but she said she loved him, and he would come around someday to his senses.

Well, even with her dead, he hadn't come back to his senses.

She sniffed and held back tears at the memory of her mom's death. The bastard of a man, whom she called her husband, was the reason why she had died. Still suffering from the shock of his elopement with a younger woman, the loan sharks had come to inform her about the loan he had obtained before his elopement, with her as collateral.

She was in high school then. Her mom had broken into hysterical sobs at the thought of losing her daughter following the loss of her husband. Her mom had worked virtually all day and night to save up enough to sustain both of them, ensured she did not drop out of school, and had given her all into working off her bones to raise money for the loan as well as for their upkeep.

She had also taken up part-time jobs after school to assist her mom in shouldering the burden. However, her mom eventually died from stress and exertion a year after her graduation from high school.

"How much do you have there?" One of George's henchmen demanded, taking the envelope in her hand.

"Ten thousand dollars," she replied flatly.

She paid on a three-month basis. She received an hourly wage from the jobs she shuffled together—five, to be exact—working overtime occasionally. Adding up her savings and the tips from her friends, she had been able to save up that much.

She wouldn't think about how much her father had cost her with his useless act. If she had invested all the money she had been handing over to George and his henchmen from the time she took up the burden of paying up the loan solely, she would have been on the track to becoming a billionaire by now.

The envelope was flung back at her. "What the hell do you think this is?"

"Money, idiot! What else would it be?" She retorted. Working over the years with pent-up frustration at just working with hardly any saving for herself had changed her from the sweet little girl she once was to the depressed lady who channeled her emotion into anger and rage.

"You watch your mouth there," he warned. "Do we look like thrift collectors? You owe over two million dollars, yet you are here with that." He snickered.

She scoffed. Was he kidding her?

"I've paid over two million dollars, and you are telling me sh*t about still owing the same two million dollars. You are crazy. Senile!" She spat.

"Shut the fuck up!" he growled, plastering a gun to her forehead. "I'll blow your pretty damned head off right now, if I could."

Lara smiled. "Shoot me," she challenged. "Shoot me, bastard!" She kicked him on the knee.

Death was most welcome to her at the moment. At least she would be free from having to continue with her miserable life. She had no life, precisely.

Groaning with a curse under his breath, he pushed her roughly to the ground and fired into the air, his gaze fixed on her with a murderous glare and a furious scowl on his face.

A black SUV screeched to a halt on the premises, its door pulled open by one of his goons, who had immediately gotten down from the car and moved swiftly to open the door for his boss.

George stepped out of the car and ordered, "Stop!"

The shooting ceased.

Lara scrambled to her feet.

"Geor.." She was hushed by a death glare from George.

"Don't you dare!" He hissed through his teeth, and his hands balled tightly into fists.

"Let me explain," she pleaded, desperation taking over reasoning.

"You have a week to pay up your loan or else..." He gave a warning look if otherwise, turned abruptly, and headed back to his car.

"What did I do to deserve this?" She cried. "I never took up the loan. Why am I being threatened over it while the bastard who is responsible for all this is somewhere enjoying himself?"

She was fed up. She was tired of being extorted. She had spent her life working to pay up a loan that wasn't hers, but despite all that, she had never come close to paying the real money thanks to the interest that accumulated over the years. All the money she had paid was still interest to them; if she had invested it in a business, she would have a greater chance of being financially stable at present.

George turned back to face her with a smirk on his face. "You are the collateral, and you should be appreciative of the fact that I'm giving you another chance to help yourself out despite your betrayal."

"It.."

George raised a hand to hush her. "I want no more of your tantrums. The next time I see your face, either be with my money or say goodbye to your misery-filled life here. Look forward to your new life in Japan. You will enjoy it, I bet." He covered the distance to his car, followed by his henchman, got in, and was driven off.

Lara watched as the car zoomed off, tears spilling down her cheeks as she knew deep down that there was no hope for her.

Two

The more he dug into her records, the greater his need to be her knight increased. He couldn't fathom what destiny was thinking by allowing her to be born to an irresponsible man as a father.

Her father was a gambling idiot and drunkard, whose sight was practically lost not to have been able to see what a precious gem he had for a daughter, and was even shameless enough to run off with a loan while placing the burden of paying it back on his daughter.

What a complete fool he was!

She deserved a better life, and he was more than willing to see to it that she wouldn't be subjected to a life of dejection from getting married to the ugly beast she called her fiancé.

Shane smiled to himself as he would finally be meeting with his...

His? Why was he calling her his?

Pushing aside the silly thoughts in his head, he made his way toward the perfect beauty, who had made his mind fuzzy with thoughts about her over the weeks.

Insane.

She sat calmly in a plain black gown, her hair packed in a ponytail, giving a full highlight to her face. She looked dazzling.

On seeing him, her calm expression had changed into a cute, angry face. He almost swore he had fallen in love with her all over again. His heart leaped in admiration at the sight of her. She grabbed her bag and stood abruptly.

He stood in her path, obstructing any further movement. She narrowly walked into him.

"Move aside." She glared at him.

"We need to talk, Lara."

"I wouldn't talk with you if you were to be the last person on earth." She hissed.

"You are furious. I get it. But you might be interested in the offer I have for you."

She rolled her eyes. "Spare me the fib, will you?"

"Just calm down and listen. It will be of great advantage to you."

She crossed her arms over her chest, looking at him suspiciously.

He gestured towards the seat behind her. "Have a seat, Lara," he told her. "Please," he added.

She did.

Taking a seat as well, he said, "I apologize for the trouble I caused you the other day. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be," she told him.

He had saved her from an eternity of misery with George, but he also implicated her, as she had to source out a whopping sum of two million dollars plus within a week to avoid being sold off to Japan as a sex slave.

A shudder coursed through her as she remembered George's threat and the consequence of her inability to meet the stipulated deadline, a fact both she and George knew was very close to nil.

"Are you okay?" Shane asked, pulling her focus back to the present.

"I am." She swallowed. "I'm sorry, you were saying?"

"I said I was sorry and..."

"Apology accepted. Could you please excuse me?" She needed time to plan her next course of action. There wasn't any time to dilly-dally with a delectable young man with her life hanging by a thread.

Shane was offended at her rudeness. However, he let it slide. "If you would just hear out my offer before rudely dismissing me," he said with as much calm as he could muster.

She shifted impatiently in her seat. "Alright."

"As I was saying, to express how deeply sorry I am, I am willing to strike a one-in-a-million deal with you. I will absolve your debts with George."

She paled at the information and got off her seat in the blink of an eye. "Am I a joke to you or what?"

Shane raised his hands lightly in the air. "I mean no offense, Lara. I only want to help."

She rolled her eyes. "Indeed." She nodded, her tone inflected with sarcasm.

"After what you said about your life being ruined because of what George said about whatever the deal there is between you being over, I made inquiries, and I knew I had to help because, partly, I was the reason your life could have been ruined, and as a matter of fact, I doubted you were really in support of your relationship with that man as your fiancee."

He knew what the deal was about, and that was more of the reason why his desire to help her out of George's clutches was spiked.

"But why?" She looked disbelievingly at him. His offer sounded just too good to be true. "Do you know how much it is we are talking about?"

"Two point five million dollars," he replied smoothly.

Lara shook her head. "You are crazy. Don't tell me you are just trying to prank me. I'm not in the mood to be played for a fool right now."

He looked serious.

"I'm sane, Lara. I told you I made inquiries, so you should know I'm fully aware of all that is going on, including the fact that you have an ultimatum this week to pay up the rest of the debt."

Her mouth formed a silent O. Biting down on her lips, she gently took her seat, her bag, although still strapped over her shoulder.

"Why?" She inquired, narrowing her gaze. "I don't understand. You don't know me. Why do you want to help me?"

She really needed the miracle of his help right then, but she was still skeptical about the risks the miracle might entail.

She didn't want to have to borrow from the devil to pay Lucifer.

She wasn't a kid not to know a man's help wasn't rendered without a reciprocation,

which essentially would not be monetary.

"I believe you deserve better than to be with George or sold off to some Japanese merchants. You are a very beautiful lady, Lara. I see a lot of potential in you, and I couldn't just let that all go to waste."

She pressed her lips tightly, still taking in his words and assessing them.

Her mind wavered on making a decision to trust him or not. It kept bringing up scenarios that kept her having second thoughts and contemplating saying yes to his offer.

Her mind was warped with fear, indecision, and impatience. There was no time for her to raise that colossal amount by herself. It had taken her mom and her years to pay up to that extent.

"So, what do you say?"

She looked at him, holding his gaze. She knew he wanted something from her. He wanted her body. It had been all over his face at the bar.

"No," she said abruptly.

Shane arched an eyebrow. "What?"

"Look, Shane. Although I appreciate the offer, it's just too good to be true. There's no way you are offering to pay that much money just to express an apology. It's incredible." She bit down on her lower lip. "Who the hell does that, really?" She chuckled dryly.

He tried as hard as he could to still the reaction her biting down on her rosy lips set in his body. It was definitely not the right time for that.

"I doubt any man will pay that much money just for an apology without expecting something in return, and with the recipient being a lady, we both know how it goes, Shane. I'm no fool."

Shane nodded thoughtfully. "You are right; my offer is not just about an apology, and it's not free either."

"I'm not having sex with you," she hissed heatedly, stamping her palms flat on the table.

He chuckled at the look in her eyes. Fierce and unwelcoming. He suspected she would be standing up again.

She made it.

"Who said I wanted to?"

She stopped, falling back into her seat. "You don't want sex?"

The hell he did!

"Just how lowly you think of men!"

"I'm not joking, Shane. Don't toy with me."

"I am not joking either, Lara. I'm interested in helping you. I am loaning it to you, Lara."

Lara scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Seriously, you expect me to take up a loan to pay off a loan? Funny."

"A job goes as well with the package."

"My answer is still no." She shook her head, rising from her seat. She knew she was being foolish by rejecting his offer, but she couldn't bring herself to trust him completely. "If you would excuse me, I have to go to work."

"I will pay you \$100,000 annually."

She hesitated to move at first.

"Still no," she said over her shoulders, desperate to move out of there as fast as her legs could take her and get down to working her bones off to hit her expected target for the week.

She would try. Although the probability of the outcome being a success was bleak, she would remain optimistic nonetheless and wouldn't give up.

He crossed his arms over his chest and watched her turn her back to leave. "Wouldn't you rather take a loan from me than be stuck with George, who is only willing to waive off the loan on the basis of your marriage to him, and trust me when I say you will regret every second of your life with him?"

She turned to face him, crossing her arms over her chest. "And on what basis are you giving the loan?"

"Philanthropy." He swept a hand in her direction.

She rolled her eyes. "You don't expect me to believe that sh*t, do you?"

"You don't have to believe it," he said, leaning up. "Accept it. It will be a lifesaver."

She looked skeptically at him. His offer seemed good enough and verifiable. However,

her gut told her there was more to it. "I still think there's more to this than just an apology and a supposed philanthropic act. You want something from me."

He checked his wristwatch. "I really wasn't expecting you to drag this this far, Lara. It's becoming exhausting."

She pressed her lips tightly, and a ghost of a smile tipped them.

He rose from his seat and walked toward her. "A loan with a job to pay it back, or a loan that you might not get the chance to pay up in due time; hence, you risk being sold off as a slave. You are smarter than this, Lara. Make a choice now."

"Is that really all there is to your terms? You are not going to pull anything out of the blue."

He clicked his tongue and nodded. He took out his business card and handed it to her.

"Meet me in my office by 8:00 a.m. tomorrow. Let's have this drafted into a document and finalized."

She took the card from him. Holding his gaze, she said, "Thank you."

THREE

It still felt like a dream to Lara. She couldn't take it hook, line, and sinker that the agreement she had with Shane was actually credible.

It looked too good to be true. She shook her head and huffed a deep breath to be certain she wasn't caught up in a phantom.

It really happened!

She looked down continually at his business card, scoffing in disbelief at how miraculously her meeting with him had played out.

He would really be paying up the loan leveraged over her by George?

The logical part of her still played the doubting Thomas, despite his assurance that he meant his words.

She raked her fingers through her hair and blew out air from her mouth as she flagged her arms out to hail a cab.

Her shift at the store would be starting soon, and unless she wanted to be laid off from her job, she would not let her emotions get the better of her.

She mentally lectured herself to calm down and not raise her hopes too high.

She wouldn't yet believe he actually meant what he had promised to do until he did exactly that.

She earnestly looked forward to sunrise the next day and affirmed his promise.

A cab pulled over in a few minutes, and she got in quickly.

Time moved at a slow pace as she worked through her shifts at the different part-time jobs she held. It was as if it could sense her desperation for it to be morning already and

to have her doubts erased about the incredible offer Shane had made.

She worked as hard as she could to keep her mind off the worries that were bothering her.

There was no thinking about George or Shane's offer. Despite her will, her brain was still structuring the new plans for the future if Shane's offer were to be genuine.

That was exactly the reason she struggled to blank out her mind. She couldn't afford to get her hopes up at the expense of the probable disappointment she might end up having by taking his words into account.

Her phone's ringtone gave off in her pockets while she cleaned the floors.

Wiping off the bead of sweat on her head with the back of her hand, she pulled out the phone from her apron pocket.

A smile tipped the edge of her lips as she saw the name of the caller: Kyle.

She picked up the phone and raised it to her ear.

"Don't tell me you will be bailing out on dinner tonight again, Lara." Kyle's voice came in disapprovingly through the phone.

She choked out a wry laugh. "I won't, Mom."

Kyle had been her best friend since high school and had been very supportive in assisting her both emotionally and financially in the little way she could.

Through her, she had also gotten to know Meredith, Joe, and Laura. The four were as inseparable as a shadow from oneself, and she had immediately been taken into their closely knit group through Kyle's influence.

And it was through Kyle's persistence that she had been able to attune herself to being friends with them over the years that Kyle had introduced her to them.

"Don't let me down, alright? Everyone's here already."

"I will try not to. I will be getting off work soon."

"Alright then. I will be expecting you. " She made a noisy, kissy sound on the phone and disconnected the call.

Lara tsked and put the phone back in her pocket to quickly wrap up her work for the day. She mopped the rest of the floors and disposed of the water.

She was in the changing room in record time. She kept track of the time on her watch as she changed out of her uniforms and into her clothes.

She wanted to meet up with the time she had promised she would be at Kyle's, and if she wouldn't be able to meet up with the time, it wouldn't be an hour later than it was.

Kyle loved chocolates and cookies, so she mentally noted to stop by the sweetshop after her leave for the day from work was permitted by her boss.

How time flew!

She pressed a hand to her forehead and sloped her head down her neck in exhaustion as she realized how long she had worked within the day.

The day had turned into night; the initial glow of the sky was eclipsed by dark gray clouds.

She flagged down a taxi immediately. She walked down the road and gave the taxi driver the address she was heading to, then settled in for the ride as the car moved.

She felt a tap on her ankle and jolted awake, startled. "Jeez!" A shiver racked through her body as she became aware of her surroundings.

She slapped her palm to her forehead, stifled an hiss through her lips, and mentally shook her head at herself for getting paranoid over nothing.

"You seem to be in need of a long and good night's rest," the taxi driver pointed out as he took the car fare from her.

She couldn't argue any less.

She shook her head with a fatigued sigh, twitched her eyebrows in agreement with what he said, and alighted from the taxi while suppressing a yawn at the back of her throat.

Her body ached to be laid on something soft and comfy. Her eyes begged to revel in the reprieve they had been denied earlier.

She should just turn back and get that much-needed rest. Her legs itched to change directions. However...

Ding-dong!

Her fingers moved reflexively, against her genuine will, to her dismay.

The door was pulled open in a twinkle of an eye, a giddy Kyle beaming with surprise and thrill upon seeing her.

"You made it!" She squealed excitedly, leaped at her, and threw her arms around Lara's neck.

Lara flattened her lips and twitched her nose reflexively, her arms out to brace the impact as Kyle leaped at her.

She winced and moved back a step at the collusion—exhaustion and fatigue bore down heavily on her. Finally, she settled into the hug and managed a smile as she hugged her best friend back.

"And I come bearing gifts," Lara said, raising the bags of goodies she had bought from the sweetshop.

Kyle pulled back with a smirk on her face. "Of course you will, Santa Lara."

Both ladies laughed.

"Manners!" She planted a finger lightly on her lower lip with a disapproving frown. "Come in quick." She ushered her in and took the bag from her.

Lara blew out a satisfied exhale as she walked into the house. Kyle caught up with her pace after she had locked the door.

"You look worse for wear. I shouldn't have asked you to come. I'm a bad girl."

Lara turned to look at her briefly with a pout. "You're just figuring that out now?" She hissed out a tsk, a smile cupping one side of her cheek.

Kyle threw an arm playfully around her shoulders with a bounce and leaned her head against her shoulder. "And that's why you love me."

Lara snickered. "Silly girl."

A round of applause echoed over the room as they walked into the sitting room.

Lara looked taken aback. She furrowed her brows and asked, "Guys, what's the occasion?"

Kyle jumped in front of her with her arms outstretched and mimed, "Ta-da!"

"You are an hour early. They are impressed," Laura explained laconically, raising her glass of wine to her lips and taking a sip.

Lara rolled her eyes as she walked to take a seat on one of the cushions.

"Hi, everyone." She waved at them all and plopped down onto the cushion, reveling in the

comfort that cocooned her aching body immediately.

She leaned back against the headrest with a sigh.

Just what she needed at the moment.

"You need a massage?" Joe asked and extended a glass of chilled juice toward her.

She rolled her eyes at him, muttered, "Thanks," as she took the cup from him, and took a long drink from the cup.

"Ah!" She sighed as she lowered the cup from her mouth. "Refreshing!" she commented.

"You look really tired, Lara. Just how much did you have to work today?" Joe asked worriedly.

He attempted to press a palm to her forehead, an attempt Lara quickly prevented, playfully swatting his hand off and clicking her teeth at him.

"We are having dinner, Joe, not a counseling session."

"Joe's right, Lara. You should cut back on how much you exert yourself." Meredith nodded, as a matter of fact.

"What's cooking?" Lara sat up, shifting the subject of discussion from her to the exact reason she was over at Kyle's and not snoring away in her bed as she would have loved to.

"You will be amazed!" Kyle smiled with a suspenseful glitter in her eyes.

Surely, Lara was amazed.

She knew Kyle was an amazing cook, but the night's special was superb.

"Wow! This is so good!" Lara moaned as she ate, raising two hands in kudos to Kyle.

"I would gladly marry you if you had not been taken already," Joe said, shaking his head at the heavenly taste of the food Kyle had prepared.

Meredith cleared her throat, while Lara peeked a glance to gauge Laura's reaction.

Her face was blank. But zero emotion mirrored a volcano on the inside.

"What about Laura, then?" Meredith inquired.

"Laura?" He leaned back in his seat, threw an arm around her shoulders, and pulled her toward himself for a kiss on the cheek, then fully on her mouth.

"Bad joke! She will always be my number one," Joe murmured over her lips.

Laura smiled and kissed him back.

"Awnn!" Kyle, Meredith, and Lara mimicked an embarrassed sigh as the two kissed.

"Come off it. Get a room, will you? Don't leave a heartache in the wake of the single ones here!" Meredith snapped.

"Who exactly are the single ones? The only single one here, ironically, is Lara," Kyle pointed out.

And, once again, Lara was at the center of the discussion.

"How soon will the loan be fully paid off? You've worked half your years off by now." Meredith looked extremely worried.

Was she ever going to come around to paying it off? The last time she calculated, Lara should have been absolved of her loan four months ago, but given the outrageous interest charged by her creditors with every delay in paying it off, she was stuck working more hours than an average human did and living less than they did as well.

She felt really disgusted at the epic failure of the father she had, who had burdened her with a debt as overwhelming as that.

Lara contemplated whether to tell her friends about Shane or not. She clenched her teeth in hesitation.

"There's something, Lara. Isn't there?" Kyle was quick to gauge her expression. "Spill it out."

The attention of everyone in the room was focused on her. It made her squirm in discomfort on the inside.

She hated being in the limelight.

"Spill it, Lara. What's going on?" Joe urged, that protective side of him etched in his tone.

"It's not certain yet." She toyed with her fingers. "I met this man, alright?"

"A boyfriend?" Kyle squealed, throwing her arms in the air in excitement. "Finally!"

Lara hissed, rolled her eyes at the absurdity of her exclamation, and clicked her tongue to the roof of her mouth. "Shane Williams. He..." She paused with a frown as they all sucked in deep breaths.

"As in the same Shane Williams?" Meredith looked astounded.

"The legendary Shane Williams!" Kyle gasped breathlessly.

"A legendary playboy," Laura stated with that horror-movie villain tone she had.

"What did he do to you?" Joe spat with a frown etched on his face. He looked eager to pick a fight with Shane, in Lara's defense.

Their reactions made Lara reconsider nurturing the false hope within her about Shane being a savior sent from above to aid her.

"What about him?" "What did he do?" "Don't tell me..."

They all spoke over each other.

"Is he bad?"

"You don't know him?" Kyle looked bewildered. "Wow!"

"I shouldn't be surprised. You spend all your time working rather than keeping up with the latest news," Meredith said, holding Lara's gaze. "How did you two meet?"

"This might be a good thing for you and might be bad as well," Kyle mused aloud.

"He proposed a deal to me," Lara informed them, looking at their faces.

"A deal?" They all choked.

Kyle waved her hand dismissively in the air. "If he wants you to be his girlfriend, bad news. He's not the typical picture of the kind of man you will need to be involved with."

"He actually offered me a job and a chance to pay off my debts," Lara said, voicing out the words one at a time.

They all stared at her, awestruck.

Kyle had her jaw hanging open. Meredith's eyes widened in shock.

"Are you kidding?" Kyle leaped off her chair and rushed to hug her.

Meredith joined in as well, with a loud cheer.

"You mean the Almighty Shane Williams offered to help? How did you two meet? How did that happen? God! I must not be dreaming!" Kyle rambled in excitement, smiling widely in exhilaration.

"I can't believe this, Lara. Congratulations." Joe came over to hug her as well.

"At what cost is he helping you, though?" Laura voiced out the question everyone had been dying to ask Lara after she congratulated her with a hug as well.

Lara shrugged. "I've been assured he has no ulterior motive for his gesture, and besides, I will be working with him to pay off the loan."

"At a rate better than the ones you earn from all your part-time jobs combined," Meredith reasoned. "I'm pleased you will have a semblance of life from now on rather than the shadow you've been enduring."

"I will be meeting with him on Monday to discuss more of the terms. Then I can fully jubilate. Although I will give nothing to be free from George's confines, I have no idea how being indebted to Shane will turn out either."

"I will be optimistic. Although he is an unrepentant playboy, I trust things will work out fine from now on." Kyle huffed a deep breath with a single nod.

"I'm scared, though. But let's close the ailing chapter first. We will cross the bridge when we get to it," Meredith stated.

They all nodded in agreement and enveloped her in a group hug.

"I'm just so happy for you," Kyle cooed.

"Not as much as I am," Lara muttered under her breath as she embraced them.

That wasn't so hard, was it?

She huffed and exhaled, looking forward to her meeting with the legendary Shane Williams.

FOUR

Lara checked herself in the mirror for the umpteenth time. She wanted to make a good first impression. Getting employed by a top, renowned company wasn't something she had dreamed of ever having, so she felt extremely nervous at her meeting with Shane.

Besides, she was anxious over the fact that all the terms of his deal might not be appealing to her, and that would spell consequent trouble for her if it should occur.

She couldn't help but silently render earnest prayers to the heavens for freedom from the mess she was in, with the hope that all her prayers had been answered and were about to take effect.

She had no strength to harden her resolve and endure this grueling harshness her life was plagued with anymore. She needed a break.

She craved a change. And she desperately hoped that the time for that change had come.

Taking a final look at her appearance in the mirror, she checked her watch, noted she still had more than an hour before she ran late, grabbed her bag, and walked out of her apartment.

"Wish me luck, Mom," she said to her mom's picture hung on a corner of the dressing mirror as she headed for the door and locked it.

She got into a taxi and was at the company's in twenty minutes. She got out of the car and allowed herself a minute to appreciate the grandness that stretched out massively and immaculately before her.

Her chest swelled with pride and euphoria at the prospect of working for a company as great as Shane's.

The building was magnificent. It was unlike anything she had ever seen. The environment reeked of affluence and class that were far superior to her base standard.

She suddenly felt self-conscious and nervous. A chill snaked down her spine, and a nervous sweat trickled down her temple in response to the anxiety that lanced through her body.

It was a towering edifice, framed entirely by bluish glass walls that captured the sky and were layered upon each other to stretch out into a slick skyscraper with an intricate architectural design. Frameless sliding glass doors paved the way from the exterior to the interior of the building, and as she walked in, she felt as if she had transcended into another realm.

An upscale realm, way out of her league.

She was transfixed by the sublime beauty of her surroundings. Everything about it, from its decor to its ambiance, reeked of opulence and brilliance.

Goosebumps trailed along the frame of her skin as she walked toward the receptionist. She felt out of place as she moved with different, elegantly dressed people across the lobby.

She licked her lower lip nervously with the tip of her tongue and bit down on her lip ring, mentally cooing to herself to be calm.

It's just a building—a background different from the one she was used to. Everyone around her were people like she was, although they were high-class.

The floors were polished and shone from the reflection from the walls of sky-blue glass encompassing the building.

The lobby was bathed in lights, adding an enrapturing glow to its atmosphere and outlook.

Lara balled her hands into tight fists as she walked to restrain herself from gawking at the surreality of the environment she was in, as she would have loved to.

The receptionist was a beautiful blonde-haired lady with mesmerizing green eyes and a smile that was as bright as her looks.

"Morning," Lara greeted the lady, subtly furrowing her brows to hide the fact that she felt awkward in the state-of-the-art and picturesque environment.

"Hi, good morning." She smiled politely with an air of enthusiasm. "How may I be of help to you?"

"Ah, I'm Lara Dunlop. Ah, I'm here to see Mr. Shane." She felt indecisive about not adding the title to his name and keeping on addressing him informally, not after she had been

exposed to the degree of his excellence.

Of course, she knew he was wealthy; how else could he have proposed to pay up a debt of over two million dollars as unaffectedly as he had done at her previous rendezvous with him?

"Williams," she informed her, exhaling lightly to ease out the anxiety that weighed heavily in her chest.

She could imagine how shocked George would be if she came up out of the blue with the remaining amount of the loan; that would be if her present meeting with Shane went well.

She looked forward with eagerness and hope to relish her forthcoming moment of freedom from George's clutches. What would she give to be rid of that despicable devil of a man's leverage over her?

She blinked rapidly to blank out the thought of George from her mind. Just the thought of him made her belly squirm with a myriad of negative emotions pooling through it: anger mixed with resentment, disgust, indignation...

"Do you have an appointment to meet with him?" The lady inquired, her fingers already dancing on her keyboard to confirm her statement.

"Of course I do. He asked me to meet him here by eight." She brought out the card he had given her and handed it over to the lady.

She took it from her and perused it. "Proceed to the elevator and head to the last floor," she informed her, returning the card to her.

Lara thanked her.

"You are beautiful, by the way. I am inclined to express that." She smiled at her with an adoring glint in her eyes.

Lara smiled in response. "Thanks. You are amazing."

She walked to the elevator and fiddled with her fingers behind her back as it ascended. The elevator stopped occasionally as the others that had gotten on it with her walked out upon reaching their floors.

Each floor had a sublime outlook and setting, as she glimpsed as the doors parted.

Eventually, the others had all reached their floors, while she continued alone to the top floor. She mentally braced herself for the meeting with Shane, recalling how rude she

had been to him during their previous meeting.

Heat pooled within her sharply, and she felt her cheeks flush deeply from embarrassment at how forward she had been with him in her earlier meetings with him.

She thought she had experienced the grandest height of beauty to be seen, but not until she entered Shane's office.

She was awestruck by its magnificence. She halted in her steps, unable to resist ogling the whole office as she walked into the room.

Even the air around the room felt, smelled, and tasted different.

An amused smile flashed on Shane's lips as he watched her.

She was punctual. He admired that. She had arrived forty minutes earlier than the time he had asked her to meet with him.

He was a habitual early bird, so he had never missed out on being punctual unless he had an appointment at a different location from his company.

Which he often did.

He went on meetings with CEOs and directors of various organizations to facilitate business relationships and bank deals with negotiators and other distributing companies of the beauty products and cosmetics company he ran.

He had always had an eye for aesthetics since childhood, and over the years, he had been able to develop his company into a multi-billion-dollar cosmetics-producing company with bases locally and internationally, covering at most half the states of the world.

She looked fresh and beautiful. She was an alluring sight to make a fresh start on a perfect Monday morning.

"Morning, Lara." He observed that she was captivated by the splendor of his office.

Lara jumped at his voice, realizing she had been staring.

She bit down on her lips, her face flushed with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry. Good morning," she said breathlessly, still rooted to the spot she was standing on.

She felt numb, with a chill snaking down her spine to her feet and nervousness shooting sharp shots through all of her body.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Shane smiled at her as he rose from his desk chair.

She nodded stiffly, flattened her lips, and twitched her eyebrows in response as she gingerly walked forward.

Her legs trembled beneath her, and she silently prayed she wouldn't trip and fall over her heels.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about, Lara." He chuckled softly, then extended his hand toward one of the sofas set at the center of the office as he approached. "Have a seat."

Lara did, relieved to be free of the risk of tripping over her trembling legs. However, even sitting down did little to ease her anxiety.

She could feel her legs shaking as she sat. Awkwardness shrouded her with such an excruciating influence that she could hardly breathe.

She heaved her chest, parting her mouth subtly to fill her constricted lungs with the air they needed before she turned purple from asphyxiation.

"Nervous, aren't you?" Shane asked, looking at her from where he sat.

She looked at him startled, blinked twice, and swallowed dryly, unable to voice out a reply. Her mouth had gone dry.

An acrid taste settled at the back of her throat at the rush of blood that had spiked through her veins at his question.

A mild sting spread through her chest, and she bit down tightly on her lips to hold down the pain.

"A bit." Her voice came out in a breathless whisper. She wheezed out an exhale and sat with her back straight, strongly willing herself to adjust to being in the sophisticated environment and be cool with it.

"You will get used to it with time," he assured.

She twitched her eyebrows, nodding feverishly in response.

"Do you have a college degree?"

She nodded. "Yes, I do." She pulled out her resume from her bag and handed it over to him.

She had trudged through college because her mom's greatest wish was to see her complete her studies and graduate, in spite of their financial situation. Hence, she had

worked hard to make that wish come true.

Although she didn't live to see the accomplishment of the dream she had for her daughter's future, Lara had ensured she didn't give up when the going had been extremely tough.

Kyle had been a huge help to her during those moments of crisis.

It was as if she had been caught up in a triple whammy: struggling to concentrate on her studies, making ends meet, and enduring constant threats and harassment from George and his cohorts. She had always wished to never wake up, but each morning, she did.

She had survived. She was surviving.

Her dreams of establishing her own brand of business and making a name for herself in the career world began to thin out over the years as she languished in indebtedness to George.

At the moment, hope was beginning to blossom within her again.

He skimmed through her resume. "You will be resuming work as my personal assistant. You will be trained over a few months on your assigned roles until you can perform your duties without supervision. When you leave, meet with my secretary to get the overall details of everything you need to be aware of to get started."

"Okay." She nodded, pausing to take a breath, and clicked her tongue to the back of her throat in response.

"What skills do you have besides design?"

"I've accumulated a lot of experience working at various jobs, but I doubt they would be significant to the assigned job demands. I can do waitressing, cleaning, and cooking, among others, and virtually anything else. I just want to pay off my debt quickly," she said rapidly, exhaling heavily afterward.

Shane stared silently at her for a while. He could sense her desperation for freedom, and he understood as well that although his offer to pay up her debt with an offer of a well-paying job to go along with it was an exceptional proposal, to her, it was just another plunge into indebtedness.

"Okay." He clapped his hands and leaned forward. "You have to know you will be required to go on business trips and work extra hours at times."

She inched her head subtly as she replied, "I'm up for any task I'm given. I promise to deliver the very best of my services."

"Good! Meet with Claire, my secretary, on your way out to be briefed on the essentials, and..." He raised his fingers and tweaked them in her direction.

"That reminds me. Before your return, you will need a makeover. This is a cosmetics company, so we have an image to uphold. I wouldn't want any of my staff, not especially my personal assistant, to be dressed below standards," he told her, then realizing she might feel uncomfortable by his words, he added quickly, "You look beautiful in your dress, but I wouldn't want you to feel intimidated in any way working with me. So, I will text you the time and location tomorrow."

Lara nodded grimly. "Okay."

An upgraded lifestyle meant more expenses to keep up with the standard, and more expenses totaled greater debts.

"No worries. The makeover is on me," he assured her.

"Yes?" She gazed at him, surprised.

"Lara, it's on me. I look forward to meeting you tomorrow." He rose from the armchair he was sitting on.

She did as well. "Thanks a lot, Mr. Williams. I appreciate the gesture, really."

"It's fine, Lara," he assured her, shaking hands with her. "And it's Shane. You can call me Shane."

She looked skeptical about that.

"Everyone is on a first-name basis here. I believe it facilitates a cordial and open business relationship for advancement and qualitative growth. So, feel free to tag along."

A ghost of a smile spread across her lips at that, and she nodded in acquiescence. She sucked in air briefly through her teeth as she replied, "Alright, Shane. Thanks."

"You are welcome."

FIVE

"How was the interview? Or do I call it an interview? How was the finalizing of his proposals?" Kyle barraged her with questions as they all met again, at Lara's house this time, for updates on the outcome of her meeting with Shane.

"I have already prepared gifts in readiness and anticipation of your reply," Meredith said with a delighted twinkle in her eyes. "Is it a yes?"

Lara nodded in response, smiling lightly. "It's a yes!"

Meredith squealed in excitement, both she and Kyle rushing over to hug her as tightly and as warmly as they could without choking Lara.

"Ladies! Ladies!" Lara mumbled against their smoldering hugs.

"Oh! We're sorry," Kyle apologized quickly, both of them pulling away from her and smiling happily for her.

Lara felt elated to see that she had such wonderful friends. They cared so much about her happiness, as if it were their own. She was deeply touched.

Meredith leaned forward and held her hands in hers. "Lara." She sniffed, tears clouding her eyes. "I've always longed for this day, bestie. You've been through so much—more than any lady, anyone your age, should have ever been through. I'm overjoyed at the moment that..." Her mouth parted wordlessly as she smiled and cried.

Lara nodded to her in understanding, silently communicating her appreciation for their steadfast and unending support for her through her eyes.

"Congratulations, Lara. This calls for celebration!" Kyle cheered with a scream of glee.

"Of course!" Lara agreed.

"I believe you've informed all your bosses, however many they may be, of your resignation," Meredith inquired.

"Of course. That's all been settled," Lara answered. "But the celebration might have to wait till the weekend. I am still to meet with Shane today."

Meredith and Kyle shared a look before they turned to her.

"Are you resuming work immediately tomorrow?" Kyle furrowed her brows as she asked.

Lara shook her head and huffed a deep breath. "No. The thing is, uh, I'm actually to go out shopping with him for suitable wear that would meet the standard of the company before my official resumption to work."

"Shopping. Wow! That's lovely," Meredith commented.

"But, on whose account will that be? His company has quite the standard," Kyle was saying.

"And for him to personally want to take you out for shopping..." Meredith included.

"Well, he assured me that he would be covering the expenses for the shopping," Lara told them.

Kyle tweaked her fingers in her face, a brilliant smile playing over her lips. "I knew it!"

"He's in love with you, Lara," Meredith breathed.

Kyle cleared her throat. "Love might be a strong term to use for someone of his reputation, Meredith. I would say he's attracted to her."

Lara furrowed her brows. "That makes no sense."

"It does. The pieces click together now. He undoubtedly admires and is attracted to you, Lara," Kyle informed her, holding her gaze.

"So, he does want something from me after all." Lara shook her head.

"You are beautiful. Extremely beautiful. So, it's not surprising that you've caught his attention, and he's willing to move heaven and earth, hyperbolically, to make you secure," Kyle said.

"Oh!" Lara sighed, huffing an exasperated exhale, and fell back against the cushion she was sitting on. "What do I do now?"

"What do you do now?" Kyle asked in confusion. "This is a golden opportunity for you, Lara. You are favored by your soon-to-be boss. It's a good thing."

"It's not," Lara argued. Her mouth parted wordlessly to defend her opposition, but all she

could do was suck in her lower lip and clench her teeth. "You shouldn't have told me this. I will feel more awkward around him now. I'm averse to office romance. How can I work with a clear head in the same space with a man I know is attracted to me? My boss!"

"Uhm.." Meredith cleared her throat. "The attraction part is just a mere theory. Let's not jump to conclusions too soon. He might just be a good man who feels inclined to help a damsel in distress."

Kyle nodded quickly in agreement, smiling enthusiastically at Lara.

Lara looked at both of her friends. "You think so?"

"Absolutely!" Meredith assured.

"Now, when is that time you said he will be taking you on that shopping trip?" Kyle fit into the conversation smoothly, changing the subject of discussion.

Lara checked the time displayed on her phone screen. "Four thirty," she replied.

Meredith and Kyle had an inquiring look on their faces.

"Four thirty!" Lara exclaimed, leaping to her feet. "I'm not prepared." She raced to her room.

"Mmnn." Meredith looked at the direction Lara had gone.

"What do you think, Meredith?" Kyle asked with an exuberant smile on her face.

"I think our friend is about to tread an interesting path in her life's course, and of course, I will be happy to be entertained by this evolution."

Kyle beamed at her. "So will I."

"I'm sorry I'm late," Lara said almost breathlessly as she met up with Shane at the location he had texted her. Her eyes darted to the time on her watch, a soft whistle escaping her as she realized she was on time after all.

Shane had watched as she pushed out of the taxi swiftly yet gracefully and hastened her strides to meet him.

"You could have been, but you are right on time," he stated, extending a hand to the

vacant seat. "Have a seat, please."

"Thank you." Her chest heaved as she settled down on the chair.

"I hope you don't mind. I was hoping you could have lunch with me before we set out. I've been holed up all day in my office with work, and I assumed the same would have been for you."

"Pardon..no, really. I do not mind." Lara swallowed.

"I see." He stared at her.

Lara felt her insides squirm with his gaze intent on her. It would have done her good had it been Meredith and Kyle had not told her his help could have been due to the fact that he was attracted to her.

It shouldn't really unnerve her that he was attracted to her. Countless men have professed their affection and attraction for her over the years, and she has promptly avoided them.

The thought of being involved with a man scared her utterly. She believed her mother had been charmed by her father into believing he was attracted to her.

What had then become of her?

She wanted no such thing for herself. She was determined to devote her mind and attention instead to her career and build a future for herself rather than indulge in damnable involvements with men.

However, she didn't see herself escaping Shane any number of years from then. She had a long way to go before her debt was utterly repaid, and she was absolved of it and granted the freedom for which she had always longed.

"Is it just around me, Lara, or are you naturally nervous?"

"What?" Her lips parted with a muffled gasp as she raised her gaze to meet his. "I... Ah!"

"Lara."

She swallowed, pressing down on her lips tightly. "I'm sorry. This is a meteoric change for me. I will get used to it immediately. I'm not nervous."

"You are not."

She licked her lip ring. "At the moment, I must admit I am, but it's just excitement. As you've said, I will get used to it with time."

"Lara, look at me. If we are to work together, we need to be comfortable with each other. Don't you agree?"

"I do. My apologies I've been acting less than professional in my conduct with you."

"You may not see me as your boss. Perhaps that's what intimidates you about my presence."

"But you are my boss."

"For a more favorable consequence, I feel you should regard me as a friend instead. Maybe that may ease you into being more comfortable around me."

"I don't think..." She looked at him. "Am I assured you have no ulterior motive for your supposed philanthropic act?"

"We are back on that matter." He sighed. "What makes you doubt the integrity of my proposition, Lara?"

She flattened her lips. "Never mind, then. I look forward to working with you."

"So do I. We had better take our lunch now unless we lose our appointment at the boutique."

"Sure." She nodded stiffly in agreement.

He called for the waiter and made orders for both of them.

"Are you friends with all your staff too? Do you cover their shopping expenses as well?" Lara asked as she sat in the car with him, headed toward the boutique.

Shane looked at her. "I wouldn't be amused if you told me you planned on a change of occupation to being an investigator."

"Of course you wouldn't be, as it is unrealistic that I would request something like that," she mumbled under her breath.

"Are you always this guarded? Is it that hard for you to accept help from others?"

"I'm not guarded, and I accept help at moments when I realize the stakes of my accomplishing a task alone are low. I wouldn't have agreed to your offer if otherwise."

"I assumed as well. So don't think too much of it. I would love to help, so I'm doing just that."

"You don't know me."

"I believe the words you ought to be saying to me at the moment, Lara, are thanks, Shane. I appreciate your kindness. Not bombarding me with questions."

"Pardon my curiosity. I apologize." She tipped her head in a light bow in his direction. "Thanks, Shane. I appreciate your kindness." She settled back against the car seat and stared straight ahead.

She guessed she would have to take him up on his word.

It was a philanthropic gesture of his to help out with her situation.

The rest of the ride to the boutique was spent in silence.

The car pulled to a stop, and her eyes widened as she saw where he had taken her.

Was he not going to the extreme with his philanthropic acts?

This boutique is expensive. Her mind reeled with a shriek within her.

She might not be aware of any recent updates about any other sector of the economy or whatever was the rage on social media, but she followed fashion magazines with close attention.

"You're coming in or not?" Shane asked over the roof of the car from the side where he stood.

Lara heaved a deep sigh, trying not to make too much of it. Kyle had, after all, said his company had quite a standard. So, of course, he had brought her to that boutique that met the standards of his company.

She swallowed dryly and walked after him into the boutique.

Minutes later, she was going in and out of the changing room, parading clothes for Shane's approval.

"Are you sure it's necessary that I go through clothes as much as these?" Lara inquired, her insides squirming even more with the awareness that the bills he would be paying by the end of the day were piling even higher.

Not that he cared; he had the money, but she did.

It felt odd for her to be lavished upon, as Shane was doing at the moment. She would have to save at least seven months' worth of her initial earnings to purchase a single dress from the boutique, yet she had lost count of how many clothes she had put on, all of which he had approved to be added to the ones he would be buying.

Shane cleared his throat and assessed the new outfit she was wearing. "Why? All the dresses look to be a perfect fit for you." He looked at his wristwatch. "We will run late if we are to keep up with this. I want all the dresses in her size packaged," he informed the manager.

"Of course, Mr. Williams," the manager said with a polite bow, her palms flat against her belly. She gestured to the attendants with her, and together they went to get his request done.

Lara bit down on her lips tightly; her brows furrowed as she mentally calculated what the gross amount of all he had bought for the day would amount to.

She shrugged lightly, resolving to yield to Kyle's advice.

She should enjoy this golden opportunity while it lasts.

SIX

Lara smiled at herself in the mirror as she checked out her profile this morning.

Clothing and accessories play an integral part in a person's outlook. She looked like an utterly different person.

She looked high-class and exotic. Her new look was a far cry from her usual casual hand-me-down jeans and cardigans, which she usually wore to work daily.

A giddy feeling spread through her belly, coating it with a bubble of warmth and excitement.

"Wow!" She breathed into her reflection in the mirror. "You look good, girl." She blew a kiss to herself and chuckled.

There were bags of clothes, shoes, heels, bags, and a lot of other accessories occupying more than half the space of her room.

She hadn't been able to completely sort through the collection of purchases Shane had made the previous day.

She tried not to think about how much money had been spent on all the clothes in her room. The ones she had been able to unwrap after his driver had assisted her with carrying all the bags into her living room would have paid her house rent for four years' worth.

She had been too tired to carry them all into her bedroom and had zonked out immediately after she had taken a shower and picked out the clothes, shoes, and bags she would be putting on to work.

She looked at the bags. Luxury brands she could never have imagined she could afford at the moment.

How had she gotten so lucky—and within such a short period?

She had gone from scrambling to pay her debts to living a life of luxury and abundance. It was amazing.

"Mom." She smiled at her mom's picture. "Your princess will be fine from now on." She pressed down on her lips tightly, trying hard to hold back the tears that threatened to spill down her face. "I'm on the path to actualizing the dream you've always had for me." She nodded, exhaling softly. "I've got to go now. I will talk to you about how my first day of work went. Hopefully," she shrugged, "it won't be awkward." She flattened her lips and scrunched up her nose before she laced her forearm through her handbag and walked out of her apartment.

People stared as she walked down the street to the road to hail a cab. It was a few blocks away from her house.

She understood the surprise on their faces at her overnight transformation. Of course, she had been surprised too.

"Oh, my God! Lara, is this you?" Sarah gushed over her new look. She lived in the next flat to the building her apartment was in. She had done her fair share of supporting her after her mom's death. She and her mom were neighborhood chat buddies, so it had been as devastating for her as it had been for Lara when her mom died. "You look..." She was at a loss for words for the perfect compliment to evaluate her new look.

"Stunning. Exquisite, darling," she finally said, her eyes going over her body with awe and unsheathed admiration.

"Thanks, Sarah. Good morning." Lara flashed a smile at her, beaming.

"Run along, child. Don't let me get you late, alright? Break a leg!" She winked at her, holding a fist raised in encouragement.

"Sure, Sarah. Later..." She turned and flagged down a cab as soon as she got to the road.

"Miss Lara." The receptionist smiled at her as she walked into the lobby. "Morning. You look flawless today."

"Good morning. So do you."

"You can call me Diana. I gather you are resuming work today?" She inquired.

Lara nodded in response. "Correct. Okay, Diana."

"You know where to head. Have a lovely first day at work. You are welcome."

"Thanks, Diana." Lara smiled at her and made her way to the elevator.

She was in Shane's office in a few minutes. He looked impressed.

More spellbound upon her entry.

"Good morning," Lara said slowly, inclining her head forward when he wouldn't stop staring. She held her handbag over a finger on each hand while she waited for Shane to snap out of his daze at her appearance and acknowledge her presence.

Shane blinked. "Oh, God! I'm sorry, Lara, for staring. You look..." He spread his arms out, falling back into his seat with a satisfied look on his face. "Now, this is more like it." He nodded in acknowledgement of her image.

Lara bit down on a smile and nodded in agreement.

"Let's get to work, shall we?" He clapped his hands lightly and sat up, picking up the telephone on his desk. He extended a hand toward her as he held the phone to his ear. "Have a seat, please."

"Right." Lara nodded and approached the sofas.

"Yes, Claire. Meet me in my office," he said into the receiver, placing the phone back on hold.

Claire came in a few minutes later, and she followed her out to get started with her tasks for the day.

She was shown her office, which, from Lara's perspective, was leagues more beautiful than her apartment. It was flawless. Astonishingly beautiful.

She trapped air in her cheeks and released it slowly as she took in the room that would be her work space from then on.

"Wow!" She breathed.

She settled into work quickly, listening raptly to all she was taught over the week of her resumption. Within a few weeks, she had grasped the ropes of things and was able to carry out her tasks, as expected, without supervision.

Shane was more than impressed with her ability to adapt rapidly to how things were run. It had been a frustrating journey, and she had a hard time keeping up with her lessons given the fact that her guide, Miss Claire, wasn't particularly an enthusiastic instructor.

Dealing with correspondence and calls, managing diaries and handling paperwork, organizing meetings and appointments, among others, had never been as tiring as they had been over the weeks she had resumed working for the company.

She knew Claire was the one making a fuss of the tasks and making them appear to be harder to execute than they actually were, but what choice did she have?

She had pulled through obstacles far worse than enduring Claire's unwarranted antagonism against her, and she had overcome her supervision as well.

"Good morning, Lara," Shane greeted her first as she walked into his office.

She had just finished drafting the report he had asked her to do the previous day, summarizing key information on the progress of the projects and initiatives within the company.

"Morning, Shane," she replied as she approached his desk. "Here is the report you requested." She extended the file to him.

He took it from her. "Thanks. Could you please bring me the sales report for our new product line?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Great. Also, conduct extensive research on our new target location to identify potential demand for the products, assess the competitors, and determine the best way to reach and engage with customers."

"Yes. I will do that and have it delivered promptly."

"Excellent."

"Will that be all?" Lara inquired.

He hissed softly through his teeth, then tweaked a finger at her. "Right. Have the research carried out promptly and make arrangements for a trip in a few months time. You are coming along with me."

"Noted."

"That will be all." He permitted her to leave.

She heaved a sigh as she settled back in her seat after leaving Shane's office. She had been accompanied into her office by Claire's glare. Not that she cared anymore, but she was tempted to ask what exactly her problem with her was.

She blew air exasperatedly through her mouth and buried herself in work. Working over the years had gotten her used to a workaholic lifestyle. She never felt comfortable sitting idly around, and whenever she worked, she poured herself completely into it,

often losing track of time in the process.

She jumped in her seat as the telephone on her desk gave off its ringtone.

She picked it up immediately and raised it to her ear. "Hello?"

"I knew you would still be in the office. Come out for lunch, will you?" Andrea chuckled over the phone.

Lara bit down on a smile, twitching her eyebrows in amusement. "It slipped my mind again. Thanks, Andrea." She wrapped up what she was doing so that she could get back to it after lunch was over.

She warmed up to Andrea quickly during her first week of working and enduring Claire's constant torture with overwhelming tasks that kept her drained all day.

To think her job demands weren't as tedious as Claire had initially made them appear to be. She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth when she thought back on the early days.

Her rigorous training had been beneficial after all. It had honed her into a diligent, proficient, and fastidious assistant to the CEO.

Andrea waved over to her from the table she had secured for the two of them in the cafeteria on the ground level. She held her tray in her hands and pivoted her way to meet the only friend besides Diana, whom she had at work.

Diana and her were more in a casual-greeting relationship. Smiles and good mornings, or good byes, were more of what constituted her relationship with the receptionist; she also exchanged compliments.

However, with Andrea, it was mutual recognition and bonding. The two kicked off their friendship during the time Lara was still being trained by Claire and Andrea had an issue with her department head.

She still did, often, but now that the two had found each other, they could endure the torture through the morning and laugh over it at lunch, as well as give each other moral support in anticipation of what the hours after lunch promised before the close of the day.

"How is your day going?" Lara asked as she sat on the chair opposite Andrea and set her tray down on the table.

"The usual," Andrea replied with a shrug, slicing a forkful of her food into her mouth and chewing. She reached for a tissue and gently dabbed the side of her mouth to ensure

her lipstick hadn't been smeared by crumbs. "How about you?"

"Things are shaping up better now that I'm overseeing my duties without being supervised by an overly demanding instructor," she answered, picking up her spoon and starting to eat.

"Good for you, I guess." Andrea flattened her lips.

"Are you still having issues with the head of your department?"

"I will say my association with you has rubbed off on me positively. I'm as efficient as you are now in my duties." She flashed a grin at her.

"Well. Isn't that wonderful? You are welcome." Lara smiled at her.

"Look at that, will you? Your admirer is on his way here." Andrea looked to the left with a crooked grin on her face.

Lara followed her gaze and groaned, mentally rolling her eyes in exasperation. "Ah!"

"It's not easy being a beautiful lady; I must concur." Andrea nodded pitifully at Lara as she resumed eating while Liam approached where the two were sitting.

"Mind if I sit with you two?" Liam inquired, pulling out a chair for himself and taking a seat.

Andrea furrowed her brows, her hands half raised, poised to slice into her food. "I don't recall giving you permission to sit." She turned to Lara. "Perhaps I missed hearing you grant him permission to sit for lunch with us."

"Don't be an arse, Andrea." Liam tsked. "Lara, hey. How is your lunch going?"

Andrea rolled her eyes and hissed. "How else would it be going?"

"Well, with you here, it won't be the ideal lunch she would have been looking forward to given the enormous tasks she must have worked through in the morning."

Andrea scoffed. "Really? Maybe you should excuse yourself from this table as well to not create more hitches in that plan of hers to have an ideal lunch." She glared at him.

"Please." Lara rocked her temples with her fingers. "You two should stop bickering and let me have my lunch in peace, will you?"

Andrea harumphed and swept her hair from one side of her face behind her.

"Liam. My lunch is going well, but I fear it might be ruined if you keep up with your

bickering with Andrea."

Andrea stuck out her tongue at him. "You are the odd one here, Liam."

"You can't single yourself out to befriend her, Andrea."

"Neither can you," Andrea shot back.

"Why are you always against everything I do, Andrea?" Liam frowned. "You irk me with your conduct with me, Miss Andrea Johnson," Liam said heatedly.

Lara observed that the playful banter and bickering were changing into a sour exchange. "Liam, Andrea, can we have lunch in peace?"

"I'm sorry, Lara. I will catch up with you later. After work, maybe?"

Lara arched an eyebrow, her lips parting in a daze. "Uh? Uh!"

"Okay. Till then." He twitched his jaw in annoyance and stood up from the table to find another.

Lara watched him go, words stuck in her throat to tell him not to leave their table annoyed but rather have his lunch with them and allow them to apologize for their brusque reception of him initially.

She inclined her head toward Andrea. "What just happened, Andrea? Do you have a disagreement with him?"

Andrea, at the moment, looked withdrawn and sullen. She slowly raised her fork and ate listlessly.

Lara huffed an exhale and resumed eating, deciding she was embarrassed by his outrage.

After lunch, Andrea didn't even so much as look at her before she excused herself from the table and walked out of the cafeteria.

Lara blew out an exhale. How hurt must she have been over Liam's words?

She pushed her way out of the table after finishing her lunch and headed back to her office. She got settled back to work, mentally noting to reach out to Andrea during closing hours and find a way to reconcile the two with each other.

She grabbed her bag after work hours were up and walked toward Andrea's office in hopes of catching up with her before she left.

She came across Liam instead. He flashed a quick smile at her as he spotted her from a distance, hastening his steps to meet with her.

"Hey, Lara. Aren't you through with your tasks for today?"

"Liam. I am on my way to meet with Andrea. Is she still in the office?"

"Oh!" He shook his head. "You should have called her. She left immediately the clock struck six," he informed her.

"Okay. About what happened at lunch today, Liam, I'm sorry."

"I'm not annoyed with you, Lara. I can't."

Lara pressed her lips tightly together. "Thanks, but I hope you've reached out to Andrea... You know... She was really hurt by how you lashed out at her. She couldn't stomach the rest of her lunch."

"I'm sorry you had to witness that, Lara. I will make amends for my action."

Lara smiled at him. "I would appreciate that, Liam."

He stared at her longingly. "You are beautiful when you smile," he whispered.

Lara chuckled. "Don't attempt to flatter me, Liam. I will be on my way then. See you tomorrow."

"It's my desire to see your captivating smiles every single day of my life, Lara."

"Liam?"

"You might think I'm forward or acting out of sorts, but I admire you, Lara. I have always thought about telling you this, from the first time I saw you. You don't have to..."

"Liam. I'm sorry, but, please..." She shook her head.

"Let me prove my affection for you, Lara. I.."

"I can't. Office romances are a no-no for me. Don't let's make things awkward with each other, Liam. I will love to take you as a friend, and nothing more."

Liam tipped his chin toward her, twitching his lips with a tsk. "Sure, Lara." He twitched his eyebrows. "It's your call."

Lara looked at him, her lips parting wordlessly. She swallowed. "Later, Liam." She turned quickly and walked away.

SEVEN

Lara dialed Andrea's number as she walked out of the elevator across the lobby. She tipped her head toward Diana and muttered, "Goodbye, Diana," to her.

"See you tomorrow, Lara." Diana waved at her with a light smile.

Her calls were forwarded to voicemail over the number of times she tried reaching her.

"We had plans for today, Andrea. It isn't right for you to shut me out, as you did at lunch. I understand you are dissatisfied with what happened at lunch, but we can talk it out and resolve our differences amicably. Call me when you get this, alright?" She bit down on her lips, grazing her teeth over them. "I will be expecting your call then." She put the phone away from her ear and disconnected the call.

She twitched her lips, looked around briefly, then continued her walk to the gate.

Her plan to hang out with Andrea later in the evening held so much prospect, and it would have been lovely if it had actually worked out.

The way she had talked about those places of interest they had promised each other to visit together had piqued her interest so much that it hurt briefly to have her hopes dashed.

She shrugged and looked ahead, taking confident strides toward the gates. She continued her walk to the main road to get a cab quickly, as she wanted nothing more than to have a shower and relax her aching bones.

Years of working laborious jobs to survive still affected her. She shut her eyes briefly and sucked in her breath harshly through her teeth, wincing as her spine cracked. She pushed out her chest subtly as she walked to relieve the burning ache in her lower back.

She glanced at her surroundings and walked to the other side with the other pedestrians waiting on the side of the road as the traffic light flashed green.

She extended her arm to flag down a taxi and retreated back a step as an exotic car, a Bugatti Chiron Profilée painted in Argent Antlatique, pulled up in front of her instead.

She tucked her hair behind one side of her ear as the window on the side where she was standing rolled down.

Her brows furrowed.

Shane.

"Get in. I will give you a ride home."

She shook her head. "Don't bother. I will take a taxi instead."

"I'm going along that way. Hop in," he insisted.

She entered the car reluctantly, unable to decline his offer, should it be termed rudeness. "Thanks," she muttered under her breath as she strapped the seatbelt around her.

The car zoomed into motion.

"You don't seem all too pleased, Lara."

"Of course, I would have felt more comfortable taking my usual transport home to this." She bit her lips as she realized what she had said.

She turned to face him quickly. "I appreciate the gesture, though. It is generous of you. You are a philanthropist after all," she rambled, pressing down on her lips tightly afterward.

Shane laughed. "Sarcastic and guarded as ever, aren't you, Lara? I denote sarcasm in your words."

"I apologize if you've been offended, sir."

"Shane," he cut in.

"Pardon?"

"It's Shane. Casual interaction, remember? First-name basis."

"I am aware of that, but that doesn't understate the fact that you are my boss," she said firmly.

"I didn't approach you on the pretext of being your boss, Lara. I would rather you see me as a friend than as your boss. So, try not to cave in too much around me. It's somewhat disconcerting for me."

"I doubt it is." She twitched her eyebrows, sucking on her lip ring. "It's not plausible that a man like you would feel disconcerted about me."

"A man like me? You mind elaborating on that?"

"You have a reputation, Shane. A reputation I never want to get enmeshed in. I can guarantee to put in my very best in my service to you till my debt is utterly repaid, but..." She shook her head and heaved a sigh. "I really appreciate everything you've been doing for me, Shane."

"Lara. All I wish for is to be your friend."

"Your reputation precedes your wish, Shane. You should understand that I'm only interested in protecting myself. And yes, I'm guarded. I've always had to be, and that's what enabled me to survive over the years, to this far." Their gazes met and locked briefly, with Lara promptly breaking the contact.

She cleared her throat, shifting with unease in her seat.

"I'm sorry for all that you had to experience, Lara. I will try as much as I can to ensure you don't have to go through such a thing again," he promised, his words blending with the air as a soothing whisper.

"You are not obliged to play Prince Charming to the rescue for me, Shane." She shifted her head in objection.

A smirk tipped the corner of his mouth. "It's funny how you share an exact sense of humor with my friend."

She nodded cynically at his statement. "Mmn!"

"What do I have to do to gain your trust, Lara?"

She tsked. "I'm in your employ, Shane. Of course, you have my trust."

"Don't prevaricate the actual question, Lara. What do I have to do to make you accept me as your friend?"

She looked at him, her lips pressed into a flat line.

"Ah! It's about my reputation again, isn't it?" He got his answer from the subtle flash in

her eyes. "You will be amazed at how I've not been able to live up to that so-called reputation over the weeks."

She didn't look convinced.

He furrowed his brows. "Isn't it popularly quoted that 'you shouldn't judge a book by its cover'?"

"You are not a book. You are a legend, renowned."

Shane stifled a laugh. "You can't judge a man by his reputation, Lara."

Lara scoffed, rolling her eyes. "What else makes a man if not his reputation? One's reputation depicts one's image and absolute character."

"No, Lara. It doesn't. Reputations are temporary. In fact, they could be rumors. They don't define everything a man stands for."

"Really?" rolled off her tongue dryly. "Enlighten me then."

"Of course. Human beings are fickle beings. We are erratic. We change with the seasons, or..." He sucked in air softly through his teeth, maneuvering the car to the side of the road and swerving into her neighborhood.

"Let me say, as time passes, we grow out of habits and inculcate new patterns of behavior on the go. Every day, there is a change. It's either getting better or worse than before in terms of our lifestyle. So, no reputation lasts for a lifetime, and it can't be the criteria for judging the absolute character of a man or a woman."

Lara stared at him, an impressed smile crossing her lips.

He pulled the car to a halt. "Here we are."

Lara blinked twice and retreated. It had taken her a startling moment to realize the car had stopped minutes ago, and she had been staring at Shane.

"Thanks, Shane," she muttered dryly, her voice barely half a whisper. She licked her lips, biting down on her lower lip.

"Lara," Shane groaned, trying to subdue the emotions her action set within him. He fought hard against the urge to pull her to himself, take those rosy lips of hers in his mouth, and kiss her senseless until they both had to gasp for breath.

She smiled softly at him, her chest heaving as she huffed a deep breath. "You are right. No one should be a judge of another man's character based on rumors alone, however

accurate they could be."

He chuckled. "Friends, then?"

"On probation," she announced rapidly.

He extended his hand to her for a shake, and she shook hands with him. "I concur."

She flattened her lips and nodded once. "Good."

Shane released her hand reluctantly, wishing he could revel in the warmth her touch spread through him more.

She got out of the car and waved goodbye at him, heading inside her apartment.

He watched her go, feeling his trousers get tighter. He shifted in his seat and sucked in a deep breath to quench the fire that burned through him. Her scent lingered in the air.

He so needed a drink.

He pulled out from where he had parked the car and swerved the car around to get down the Broken Shaker with his buddy.

"What's new?" Derrari inquired as he raised a glass of wine to his mouth and took a drink from it.

"Nothing much, really." Shane swallowed, pouring himself another fill of wine as he set his glass down on the table.

"I assume you haven't been able to make progress with her, correct?"

Shane arched an eyebrow at him, ignoring him and focusing his gaze back on filling his glass with wine.

"What's causing the delay? Most importantly, how have you changed so rapidly? The Shane Williams I know would have gotten into her pants by now and closed her chapter by now."

"She's different. I couldn't do that to Lara."

"I see nothing different about her. She has boobs and a hole between her thighs, and she's beautiful. Precisely every lady you've hooked up with possesses the qualities she has."

"I want to do her right. She deserves more than..."

"You?" Derrari piped in and chuckled at Shane's glare. "If you want what's right for her,

you should know you are a far cry from it, man," he told him as a matter of fact.

"I am not. I am right for her."

"Ladies like her are sentimental about whom they get romantically involved with. She doesn't look like the quick-sex-and-off-you-go types of women you engage with. Don't wreck her, Shane."

Shane took a long drink from his glass and set it down, falling back against his seat. He rocked his temple lightly with the crook of his finger, his eyes closed from exasperation.

Derrari was right, but what was more accurate than his best friend's statement was the discussion he had with Lara earlier in the evening.

His reputation could not stand as an overall judge of his character. He wanted something, and he was going for it, regardless of the odds against him. He was willing to deny himself the pleasure of his escapades if that was what it would cost him to get Lara to be with him.

His heart lurched in his chest as he realized the gravity of his infatuation with Lara. He really wanted her. His groin hardened and stretched in acquiescence to his thoughts.

His eyes snapped open as the scent of jasmine, rich coffee, and vanilla wafted heavily through his nose. Pairs of delicate and slender arms wrapped over his neck, and long, silky hair fell over his shoulder as a kiss was pressed to the side of his mouth.

His groin jerked in response, the urge to thrust deep and hard into an abyss of warmth only a particular gender could offer heightening within him.

However, the only one he wanted was off-limits at the moment. A low curse escaped his breath with the awareness that he would have to deal with yet another torture from the blue balls for the night.

"Get away from me, Olivia," he rasped out breathlessly; his voice came out harsher than intended.

"Shane," Olivia said, sounding surprised and embarrassed as she retreated a step back from him. She looked at Derrari. "What's with the cranky mood?"

"Fulfill his demand first, Olivia. Maybe next time," Derrari told her flatly.

She scoffed in disbelief at the dismissal she had received from both men, looked at them scornfully, and stormed away.

Shane struggled to even his breathing, balling his hands by his sides into tight fists and

gritting his teeth hard against the throbbing ache in his balls.

"I can't believe you are actually subjecting yourself to this torture over a woman. She's not feeding you her cunt yet; why are you holding back?"

"I will be the right man for her."

Derrari choked on a laugh. "Right man, indeed. Says the man who believes women are nothing but a gender, existing only as sources of pleasure for men."

"Lara has proved me wrong."

"You've encountered lots of women to prove your opinion wrong, but they've never influenced your view of women to change," Derrari argued.

"Note the difference. I never said I identified women, generally, as the only sources of pleasure. I meant 'those women', not 'all women'.

Besides, you can't understand. She's different from any other woman I've ever noticed. She captivates me. And it's not just about the fact that she is exquisite. Everything about her fascinates me."

"Blah, blah, blah," Derrari cut in his words. He leaned over and hit him firmly on the shoulder. "Congrats, man. For finally being bewitched. What fascinates me the most is that she didn't even have to make an effort. Flawless!" He clapped.

"Tease me all you want. I want her, and I will make her mine."

"I know you will. I'm sure of that. All I fear is the price you would have to pay to actualize that." Derrari shook his head briefly at him and took more wine, his gaze never leaving Shane until he emptied the contents of his cup.

EIGHT

"Please!" Lara groaned. She had lost count of how much she had rolled her eyes over how her friends gushed about how much she had changed over the months she had been working for Shane's company.

"How many proposals have you received over the week? Tell me!" Kyle demanded, bouncing excitedly on the settee she sat on. "Add mine to it, because I'm asking you out right now."

"Alice in Wonderland." Meredith made a dramatic show of falling to one knee and extending her arms out to Lara.

"What's that?" Kyle tsked, shook her head at Meredith's display, and giggled. She turned her attention back to Lara. "This is wow!" She swept her hand in the air to capture Lara's frame.

"We haven't been able to hang out much over the previous month, but I'm totally awed and speechless by the change in your outlook," Meredith said.

"Don't go breaking hearts, alright?"

"Goodness! You are so beautiful it hurts to look away, Lara," Joe complimented, a smile crossing his lips.

"Look away, Joe. Laura wouldn't find it funny if she heard you giving out compliments to another woman," Meredith told him.

"Lara isn't another woman. She's my friend, and of course, I can appreciate her flawless beauty as much as you guys can. I'm a man with eyes, please."

"Keep those eyes on your girlfriend, then, Joe," Meredith stated firmly, holding his gaze.

"Snap out of it, you two," Kyle chided. "Meredith's right, Joe. There's so much patience a lady can have when it comes to her man. Don't give Laura more reasons to be

intimidated by Lara."

Joe furrowed his brows. "We've all been friends for years."

"Until you asked her out. You are now exclusively her man. So, forget about being friends with any of us; we are all potential threats when it comes to staking her claim on her man, alright?" Meredith told him.

Joe huffed. "Women and their jealousy!"

"Men and their covetousness," Meredith returned.

Lara raked her fingers through her hair. "That's enough. You all are making me feel uncomfortable with myself."

They all looked at her.

"I'm right here, and you are discussing how I am distressing and intimidating to you. It unnerves me."

"I don't feel intimidated by you, Lara," Kyle said.

"Neither do I," Meredith included.

"Me neither," Joe said, scowling as Meredith turned her face in his direction. "What?"

Kyle and Lara laughed at the two.

"Meredith, stay off Joe's case, will you?" Kyle chuckled.

Meredith snorted. "Stay off his case, my foot."

"If I weren't any wiser, I would think you have a huge crush on him," Kyle teased.

Joe made a show of widening his eyes in shock. "I'm not surprised. I get fawned over by women wherever I go."

Meredith leaped off her seat and flung a pillow at him.

He dodged it.

"You utter one more word, and Laura would have to date half of you by the time she comes back from her trip."

Joe stuck his tongue at her and flung the pillow back at her.

Lara and Kyle reclined on a cushion and watched the two, amused.

"I expected they would have grown out of this years ago," Kyle said. "They would have made lovely couples, don't you think?" Kyle whispered to Lara.

Lara nodded, smiling at the two. "Surely, they would have, but I think Laura would have our tongues should she ever hear us saying this."

They both giggled.

"We should stop them," Lara said, watching as the pillows were flung between the two.

"No way. I say we enjoy the show." Kyle pouted, shaking her head like a kid having a shit fit.

Lara rose from the cushion. "Not at the expense of my pillows. Stop it, you two!" She barked, barging between the two to catch the pillows being thrown.

She missed and got hit in the face by a pillow she hadn't seen coming from Joe's side.

"You!" She gritted her teeth and aimed the pillow at him.

Joe leaped off his seat as he was now being attacked by two vicious ladies.

Kyle cheered as she watched them. "Get him, ladies!" She laughed, throwing her arms in the air.

Joe raised both arms in surrender as he was cornered on either side by both ladies.

"Spare me," he pleaded. "Please," he added quickly when Meredith raised the pillow in her hand to beat him again.

"You deserved the beating," Lara hissed.

"Says the person who planned on saving her pillows." Kyle laughed. "And Meredith, how would Laura react if she were to walk in on the two of you disrespecting her man?" Kyle teased.

Meredith harumphed. "Well, let's be thankful she's away on a trip."

"I find Laura to be actually cool. Stop painting her the villain she fakes being," Lara defended her.

Joe slid up to Lara's side and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Thanks, pal. I knew you had a better eye for people than these other two."

"I'm still mad at you." Lara glared at him, shrugging his hand off her shoulders.

He held on to her and tickled her on the waist.

Lara jumped with a gasp, leaping away from Joe. "You..." she laughed. "I told you I hate being tickled, Joe."

"Oops. It slipped my mind." He turned to face Meredith.

"Dare you tickle me?" She seethed at him.

"I dare not." He raised his hands quickly in surrender and pulled her to himself for a hug. "I'm a lucky man, am I not?" He mused aloud as he pulled back from the embrace, leaning his arm around her shoulders. "I have four gorgeous women around me."

"Lucky man, indeed." Meredith snickered, jabbing him on the waist with her elbow.

Joe winced and bent over.

Lara and Meredith walked back to take a seat, plopping down on the chairs, with Joe joining them afterwards.

"That reminds me. How's your legendary boss, Lara?" Kyle said.

"Don't start with me, Kyle." Lara glared at her.

"Cheers to everyone!"

They all cheered and clinked their glasses together.

To mark the company's annual celebration, an all-staff dinner party was organized. They all went to "The Palms" in Miami Beach.

It was a luxurious venue with a stunning view of the ocean and was beautifully decorated. Shane had at first given a heartfelt speech to acknowledge everyone's efforts, hard work, and dedication that led to the company's success.

Afterward, they were treated to a gourmet dinner with a variety of dishes, including fresh seafood and exotic desserts.

Lara marveled at everything about the restaurant. From its decor to the dishes served, it

was exceptional. The atmosphere was lively, and everyone was just catching up with each other and making new connections.

Conversations began to flow between the staff members from different departments, with the discussions ranging from the latest beauty trends to the challenges of running a successful business in a competitive industry.

"They have a spa in here. I would love to try it out," Andrea said with an air of excitement as they all dined. She leaned over in her seat and playfully nudged Lara's arm with hers. "What do you say?"

Lara laughed awkwardly. She doubted anything in the restaurant was above average. As much as she relished the idea of visiting the spa, she knew she dared not cut her clothes beyond her size, regardless of the fact that her body ached to be cared for by a masseuse.

"I will pass on that. I prefer to have a view of the ocean. I've always wanted to see it. Especially at night. The better for me."

"The air will be chilly out there tonight. Getting a spa treatment is a better option," Andrea said. She shrugged when she noticed Lara was firm in her decision to take a walk on the beach instead. "Fine. I will get the spa treatment."

"And I will get the ocean view." Lara tilted her glass in her direction.

Andrea repeated the gesture, and they both drank their wines.

Shane announced the plan to launch their new product line in Paris, and the conversation turned toward how the product launch could be a success.

Ideas were shared, and the marketing team started brainstorming ideas for a launch campaign.

"I think this is going to be our best launch yet," one of the product development specialists said. "The ingredients we used are top-notch, and we've conducted extensive testing to make sure the products deliver on their promises."

The discussion turned to the best ways to market the new product and how to create buzz around the launch, both at home and abroad.

The marketing executives discussed the latest trends in social media marketing and how the company could leverage these trends to reach a wider audience.

Everyone was excited about the new line of skincare products that were set to hit the market in a few weeks' time, as well as the new extension plan of the company's

products to Paris.

"Thank you all for your contributions. They have all been insightful and noteworthy." Shane commended them. Making reference to the company's financial performance over the past year to an overall applause, he continued, "We need to keep innovating and staying ahead of the competition. We can't afford to rest on our laurels.

The growth the company has achieved so far is remarkable, but there are challenges that lie ahead in this fast-paced, constantly evolving, and competitive industry.

We need to be mindful and on constant alert for every change that evolves and how it could impact our business. We need to be prepared to pivot quickly if we need to. Are we together?"

They all nodded in acquiescence, and then the discussion flowed from there to the best ways to future-proof the company and how to stay agile in the face of changing market conditions.

As the night wore on, the conversations became more relaxed, and they all started sharing personal stories and anecdotes.

The party continued, with everyone dancing and enjoying themselves. It was a great opportunity for everyone to get to know each other better and build a stronger relationship within the company.

Lara excused herself from the party, needing to catch her breath after having to meet and greet the other staff members all through the party.

A gust of wind blew over her face, sending shivers down her spine. She rubbed her hands over her arms, her lips trembling against the chill.

Andrea had been right. The air was freezing tonight. She sighed as she watched the serene ripple of the water. The waves gently lapped against the shore, creating a soothing and calming sound that blended with the night breeze.

The water had taken on a deep blue hue that seemed almost dark in certain areas, with the lights from nearby buildings and boats reflecting off it and creating a mesmerizing dance of colors. The moon also cast a soft glow over the water, with the stars twinkling above. The air was filled with the scent of salt water and the distant sounds of sea gulls and other nocturnal creatures accompanying the ocean breeze as it caressed her face.

It was indeed an enrapturing sight.

A sigh escaped her lips as she appreciated the compelling sight of nature that stretched

out before her.

She took off her heels to feel the sand under her feet and revel in the magical atmosphere around her.

"A lovely sight, isn't it?"

Her head jerked in his direction, a soft smile spreading over her lips as he approached her. She turned her gaze back to the ocean, with Shane standing beside her.

"It is peaceful," she whispered wistfully.

"Yes, it is." He nodded in agreement, watching the water as well.

A gust of wind blew over, and Lara had to bite down on her lips against the chill that spread through her. Her teeth chattered.

"You should head inside, or you might catch a cold."

"You purposely came here to walk me inside, didn't you?"

"No. The night is enchanting. I love watching the stars. I'm a nature lover."

"Of course you are." Lara nodded. "You are taken with everything beautiful."

Shane looked at her and smiled, his gaze lingering before he said, "You should head inside now, Lara. How about a spa treatment tomorrow?"

She choked out a laugh. "I would love that, but no."

"You ought to get one. I insist. If it's about the expense..."

"You will pay again," Lara said. "No." She shook her head. "I can't."

"Your health matters to me. All of my employees' health is important to me. You are getting that spa treatment tomorrow morning, and that's final."

"I.."

"It would help with your back aches. Stop being so guarded!" he snapped in frustration.

"How do you know about..." She exhaled, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "Okay. Alright. I will be heading in now. Good night."

"Good night."

He watched her walk back to the hotel and took a moment to let the dangerous

emotions whirling in him cool with the chill in the air before he followed her.

Everyone had gone to their lodges. It was extremely late in the night, and the party had carried on so far.

"There you are, Shane." Claire approached him. "I've been looking for you."

"What do you want, Claire?"

He knew she was attracted to him and had noticed all the signs she had been giving to make him notice her.

As if he hadn't already. But his staff was off-limits. His relationship with the women he had dalliances with was a one-night stand and a complete write-off.

Claire was an efficient secretary. She was good at her job. She wasn't someone that he could easily dismiss, so she was off-limits.

However, despite his reputation as a rake and the first-name basis he had set in his company's principles, he still commanded the respect of his staff.

"Shane." She breathed softly, her voice almost a purr, as she slowly covered the distance between them.

"Do you still need your job, Claire?" He asked blandly

She halted, a frown on her face. "What?"

"Do you still need your job?" He repeated it, holding her gaze.

She looked confused at his question but replied, "Yes," furrowing her brows.

"Then, get out of my way," he told her, his voice as soft as a caress.

"Oh!" Her mouth parted in shock. She retreated to the side and watched, deeply embarrassed, as Shane walked out on her.

Her eyes welled up with tears at her wounded pride and the embarrassment she had received. She fumed at how he hadn't shown a hint of being attracted to her.

Looking around to be sure no one had witnessed their exchange, she huffed out an exhale and headed for her room, deciding she would have to up her game.

Her next attempt to win him over would yield better results, hopefully. No matter how long she had to wait or what she had to do, Shane Williams would be hers.

NINE

Lara tried to rein in her excitement as the plane ran along the runway to take off. It was her first time on a plane. She could never have anticipated being on a plane, let alone thinking of traveling overseas on it.

She balled her hands into fists, biting down hard on her lips as the plane gained ascent off the ground.

Shane looked amused as he watched her. "You will bleed your lips if you bite down that hard on it."

If she needed help biting harder on it, he would gladly fulfill her request if she did.

She flattened her lips, a deep flush painting her cheeks. She heaved a relieved sigh as the plane finally gained altitude. She wheezed out an exhale. "There," she breathed, and she swept her tongue over her lips.

"Bravo!" Shane clapped, an amused smile on his face.

Lara resisted the urge to roll her eyes, clicking her tongue noisily in her mouth instead.

The takeoff had been terrific. With her life left at the mercy of a towering mass of metal ascending into the air, there was little she could do to keep her heart from jumping to her throat.

She felt embarrassed, however, that her fear had been so obvious. She bit her lips, pinched her nose, and hit her head against the head rest. Her eyes closed tightly.

"You don't have to be embarrassed about it. It's your first time, after all. And you're lucky your reaction to being on a plane for the first time is just take-off fright and not flight

sickness."

"It's still embarrassing," She muttered under her breath, her eyes still shut, and her head leaned against the headrest.

Silence settled briefly between the two before Shane asked, "Is there any place you would love to see in Paris?"

"Pardon?" She sat up and looked at him, and then the question he asked registered in her head. "Oh!" She said this and leaned back against the seat. "I've not had the time to consider that, really. I've been occupied." She twitched her lips.

Shane nodded in understanding. "Occupied," he repeated. "Indeed." He nodded in agreement with her diction, inhaled, and let out an exhale. "We still have a few days ahead before our meeting. What do you say to exploring Paris?"

She looked at him, blinking twice, as she considered taking up his offer. She would love to explore the world in Paris with him, but she feared he might be trying to charm her.

And if he truly was, he was gradually worming his way through the barricades she had raised around her heart.

It was hard for her not to appreciate him. She couldn't have circumvented her growing attraction for him. As opposed to the rumors she had heard of him and her consequent evaluation of him as a bad man, he was sweet, genial, and attractive.

He was thorough and humble. She admired that about him. He made it seem effortless for everyone to relate to him, although he was on an entirely different level from her and his staff.

Her heartbeat accelerated as she realized what was happening to her. She was giving in to his charms.

Hell no, Lara. Take a hold of yourself. Keep a clear head.

She muttered repeatedly in her mind.

Shane could see the hesitation in her face. He sighed. "Lara. My offer to explore Paris with you is not for personal reasons, if that's what you are scared of. Still business, but mixed with pleasure and fun. More like field research. It's an avenue to get to know more about the locals and the market we are targeting based on their opinions and expectations of the product we would be launching."

She seemed to relax at that. She nodded, sucking in her lip ring. "Okay."

Shane looked at her, noticing how she avoided making eye contact with him. "I'm sure you are aware that it's not professional to avoid eye contact."

She huffed subtly through her nose and apologized quickly. Her heart thudded loudly against her chest as she forcefully summoned her will to hold his gaze. She apologized, flustered, "I'm sorry."

"What exactly is going on, Lara?" He knew what exactly was off with her, but he needed to aim his target well before he fired his shot.

He never made mistakes when it came to charming women, but with Lara, he knew he needed to tread more carefully.

She wasn't like any of the other women he had been involved with in the past. He only cared about getting into their pants, nothing more.

But with Lara, he wanted more than that. He wanted not just a part of her; he wanted all of her, but he would have to earn her trust to gain that.

However, Lara didn't appear ready at the moment to grant him his wish. She was particularly guarded around him, and no matter how hard he tried to make her let down her walls, she cemented them higher and stronger.

He was like fire to her. A compelling fire she mustn't get in contact with, or else she risks being burned; it would leave an indelible scar on her.

"What do you mean?" She feigned ignorance.

"I thought we were friends now, Lara. Do I make you uncomfortable?"

She choked out a laugh. "No." She shook her head. "Of course you don't. I apologize if I've acted in a way to make you think that way. I'm sure... uh, exploring Paris is a wonderful idea." She swept her tongue briefly over her lip.

"And stop doing that, please," he snapped.

"Uh, right," Lara breathed.

He realized what he had done as he watched the withdrawn look on her face. "I didn't mean to snap at you."

She twitched her lips and smiled flatly. "I understand. It's fine."

"Lara," he persisted.

"Shane." She held his gaze. "It's a habit I have. I've always been told by my boyfriend that

it's unsettling when I do that."

An alarm set off within him at her words; his nose flared, and his eyes widened. "You have a boyfriend?" He spat.

She furrowed her brows. "Yes. A friend of mine who is a male."

He relaxed. "Oh." He paused. "We should get to know each other since we've agreed to be friends, and maybe that would help with your unease around me."

"I'm not at unease around you," she denied, the words rolling off her tongue rapidly.

"You're sure?" He teased, a smirk cupping a corner of his mouth.

She looked at him. "Of course. I'm not."

"So, do I have your pardon?"

"For what?" She recalled what. "It's fine. You are free to express your disapproval."

"I don't disapprove of the action itself."

She gave a then-what look. "You are not pleased to see me biting down on my lips. I get it."

Absentmindedly, she bit down on her lip again.

"I warned you."

With a low growl under his breath and propelled by his desires, Shane leaped off his seat, covered the distance to hers with a long, powerful stride, and slammed his lips roughly against hers.

Lara hadn't seen it coming. Her mouth parted wordlessly as he swooped down to meet her face, swallowing her gasp with his mouth.

Heat burned through her as his lips touched hers, tasting, seeking, and exploring all of her. She shivered as a rush of pleasure she had never known existed coursed sharply through her.

She held on to him and purred into his mouth, all her body itching to be seared with his hot kisses.

He pulled her to her feet, gripping her hair while he kissed her.

A combination of thrill and pleasure raced through her, her mind fogged by the onslaught of desire that washed over her.

Stop. Stop! A distant, still voice protested in her mind as he took her down into the throes of passion with his passionate and erogenous kisses.

His hands captured the contours of her waist from her lower back to her hips; his fingers trailed feather-light touches over her skin.

She moaned.

Stop!!!

She jerked back, pushing him away from her. "No!" She gasped.

What the hell was she doing? She pressed a palm to her forehead, gasping and panting, averting his gaze.

"I'm so sorry, Lara," Shane rasped quickly, retreating back a step. He apologized repeatedly, mentally beating himself up for losing his self-control.

He had messed up big-time. He puffed out an irritated exhale at himself through his mouth. "Lara.."

"It's fine. Just stay away from me, please." She held out her palm to him. "I need a moment," she said breathlessly, her hand planted on her heaving chest.

He paused, deciding it was better to obey her demand.

He moved back to his seat, silently cursing under his breath for losing control of himself. He feared greatly that he had lost Lara's trust in his intentions before he gained it.

His balls ached as he sat back in his seat. His body was still on fire from the kiss he had shared with her.

Thank goodness she stopped him when she did, or else he would have done things he might never get forgiven for.

With the other women he had had, he could care less, but with Lara, he couldn't make up his mind to do anything that would hurt her and make her hate him.

With passion.

The rest of the flight was spent in painstaking silence. They each kept to themselves until they lodged in the hotel they had booked for their stay.

It was a luxurious hotel built in a grand style and offered elegant rooms and suites with stunning views of the city.

"Lara," Shane tried to reach out to her again. Guilt spread through him as he noticed how immediately she walled up at the sight of him, flinching subtly. "Please. I know I've acted out of character. I really admire my friendship with you, Lara. I don't want to lose this priceless connection with you."

"I'm not annoyed with you, Shane."

He arched an eyebrow at her response. He wasn't fooled into believing she wasn't annoyed at him, as she had said. Not after how she had balked at the sight of him.

"I'm not trying to play with you. I really am sorry," he apologized, feeling contrite about his actions.

She looked at him. "Please. You are making me uncomfortable and feel bad about myself with your apologies. Don't make this any more awkward. I've overlooked it. It was a mistake. We got carried away." She sucked in a deep breath, her chest heaving. "Alright?" She released her breath.

Shane looked so emotional at the moment, it unnerved her. She resisted the urge to pull him into her arms, embrace him, cuddle him...

"Oh, God!" She moaned as she took note of the direction her thoughts were taking.

How would she forge through the years she had to work with him and pay her debts if she couldn't keep a hold on her desires?

She wished she could run. He was a turn-on. She needed to get away from him as fast as possible.

He was a danger to her resolve. All sense of reasoning appeared to flee her mind and brain within proximity to him.

"When does our field excursion start?" She changed the subject of the conversation quickly, giving a light shrug.

He didn't look entirely convinced that she had put the kiss behind her. He knew he had ruined the brief progress he had made to get through the cages of her heart. He swallowed. "Yes. We leave whenever you are ready tomorrow morning."

"K. Good night." She went into her room, feeling his gaze hot on her back.

She slammed the door shut and fell back against it, holding her thudding chest with her hands.

"Breathe in, Lara," she instructed herself, slowly following her guide. "And out." She

exhaled, her shoulders sagging. She walked to the king-sized bed and plopped down flat on it with her arms spread wide.

"You can do this," she whispered encouragingly to herself. All she had to do was keep up a wall between them. Nothing would stop her from exploring the world of Paris tomorrow.

The days went by in a rush and were regrettably short-lived. She wished she could have extended the days before they had to meet with the distributor company to negotiate the contract.

She had so much fun visiting iconic places like the Eiffel Tower, which offered a breathtaking view of the city. There was the Jardin du Luxembourg, a beautiful park with manicured gardens and a pond for sailing miniature boats.

And, of course, her favorite, Disneyland. She had so much fun riding Space Mountain, and she had such a good laugh—her stomach hurt—that Shane had shown fear as she had been frightened on the roller coaster.

They each shook hands with the company's representatives and took their seats.

Shane began, "Good morning. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. I'm interested in discussing the possibility of forging an alliance between our companies."

"Good morning, Mr. Williams. It's a pleasure to meet with you as well," the man replied, his gaze lingering unnecessarily on Lara as he spoke. He introduced himself as Raphael Dupont. "We're certainly open to exploring opportunities for collaboration.

We've been following the success of your beauty products and are excited about the potential of working together with you. Shall we proceed with the contract negotiations? What specifically do you have in mind?"

Shane launched into the proposal. The conversation extended over a few minutes, with Mr. Dupont's gaze constantly moving in Lara's direction while they talked.

Lara swallowed dryly and tried not to show her unease at Raphael's gaze. She twitched her lips and willed herself to follow the conversation instead.

"Alright, that all sounds good. We've prepared a draft contract that outlines our initial proposals."

The contract was handed over to Lara by his assistant, a young lady who had been introduced as Felicia Durham.

"We look forward to your input and suggestions to ensure a mutually beneficial

agreement that sets the stage for a prosperous business relationship," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Dupont. I appreciate your proactive approach. I will review the draft contract and provide our feedback within the agreed-upon timeline," Shane said.

"Absolutely, Mr. Williams."

"Thank you for your time today, and I'm looking forward to finalizing this contract soon."

"Thank you, Mr. Williams. I share your enthusiasm and look forward to our ongoing collaboration. Have a safe journey back."

Shane nodded in acknowledgment. "And you too, Mr. Dupont. Let's keep in touch. Until we meet again." He shook hands with him.

Mr. Dupont shook hands with Lara as well, and Shane shook hands with Miss Felicia. "She wears the product well. She will make a perfect model."

"She's an executive assistant." Mine. "Not a model, Mr. Dupont," Shane stated firmly, giving the hint that he was trying not to get offended by how he had been leering at his assistant all through the conversation.

"Of course." He flashed a smile at both of them and bid them goodbye again until their next meeting.

"How do you feel?" He inquired as they sat in the car.

She looked at him, reaching out to sweep her tongue over her lips, then, recollecting the consequence that could have, shut her mouth and swallowed. She nodded in reply, twitching her lips. "I'm good."

She laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Technically, I was at the meeting as a model. You didn't have to react that way to his statement."

"I will accept that if you tell me you were not at unease with his leers. His gaze was virtually on you all through the meeting." His voice rose to a pitch of smoldering annoyance.

She watched him silently, a ghost of a smile on her lips.

"What?" He asked, and his inflection changed.

"Thank you, Shane. For everything. Being here is such a huge blessing and an unmerited opportunity for me."

"Lara, you deserve every second of it all. You deserve more than this."

"I.."

He spread his arms. "Give me a hug?"

She arched an eyebrow.

"Not as your boss. Your friend." He held his arms open. "Come on, Lara," he urged. "I won't bite."

She flattened her lips, inclined to lean for the hug, but she remembered her resolve.

"I will pass," she refused politely. "Thanks, buddy."

A twinkle lit in Shane's eyes at the endearment she had given him. She might have denied him a hug, but she had granted him something more valuable.

She had acknowledged him.

"You are welcome, mate." He smiled.

TEN

The rest of their stay in Paris was mapped out with occasional meetings to discuss the terms of agreement, negotiate the proposals made, and finalize the contract with Mr. Dupont and his company.

Shane thanked and shook hands with Mr. Dupont after they had both appended their signatures to the documents drafted to secure their deal, promising to keep in touch with each other on the latest updates.

"I believe you've enjoyed your stay so far in Paris, Miss Dunlop," Mr. Dupont inquired as he shook hands with Lara, prolonging the handshake with a charming smile on his face.

"It has been very wonderful."

"Perhaps you might love to visit again. We will be very delighted to receive you on a guided tour of the city."

"Oh!" Lara smiled, politely pulling her hand out of the prolonged handshake. "That's generous of you, Mr. Dupont. Thank you."

"You are always welcome." He flashed another smile at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

"They are good at their business approach, but their ambassador is a huge letdown," Shane fumed as he got into the car.

That would be their final meeting, and Lara was glad it had been a success. Also, it would be the last time she had to endure Mr. Dupont's lascivious gaze.

"It's all over now." Lara heaved a relieved sigh, leaning back against the car seat.

They would be taking a direct flight back to Miami from there, and she wanted nothing more than to shut her eyes and revel in the reverie of not being under some man's scrutiny.

"I'm really sorry and pissed you had to endure that." Shane hissed through his teeth.

"Why should you have to apologize? He's the one at fault for being indiscreet about his desires."

Shane wasn't annoyed with Mr. Dupont overtly expressing his appreciation of her beauty. Of course, he also had a hard time conducting himself professionally around her. He had a flashback to the moment on the plane.

He hadn't been thinking when he pulled her to himself and kissed her as roughly as he did.

But he was jealous. He would have no other man leering at his woman.

Yes, Lara was his. He was making her his, unfailingly.

"You are right. How about we grab a drink sometime to celebrate the success of our collaboration?"

Lara tsked. "Collaboration? You did virtually all the work. All I did was put in an appearance."

"The finalizing of the contract was rapidly done thanks as well to your presence. Mr. Dupont looked really taken with you and was more than eager to sign off on the collaboration. He was impressed by what he saw.

As he said, you wear the product well. Didn't he make an offer for a guided tour around Paris? Now, that's profound. Good job in there, Lara."

"I'm honored, Shane." She smiled at him. "Thanks."

Their flight back to Miami was interesting. They shared their personal experiences and exchanged banter about their pasts.

Their conversation was lively and animated; they both lost track of time and were engrossed in their chats. They were both surprised that the plane would be touching down in Miami, as their pilot announced it over the radio.

Lara looked at her watch and marveled. "Woah!"

She couldn't believe she had chatted seamlessly over that extended number of hours with Shane. She had warmed up to him and loved every tidbit of their conversations.

He was a great conversationalist, and she had been entertained throughout their conversations, hardly aware that the day had passed.

Shane's driver was waiting to pick them up, and he loaded their luggage in the car. They

got into the car, and the car was pulled fluidly into motion.

"Oh!" Lara sighed as she looked out the window at the streets. It felt good to be back home.

She had spent weeks in Paris and had almost forgotten how pleasurable life in her birth city felt, taken by the allures of the city in France. It surpassed her expectations. Indeed, it was an exceptional and fascinating city to visit, as popularly claimed by tourists.

She turned back to face Shane as the car swerved into her neighborhood and pulled to a halt in front of her house a few minutes later.

"Thanks a lot for today, Shane. Congratulations to both of us on a safe, successful trip."

He smiled at her. "Sure, Lara. Good night. I'll see you at work on Monday. You should take a good rest."

"I will, and you too." She made to open the door and alight from the car.

"When do you say we grab that drink to celebrate our successful collaboration? Will you have been well rested by the weekend?"

"I'm sorry. I have plans for the weekend. I chill with my friends on weekends."

"Oh! How about this day next week? After work, presumably."

She paused and considered the offer briefly before she replied, "D'accord."

Shane hissed out an amused laugh. "Now you speak French. Au revoir et bonne nuit. Profitez du reste de votre journée."

"I have no idea what that means." She laughed.

"Goodbye and good night. Enjoy the rest of your day," he translated. "That's what it means."

She heaved a sigh, smiling and staring incredibly at him. "You are full of surprises, Shane. Good night." She waved goodbye at him and got out of the car.

He smiled back at her as she closed the door and watched until she had entered her apartment and closed the door before he told his driver to pull the car around and take him home.

He leaned his head back against the headrest, a wide grin spreading over his lips as her compliment replayed in his mind.

He would sleep through the night, the happiest man in the world.

Lara gave a half-scream, balking as the door was opened, and all her friends leaped at her to give her a welcoming hug: Kyle, Meredith, Joe, and Laura.

They were all extremely happy to receive the news of her arrival and had all come, as soon as the clock struck mid-afternoon, to her house.

Kyle gave a shrill sound of excitement as she saw her first and rushed to meet her with the others.

"You smell like French," Kyle commented as they all pulled back from the group embrace that had almost smoldered her within.

Lara rolled her eyes, laughing and unable to resist shaking her head at Kyle's comment. Kyle had a way of making amusing teases.

"You look good, baby girl." Meredith nodded in approval, assessing her look and pulling her to herself for an embrace.

She had made herself Lara's human monitor. She monitored, appreciated, and gushed about every change in Lara's outlook.

"It's good to have you back, Cinderlara," Joe said, wrapping his arms briefly around her.

She patted him once on the back and smiled at the nickname she had been given by her friends ever since Kyle had likened her initial lifestyle to that of the Disney character Cinderella.

"How was the journey to and fro?" Laura asked. "You couldn't even call," she mumbled in an accusing tone.

"She got carried away with all the fun and forgot about the rest of us." Kyle hissed playfully.

"I'm really sorry, guys," Lara apologized, beaming with exuberant smiles on her face.

"Tell me you have pictures and videos." Kyle tweaked a finger at her.

"Lots of them."

"Saved on your phone?" Meredith inquired eagerly.

"Trust me." Lara nodded in confirmation.

"Yay!" Kyle threw her arms excitedly in the air.

"Come on in, ladies and the gentleman. What would you like to have?" Lara waved them over to the sitting room as she walked through it to get refreshments from the kitchen for them before she got started on fully entertaining them.

They followed behind her and each took a seat on either side of the chairs placed around an intricately cut, dark, lacquered table at the center of the room.

She came in a few minutes later with a tray of glasses filled with juice and served them all.

"Have a seat first, and tell us all the gory details about what went down in Paris." Kyle jiggled excitedly on the armchair she was sitting on.

They had pounced on Lara's phone and started snooping through her phone's gallery for details worth piquing their interest about her trip to Paris while she went to the kitchen to have their refreshments prepared.

There were also various cookies on the tray to whet their appetites while they talked about her experiences on her trip.

They had been oohing and aahing at the photos she had taken on her trip; their excitement heightened at those ones she had taken with Shane—at each iconic landmark in Paris and notable fun places there.

"Look at that!" Kyle flashed Lara's phone in her view, showing an image she had taken with Shane at the Eiffel Tower.

"They both look so beautiful together; I almost believed they were now a couple," Meredith said.

Kyle sucked in a deep breath, making an exaggerated show of gasping, her eyes widening in faux shock. "You guys are actually a couple, aren't you?"

Lara tried to answer, but she could not utter a word; Meredith had taken it up.

"Of course they would have been by now. Staying together over those weeks, a chemistry is bound to have simmered between them."

"No way!" Laura exclaimed.

"He's not right for you, Lara," Joe said heatedly. "You can't be with him."

"He's perfect for her," Kyle argued.

"He's a damned playboy. He will only end up hurting her," Joe argued.

"You don't say." Meredith shook her head at him. "For a man who plans on breaking her heart eventually, he wouldn't go to these extremes just to get into her pants."

"He is attracted to her, undoubtedly," Kyle added. "Did you kiss him? Has he kissed you, rather? How was it? I bet he was a sensual kisser. Oh, my!" She feigned swooning on her behalf.

Lara shook her head as her friends argued over her relationship with Shane, too flustered to correct their erroneous notions.

"It is a popular legend in Paris that if a couple kisses while standing under the Eiffel Tower, at the very top, as the bell chimes, their love will be eternal, and they will stay together forever," Meredith stated.

"Of course, the place itself is often seen as a place of romance and love. It wasn't just circumstantial; he happened to take her there," Kyle added.

"Stop it!" Lara bellowed.

Kyle gasped as they all turned to face her, mouths agape and stunned.

"I don't want to think about it. We went on a business trip. All those places we went to were for market surveys. Customers field research. So, the photos taken are not proof that we are couples, dating, or whatever." She shook her head and released a fatigued sigh.

"Nothing happened between Shane and me," she notified them, turning a finger down to get her words straight to them.

Joe looked relieved at her declaration.

Kyle and Meredith looked perplexed. Lara wasn't convinced.

"It's okay if you don't want to tell us about the gory details that went down between the two of you. We won't ask," Kyle told her.

"I said nothing happened between Shane and me. He's my boss, for crying out loud. I can't get wrapped up in an office romance. I've never been a connoisseur of it." She sounded impatient this time, annoyed by the sneering voice in her mind.

Really? Nothing happened between the two of you. What about the passionate kiss you shared on the plane with him?

Lara closed her eyes briefly, muttering inaudibly under her breath at her rebellious mind.

Kyle adjusted her sitting position, staring incredulously at Lara. "Well, I'm surprised." She planted a hand lightly on her chest.

"So am I," Meredith said. "Not even a kiss?"

Lara groaned under her breath and glared at her friends at the reminder of that heated moment she had on the plane with Shane.

She didn't want to think about it. She needed to stop thinking about it. She couldn't bear the thought of getting involved with Shane.

He would wreck her. And she would never be able to regain her full sense of self if that ever happened.

"You are being naive, Lara," Kyle said. "What's wrong with office romances? They are always the most interesting."

"And adventuresome," Meredith chipped in.

"When watched in movies," Lara seethed through her teeth at the two. "Could you please just stop talking about your expectations for a relationship between Shane and me?"

"It's not our expectations. We are pointing out facts," Kyle informed her.

"It's obvious you two have chemistry together, however hard you try to hide it," Meredith told her, holding her gaze.

"Come on. Kyle, Meredith," Joe chastised the two. He tuned in to face Lara. "I'm in support of your decision, Lara. As a guy who knows what's best for you and as a friend, I will advise you. Shane Williams is not a wise choice as a lover for you."

Lara nodded flatly at Joe, heaving an exasperated sigh at the conflict between her mind and her heart.

ELEVEN

"Morning, Lara." Andrea threw her arms around her briefly in an embrace at lunch.

"Welcome back from your trip. How was Paris?"

"Interesting. It's a fascinating city," Lara said.

"I missed you a lot," Andrea was saying.

"Yet you didn't call." Lara cut into her words, making a face.

Andrea pouted. "I expected you to call and share the fun on the trip with me, but no, you didn't. You couldn't have expected me to call. What if I called while you were having a meeting?"

"Your excuse is flimsy, buddy. But I will let it pass," Lara told her, and she tsked, shaking her head in amusement at her as she walked along the queue to get her lunch served.

She walked to the spot where Andrea and she usually hang out during lunch and sat down, Andrea joining her a few seconds later, and they both started chatting.

"Liam," Andrea muttered as Liam walked by their table, hesitating for a moment about joining the two at their table and eventually deciding to sit on another instead.

Andrea waved him over. "You can sit with us," she told him. "If you want," she added quickly.

He looked at Lara; their gazes made contact briefly before he approached the table and sat with them.

"Are you avoiding me, Liam?" Lara asked him as he sat with them.

She hoped he was not yet stuck over her rejection of his proposal to be in a relationship with her. It couldn't be. But she hadn't seen much of him around since then.

"Why should he be avoiding you?" Andrea piped. "Did you two have a fallout?"

"I'm not avoiding you, Lara. It's not you."

"Oh!" Lara's lips parted briefly, understanding the message just as much as Andrea had.

The expression on her face turned sullen again, and she focused intently on her food, pretending to be enjoying her lunch.

But Lara could see through her facade. She knew something was up between the two of them.

"Is there anything I'm missing out on, Liam? I thought you and Andrea had settled your disagreement. Or are you having a relapse?"

"It's nothing, Lara. It's nothing of the sort. We don't have a disagreement."

"Then, it's definitely me you are avoiding. I haven't seen much of you around since I got back from the trip."

Liam looked at her with a smirk on the corners of his lips and tsked. "How could you have? You've only been in office four days now since you came back."

"And four days is inconsequential? I would have noticed your presence on the first day of my resuming office."

"I missed out on lunches purposely because I had a lot to cover. I was rarely in office during those periods. You should know I would have been the first to welcome you back to the office upon your arrival." He flashed a light smile at her. "How was your trip?"

"Successful." She looked at Andrea, aware she had exempted herself from the conversation.

The Andrea she knew never shirked from setting banter rolling in a conversation.

"Andrea. What's wrong?"

Andrea shook her head and forced a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"You don't look as cheerful as you had been a minute ago," she observed. She placed a hand over a corner of her lips to shield it from Liam's view. "Is it Liam? Has he done something to offend you?" She whispered to her, leaning closer to her to talk as distinctly as possible to her without her words getting overheard by Liam.

Andrea closed her eyes briefly and shook her head in response; her cutlery was paused over her plate, her palm pressed against the edge of the table.

"Lara?" Liam urged. "What are you whispering about?"

Lara settled properly in her seat and twisted her lips at Liam. "Ladies' talk, Liam. You

don't get to know."

Liam feigned being hurt, pressing a hand to his chest with so much vigor that Andrea couldn't resist sneaking a peek at him. "How you hurt me with your words, Lara. I never took you for one to discriminate."

Lara laughed. "Why? I never could have thought you were as dramatic as you've shown now."

Andrea grimaced as the two laughed.

Then it dawned on her. She took a closer look at the covert look in Liam's eyes as he laughed with Lara.

He was truly attracted to her. What had begun as an ordinary tease was playing out to be true; Andrea observed to her dismay.

She had only made jests of Liam's eager attempts to befriend Lara because of her beauty; she hadn't known he truly was attracted to her.

Probably he had already revealed his intentions, or he was bidding his time for the perfect time to strike and sweep her off her feet with his charming smile and delectable humor.

Her heart lurched as she watched the two, instantly repelled by the idea of the rest of her lunch. She would never be able to stomach her lunch, given the state of her emotions.

She stood abruptly from her chair, putting an abrupt end to their laughter, and excused herself. "I have to go," she informed them quickly, and she walked with harried steps away from the table and out of the restaurant.

Lara looked confused. "What could have happened to her?" She looked fine by the time they started eating their lunch.

Liam shrugged indifferently. "Don't ask me. I have no idea."

Lara didn't look convinced. The two had been acting out with each other. Something had gone down between them. She decided to find out about it from Andrea after the day was over.

She hoped she would let her in, though.

She had the rest of her lunch with Liam and politely refused an offer to meet for the weekend.

"All my weekends have been booked by my friends."

"How about today, then? I honestly have to treat you to another meal. I really enjoyed your company today, Lara. You will make a good chat buddy."

"I have an appointment to meet with someone after work today; I'm sorry."

He raised an unconvinced eyebrow at her. "Or you are deliberately making up excuses not to hang out with me because of my request?"

"I'm offended you would think that of me. I mean it. I'm occupied for the rest of the week. The following week, perhaps."

"My apologies for doubting the veracity of your words. Next week. I look forward to it."

She nodded in acknowledgment and walked back to her office, feeling energized to continue with the rest of her tasks for the day.

Shane called her to his office a few minutes after she relaxed in her chair and was about to get on with her work.

"How was your lunch?"

"Good. Do you need me to get lunch for you from your preferred restaurant?"

He waved a hand to dismiss her request. "Don't bother. Are we still having drinks together today?"

"Of course," she confirmed.

"Would you like having dinner with me tonight over drinks? I've missed having home-cooked meals." He paused, searching her expression. "We can just have a drink if you are not open to the idea."

"Alright." She tilted her head in agreement. "What's the menu for dinner?"

Shane touched the tip of his tongue to the back of his lower teeth. "The issue is I don't have much to make dinner. I hardly cook, so I don't bother shopping for groceries."

Lara choked on a laugh, scoffing subtly in amusement. "I will prepare a list of the things we will need for dinner. What would you love to have?"

"It's all on you. Whatever you decide."

She twitched her lips with a half-smile. "I get it. Will that be all?"

"Sure," he answered, clasping his fingers below his chin. "I will pick you up at the end of

the day. We can go grocery shopping together. Perhaps I could learn a thing or two and stop being so dependent on my mom to have a taste of home-cooked meals."

Lara laughed and nodded in acquiescence to his words. "Of course." She exited his office to hers and set on wrapping her tasks quickly before the end of work hours for the day, so she could find Andrea before Shane called her up.

Andrea had a thing for becoming elusive whenever she was hurt. She would make sure she didn't escape her today.

"Looking for Andrea?" Liam asked with a knowing smile on his face as they came into contact in the hallway leading to Andrea's department.

Lara's shoulders sagged as she heaved a defeated sigh. She had beaten her into leaving again. "There's something you are not telling me, Liam."

"It's not for me to tell. I thought ladies talked. She would fill you in when she comes around to doing so. Either way, it doesn't pique my interest."

Lara arched an eyebrow at him, furrowing her brows in inquiry.

"Next week, Lara," he reminded her. "Goodbye." He gave her a salute and continued walking toward the elevator.

Lara huffed another sigh, exhaled on a low whistle, and went to meet Shane to get on with their plans for the day.

She wasn't surprised he lived in a luxurious estate, as they were driven through Star Island after purchasing all the grocery items they would need to have dinner prepared for the night.

Shane's house was magnificent, a true testament to opulence and grandeur. The exterior of the house was a sight to behold, exuding an air of elegance and sophistication.

The mansion sat on an expansive waterfront property, with perfectly manicured gardens surrounding it like a verdant oasis. Towering palm trees swayed gently in the warm breeze, casting playful shadows upon the meticulously designed pathways leading to the grand entrance.

The architecture was a harmonious blend of Mediterranean and contemporary styles, featuring sleek lines, stately columns, and large arched windows that allowed glimpses into the world within.

As Lara stepped through the double doors, a wave of awe washed over her, for the

interior was nothing short of breathtaking.

The foyer welcomed her with its soaring ceilings adorned with intricately crafted chandeliers, their crystal facets casting dazzling patterns of light upon the marble floors below. Artwork by renowned masters graced the walls, each piece carefully curated to evoke emotion and admiration.

As he led her further into the house, they stepped into a vast living room that exuded both comfort and sophistication. Plush velvet sofas, upholstered in rich jewel tones, inviting one to sink into their embrace, sat proudly in the room. The room was bathed in light, its floor-to-ceiling windows offering an unobstructed view of the azure waters beyond.

A grand piano stood proudly in one corner of the room, its polished wood gleaming under the soft glow of recessed lighting.

"Welcome to my humble home." Shane stood ahead, extending his arms out in a welcoming gesture.

Lara had forgotten how to breathe, mesmerized by the lavish interior of his house. All of it exuded an unparalleled sense of luxury. "Humble." She scoffed. "Your house is outstandingly beautiful, Shane. This is ethereal!" She said it with a high pitch.

She had been expecting his home to be a grand sight to behold, but this was beyond her wildest imagination.

Adjacent to the living room was a gourmet kitchen that would delight even the most discerning chef. Lara marveled at the gleaming stainless steel appliances and pristine marble countertop. The island at the center of the room was a hub for culinary delight, while the cozy breakfast nook beckoned with its sun-drenched ambiance.

"I could give you a guided tour of my house, should you be interested," he said, making emphasis on the 'guided tour.'

Lara snickered, aware of whom he was making a reference to.

Dinner was a flavorful delicacy of Spanish-style seafood paella with a variety of fresh seafood, such as shrimp, mussels, clams, and fish, infused with saffron and spices.

Once it was cooked, she removed the pan from the heat and let it rest for a few minutes to allow the flavors to meld together.

"Mmn." Shane rubbed his hands together, thrilled, as he approached the kitchen, inhaling the aroma that wafted in the air. "Something smells good."

She garnished the food with parsley and dished out portions for each of them. "It's all ready to be served," she announced.

"Hooray!" Shane cheered with glee. "What can I help with?"

"It's all on me, remember?"

"As your ladyship pleases." He swept a comic bow, to which Lara snickered.

"Woah!" He gave her two thumbs up as he took a spoonful of the food, his eyes widening immediately with thrill and pleasure, a soft moan escaping his throat. "Were you a chef, or did you work as a chef too?"

"This," she leaned back and gestured to the dishes on the table, "is all thanks to my mom's unparalleled culinary skills. I learned from the best."

"Of course." Shane nodded, enthusiastically scooping spoonfuls of paella into his mouth. "This is delicious!" He gushed profusely.

"Easy, it's hot."

"All I can taste is the richness of its taste."

Lara smiled, digging into her food as well. "Mmn." She moaned in appreciation for the taste of the food.

Her knowledge of Kyle's culinary skills blended with those she had learned from her mom's to make an exotic combination.

"I would love to have more tastes of your cuisines, Lara. This is impressive. I love it. I get to have weekend specials from now on."

She furrowed her brows, pausing her spoon mid-air after she had scooped the paella into her mouth. She chewed and swallowed. "Is that an order or a request?"

Shane made a face at her. "A request. From your friend," he answered.

She twitched her brows.

"Please."

"I'm honored to be your host."

"Thank you," he breathed ecstatically.

After eating, they both cleared the used dishes off the table and cleaned them. Shane had insisted on helping out since, technically, Lara was a guest in his home.

"What?" Lara turned to face him after she had placed the last of the dishes they had used away, wiping her hand dry with a towel.

He had been staring at her. She felt awkward with the adoring expression in his gaze. It made emotions she wished remained buried until she left him surge within her.

"You are perfect." His voice was a caressing whisper.

The compliment made her heart leap. Tiny flutters moved through her, and her belly made flip-flops at his comment.

She sucked in her lip ring and swallowed, snapping out of the trance their locked gazes kept her in. "We should have the wine now. I will.. I will..." She licked her lips nervously. She had forgotten what she ought to do.

Shane was struggling to rein in his desires as he watched her get flustered.

She frowned lightly. "I will head to the sitting room first," she said in a rush, and she moved with harried steps, muttering inaudibly under her breath, her heart thudding so loudly she could hear its beats in her ears.

Her mind raced. All this had been a bad idea. He was unraveling her emotions gradually. A chill spread within her, and fear gripped her. She tripped in her strides and let out a yelp as she saw the floor rush to meet her face.

Relief and a shiver racked through her as a powerful arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her back against a wall of hard, muscled chest.

She heaved out pants at his proximity, her mouth going dry as she felt him behind her.

She ought to leave now. She should run. Her legs decided to grow heavy at that crucial moment, trapping her in a dangerous position with him.

Her lips parted as his warm breath caressed her nape.

Her scent was intoxicating. It made his pulse rise. He mentally willed himself to take his hand off her waist; she was safe now, but he couldn't bring himself to do that.

"Lara." He sighed, fearing what he might do to her if she didn't move away from his hold. He couldn't pull away from her, and it was hard for him to hold himself back from ravishing her as he would love to.

"Lara!" he pleaded for her to leave, his lips itching to taste her.

"Just a taste," he told himself, tilting his head to press a kiss on her neck.

Fire burned through her at the touch of his lips against her neck. A moan escaped her throat, and heat pooled between her thighs.

Damn it!

Shane cursed sharply under his breath, overwhelmed by his desires, turned her to face him in one swift swirl, and slammed his mouth roughly against hers.

TWELVE

Lara typed away on her laptop; she had lost track of time again as she worked. There was a lot to be done, so she immersed herself in work to get everything done in record time.

She jumped, startled out of her flow, as the telephone gave off. Reflexively, she raised her arm, pulled back her sleeve, and checked the time on her wristwatch.

She picked up the call and raised the phone to her ear, speaking into the receiver. "Hello, Alarm."

"Alarm? Who's that?" Shane's voice came through the receiver, with a tinge of jealousy in his voice.

Lara pushed back an inch on her desk chair, not expecting that. "Oh!" She muttered under her breath, biting down on her lip.

A blush crept up on her cheeks, and her heart soared with rapture as she reminisced about the events that had occurred on the previous weekend.

She had stayed the weekend over at Shane's house, and she relished every moment she had spent with him.

She wished just as much as he did that the weekend would never be over. She had been taken on the most memorable pleasure ride ever.

"Lara."

She snapped out of her thoughts. "Yes?" She breathed, jumping subtly on her seat at the abrupt pull back to reality.

"Is there something I'm missing out on? Who's Alarm? And why did you zone out on me when I called?" His voice had risen in pitch without him realizing it.

"Shane," Lara breathed.

He huffed a breath over the phone and sighed. "This is not working. I'm coming over."

The call was abruptly ended, and by the time Lara looked to the door adjoining his office to hers, he had pushed the door open and walked in.

She shot to her feet, her mouth going dry at the sight of him. All the foreplay they had been engaged in over the weekend surfaced in her mind with a vivid effect, and heat pooled within her.

Her lips parted slightly as she gasped at the pleasure that rippled through her in waves.

Shane's nose flared at the sight of her reaction to his presence. He covered the distance between them in a blink of an eye, trapping her to himself with his palm pressed on her lower back and slamming his mouth roughly over hers.

Lara wrapped her arms around his neck and moaned as she kissed him back. It had been a day since she had been in his arms, yet she missed him so much.

His lips trailed kisses along the corners of her lips to her neck. She shivered as he lingered on her sensitive spot, the tip of his tongue applying moisture to the warmth he spread through it with his warm, sensual mouth.

She felt her eyes roll over in her head, her legs giving way beneath her as another mass of pleasure flooded through her. It rocked her off balance, but Shane caught her.

"I need..." She was saying. Her voice sounded breathless.

She jumped as the telephone gave off. It took a moment for her scattered wits and pleasure-befuddled brain to register where the sound had come from.

She glanced at Shane before she lunged for the phone. "Hello?" She spoke into the receiver and choked at how breathless she sounded. She coughed silently at the back of her throat and swallowed.

"You're not coming down for lunch?" Liam's voice emitted through the receiver.

"Oh! It slipped my mind." She pressed her palm to her temple, licking her lips nervously.

"You promised not to skip lunch. Come on."

"Sure, Liam. I will be there soon," she said through her teeth, placing the phone back on hold as the call was disconnected on Liam's end.

She wheezed a sigh of relief and looked at Shane.

He looked withdrawn. "Liam?"

"Yes..." Lara was saying, then noticing the pulse of annoyance on him, her eyes widened,

and she shook her head. "He's not what you are thinking he is."

"He's not. What do you think I am thinking he is?" His nose flared again, his annoyance more pronounced.

"You are jealous, Shane."

"Of course I am. Seeing how you two have already gotten so close that you are now exchanging nicknames. Alarm?" He hissed through his breath.

A smirk raised the corner of Lara's lips, an amused twinkle in her eyes. "Hey." She covered the distance between them and wrapped her arms around him, leaning one side of her cheek against his chest.

She smiled at the feel of his hard, masculine chest against her face. The contours of his chest were perfectly muscled and evoked a soothing and reassuring feeling within her.

It scared her that her resolve had broken, but she felt safe. With him.

She closed her eyes and breathed in his scent deeply; her heartbeat formed a rhythm with his.

"You have no idea what you do to me, Lara," Shane said softly, his hands caressing her hair down her back while the rising and falling of his chest hummed in her ear.

She pulled away from him. "Liam and I are friends."

"I can't help but get jealous, knowing what's at stake. He's a man, either way." He checked the time on his watch.

"Come on. We will be late for lunch. I called to ask what you would like to have for lunch, but we got carried away in the heat of the moment. That's how irresistible you are, Lara. So I'm not naive to believe Liam only sees you as a friend."

Lara bit down on a smirk. "I'm having lunch with Liam and Andrea. For your notice, Andrea is Alarm, not Liam."

"You are having lunch with me. We are both going out for lunch, Lara."

"But, Liam..." Her words were cut off mid-sentence as Shane covered her mouth with his. "We're in the office, Shane," she murmured against his mouth, placing a hand lightly on his chest to stop him.

"We are in the privacy of your office," he murmured back, wrapping his arms around her in an embrace while he kissed her again.

The two made quick work of delving each other of their clothes, their lips and bodies melding with passion.

They settled into a fast and demanding pace, raking their fingers through each other's hair and groping feverishly for each other as they kissed.

His thrusts slowed down, and he buried his face in the crook of her neck, planting soft kisses on the flesh there.

Lara sighed, her eyelids half-closed as he kissed her.

"I can't get enough of you," he murmured against her neck.

Lara placed her palm over the back of his neck and caressed it. "We will miss lunch, Shane."

"Right," he said, withdrawing and slowly pulling out of her. He kissed her long and hard before he finally let go.

Lara smiled at him as they both worked on adjusting their clothes. Her smile faltered at the edges of her lips, though.

Shane noticed that. "What?"

"We shouldn't be doing this. Not even in the privacy of our offices."

"I couldn't help it either."

She twisted her lips to one side. "I agree." She sighed. "Nobody can find out about us, Shane. Not at work," she told him. She pressed her lips into a tight line and swallowed down her throat.

"I don't want to keep you a secret, Lara. I've always wanted you, from the moment I set my eyes on you in that bar. Now that I have you as mine," He held her gaze as he spoke, holding her hands tenderly in his. "I want to show you off for the world to see what a lucky man I am."

Lara looked touched. She bit down hard on her lips to hold back the tears that clouded her eyes. His words surged an avalanche of indescribable emotions through her; she felt pushed to tears. "Shane." Her lips trembled as she forced them to stay locked against the myriad of emotions that cascaded through her.

"That's how much I feel about you, Lara."

She licked her lip ring. "We can't do this at work either way, Shane. We can't allow our

desires to conflict with our duties at work."

He nodded once in agreement. "I understand your concern, Lara. Okay," he said. "What will you be having for lunch?"

She looked at the time on her wristwatch. "I have only five minutes left before lunch is over. I will grab a quick bite from the cafeteria and head back in. I should be able to catch up with Liam and Andrea before lunch is over."

Shane arched an eyebrow, a half-grin on his lips. "You are having lunch with me, Lara. There's no alternative."

She furrowed her brows. "No. I promised to have lunch with Liam and Andrea today."

"Work calls, Lara. Unless you want to go out there and alert everyone about just being fucked in your office, then you can go."

Lara's frown deepened, and she retreated a step, inhaling the air around her. Truthfully, she reeked of sex.

She glared at him. "You did that intentionally, didn't you?"

"Hey." He raised his arms quickly in mock surrender, a wide grin on his face. "I'm only an innocent man with the intention to take his girl out for lunch."

Lara rolled her eyes. "You had better stick to your office henceforth." She tweaked a finger at him in warning.

"Yes, Ma'am." Shane nodded, smiling in amusement.

Lara was conscious of herself as she walked with Shane down the hallway towards the lift. Shane had an amused smirk on his lips as they walked, struggling to hold himself back from chuckling at the glares she cast surreptitiously in his direction.

He placed his hand on her lower back as the doors of the elevator closed in on them. "Stop being fidgety, Lara. That will draw people's attention to you. You are good to go."

She seethed through her teeth at him. "As if."

"Really, Lara." He leaned closer and inhaled the air around her, his breath fanning the skin on her neck. "You smell good to me."

She bit her lip down on the shiver that coursed through her from his caressing whisper and breath on her skin. "Step back." She pushed him slightly away from her.

"Mad at me, uhn? I'm sorry." He tickled the side of her waist.

She jumped against him and gasped. "Shane!"

He smiled innocently at her, his expression clouded with naivety.

She pulled away from him. "Keep your distance, Shane. Still at work."

He clicked his tongue noisily in his mouth as he kept distance between them. "But.."

Lara held a finger to hush him. "I don't want to hear that we are in the privacy of the lift. Please, Shane. This is more about me. My image will be at stake if words are to go around that I'm involved with you. Sexually involved. With you."

He stared at her before he finally nodded his assent. "I get it. I will keep my distance."

She twitched her lips and briefly held his fingers as she whispered, "Thank you," holding his gaze.

The elevator gave a ding as it stopped, and the doors opened. Shane stepped out first, and Lara followed behind him as they stepped out into the lobby and walked towards the car park.

They got into the car, and he pulled it deftly out of the space on which it had been parked and towards the gate.

Lara's phone gave a notification beep a few minutes away from the company. She checked the message. Kyle had texted her.

Reunion dinner tonight!

She texted back her response.

O.K.

And she clicked on the send button.

She glanced at Shane, aware he looked curious, but he refrained from asking.

"It's my friend, Kyle."

"Don't bother. You don't have to report every aspect of your life to me. It will tag me as someone with trust issues. I trust you, Lara."

"We have to be open with each other in a relationship, Shane. I sensed a spark of jealousy. You felt it when I told you about Liam."

"That was different."

"It isn't," Lara responded promptly. "Shane, we have to eliminate all causes that will bring out doubts in our relationship, however trivial they may appear to be."

"Sure. You are right."

He swerved the car to the side of the road and maneuvered it through the driveway of a luxurious restaurant.

Nestled in a charming Mediterranean-style villa, the restaurant offered an intimate and romantic dining experience. The interior was tastefully decorated with warm colors, candlelit tables, and an eclectic mix of vintage and modern furnishings.

The restaurant featured several small dining rooms, each with its own unique charm. Outside, a lush courtyard with twinkling lights, cozy seating, and a cascading fountain created a magical atmosphere that would leave any guest enthralled.

Lara was speechless. "It's immaculate," she breathed, unable to take her eyes off the sight.

Shane smiled. He loved how she gazed at whatever she loved with unabashed admiration. She looked extremely beautiful.

It reminded him of how she had looked breathtaking while he worshipped her body. The memory was evergreen in his mind.

Lara was more than he had bargained for. She wasn't only beautiful. She was as enchanting as a melody that captures the heart.

He held her hand in his, unable to help but gaze at her as much as she fixed her eyes on the restaurant decor.

She looked at him. "This is way too upscale for just lunch, Shane."

"Not when you are royalty," he answered softly.

She would look as resplendent as a queen. She was indeed a queen. His!

THIRTEEN

Shane kissed her long and hard after he pulled the car to a stop at the venue where Lara had informed him the reunion dinner with her friends would be celebrated.

He wished the night wouldn't end and he could have her in his embrace again. He knew the feeling was mutual as Lara caressed the side of his face gently with her hand.

Her feather-light touches on his skin sent heat cascading through him as if running down an electric current.

"Do you still want to go to that dinner?" His voice was low and husky as he murmured against her lips. Their lips puckered as he briefly touched his lips to hers.

She smiled against his face, their noses teasing each other. "You wish." She pulled back from him.

"Thanks for today, Shane. I had a wonderful time at lunch."

The few hours they had spent together during the day had been an insightful and memorable experience for Lara. She had been plunged into a world of wild ecstasy, merriment, and luxury she had never known existed.

"I'm glad you did."

"I will get going now. Thanks for the ride."

"You are welcome, darling. Call me when you get home."

"Sure. Drive safely," she told him, pushing the door open to get out of the car.

She closed the door and waved at him, urging him to go on first. She watched as he pulled the car out onto the road, swerved, and drove off into the distance, a sigh escaping her lips in contentment.

She turned towards the bar and walked in. There were several dining spaces in the bar,

fully packed with people with different interests who were patronizing the bar tonight. She perused the faces in the bar to locate the space that her friends had reserved.

She bit down on a smile as she spotted Kyle energetically waving at her to draw her attention to her over the din.

She weaved her way towards everyone gathered around the large table, filled with liquors, beers, whiskeys, and drinks for each as it suited their taste. There were unfamiliar faces, and those Lara had an indistinct recognition of.

She had been an introvert throughout her days through high school and college, given the burden she coupled with getting through her studies, as her mom had wished.

Her presence was announced to everyone gathered as she approached. "Look who's here, fellas!" Kyle chimed loudly over the din in the bar.

"Wow! Lara?" One of the men sitting across from Kyle gasped in disbelief.

Lara furrowed her brows while she tried to recall where she had known him. He looked familiar.

She smiled slightly at him and waved. "Hi."

They all took turns exchanging greetings and reconnecting. The evening thinned into darkness, with conversations flowing as effortlessly as the drinks were being drunk.

Lara huddled between Kyle and Meredith, listening in on the conversations instead. She politely refused an offer to be poured a drink by the guy sitting beside Joe.

"I can't hold my liquor well. I will stick to non-alcoholic drinks," she informed him with a half-smile.

They exchanged banter and laughed as they recalled their experiences in school.

"What about you, Lara?" The guy asked, angling his chin in her direction as he raised his cup to his mouth. He took a sip and held it half-raised; his gaze on her was intent as he waited for her to reply. He had introduced himself as Marcus.

"I doubt you remember me." He had told her.

"You haven't been saying much. I could hardly reach you when we were in college as well."

"Oh! Me?" Lara choked on a scoff and shook her head.

Kyle butted in, sparing her the trouble of racking her brain to come up with a non-

existent memory she relished during her college days.

She hadn't had the time to create notable memories worth reliving.

"Lara was more of a nerd in school. You have any idea how hard I tried before I could become her best friend?"

"So, you are naturally elusive?"

"More reserved," Kyle corrected. "That was then, though. Lara has changed pretty much since then," she added.

Marcus nodded in agreement, tilting a finger from the hand with which he held his cup in her direction. "Noticeably. She's gotten more beautiful."

Kyle's eyes were lit with a mischievous twinkle as she noticed the difference in Marcus' voice. She shared a definitive look with Meredith, both turning to look at Lara.

"What?" Lara mouthed at the two, pulling back her sleeve to check the time on her wristwatch. "I will have to get going early," she informed her friends.

"You've only been here an hour. That's not enough to connect with everyone," Kyle whined in protest.

"That's more than enough, Kyle. Unless you want me to get late to work tomorrow and be sanctioned for it."

"Please. I'm sure your boss will pardon you without hesitation. We are still leaving here to celebrate our reunion."

"Not me." Lara shook her head. She had enough fun for the day.

"You are staying, Lara," Kyle notified her firmly. She turned to face Marcus. "Mark, do you want to have a word with Lara?"

A corner of Marcus' lips lifted to depict his pleasure at Kyle's question. He looked at Lara for confirmation.

Lara turned a glare at Kyle. "You." She seethed through her teeth and clasped her lips shut before turning back to face Marcus.

Marcus was already up in his seat and coming over to where Lara was sitting. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, so she could hear him over the noise. "We should talk in a place quieter than this."

Lara turned to face him and whispered back. "That won't be necessary, Marcus." She

rose from her seat. "I will be on my way soon."

He paused, then replied, "I understand it's late. We could then talk over the phone. Let's exchange contacts."

Lara nodded. "Sure."

They exchanged contacts.

Marcus smiled at her. "Awesome. I will give you a call."

Lara twitched her eyebrows in response with a tight smile.

She caught Joe's gaze as she turned to bid everyone goodbye. "It was fun meeting all of you again, but I'm sorry I will have to leave early."

"No problem," they all chorused, most of them too engrossed in their chatter to mind her departure. They waved briefly at her and refocused on their conversations.

Joe got up as well. "We should leave too. It's late. Kyle, Meredith?"

"Alright."

They waved goodbye to everyone and walked out to where they had their cars parked.

"Mark looks interested in you, Lara," Kyle notified her as they all walked down to the car park.

"I'm aware," Lara replied flatly.

"Do you plan on taking him up on his offer? I'm sure you are still as naive as ever when it comes to relationships," Kyle said.

"He looks to me like a great guy," Meredith added.

"I have no interest in dating him. Don't kid yourself into thinking I will consider that," Lara dashed her friends' hopes with an apathetic inflection in her voice.

"Wise decision, Lara," Joe said from where he walked with Laura.

"There's nothing wise in her choosing to be a prude for the rest of her life," Kyle hissed heatedly at Joe.

"I'm sure I'm old enough to make my choices about dating without your matchmaking attempts, Kyle."

"Sure. I vote for the legendary Shane Williams over Marcus. They will make a more

lovely couple than she and Marcus will," Meredith said.

A soft smile spread on the corners of Lara's lips at the mention of Shane's name. She bit down on her lips as the adventuresome delights she had embarked on with him that day flashed through her mind.

Kyle furrowed her brows as she caught the subtle expression that flickered over Lara's face at the mention of Shane's name. She could read her friend like an open book, and she had a suspicious feeling something was going on between Lara and her boss.

"You are with Shane Williams now!" She spat abruptly.

Lara jumped, startled. "What? Yes! No.." She huffed a feverish breath, a blush painting her cheeks deeply at the abrupt exclamation Kyle had made.

They all stopped walking and stared at her, their faces pale from shock.

Meredith sucked her breath through her teeth. "Is it true?"

"It had better be false, Lara," Joe hissed through his teeth, eager to have Kyle's accusation denied and proven wrong.

Kyle hissed through her teeth. "I'm right. She looks flustered."

"That's correct," Meredith agreed, taking in the deep flush on Lara's face. "I knew those two shared too much chemistry to leave their relationship platonic."

Joe looked extremely annoyed. "Him, Lara? He's not right. So not right for you."

"No man's good enough for her, Joe. I noticed as much. How had I been so slow to observe the signs? You're so going to tell me all about it," Kyle gushed with open excitement.

She winked at Laura. "I'm driving Lara home. Have fun with your man."

"Kyle." Laura stifled a laugh, catching the unspoken message in her eyes. Kyle was as naughty as ever.

She shook her head, an amused smile parting her lips, and nodded. "Sure. Good night. Call us when you get home."

"Lara." Joe sighed, clicking his tongue at the back of his throat as he wheezed a dissatisfied exhale. "Is that what you want?"

"It is," Meredith replied in her stead.

"You don't answer for her, Meredith," Joe said, his tone laced with smoldered annoyance.

"Neither do you, Joe," Meredith quipped.

"Stop it, you two!" Lara barked at the two of them. "You keep arguing over me as if I'm not present."

"Lara..." Joe began.

"I'm now dating Shane," Lara announced.

A triumphant glimmer lit up in Kyle's and Meredith's eyes. Joe looked rather dissatisfied; his displeasure was more pronounced.

"Listen. I appreciate your concerns, Joe, but I will be fine. I'm not naive. I'm not a fool."

"I never claimed you were a fool," Joe cut into her words. " But..."

"You think I'm unable to take constructive decisions for myself; hence, you have to constantly look out for me," she concluded for him.

He furrowed his brows in disagreement, his lips parting to express his dissent from her opinion about his true intention.

"Let it lie, Joe," Laura said softly, placing an arm softly on his arm.

Joe stopped, closing his parted lips.

Laura looked at Lara. "Don't mind Joe. He gets overprotective sometimes and forgets himself."

"She's right, Joe," Kyle told him. "She has the right to make absolute decisions on issues pertaining to her love life."

"I'm only trying to look out for her. I'm a guy, alright? I know the code better than you ladies, and when I tell you both Marcus and especially Shane Williams are not ideal for Lara to be involved with in a relationship, you should heed my words."

"You can't always be right, Joe," Kyle said. "Marcus, I may take your word on it; he's among your hangout buddies. But Shane, it's a no-no for me. Don't you see? He is taking good care of her. His intentions had always been obvious from the start, but Lara was the one ignoring the glaring signs about his interest in her."

"Of course he is taking good care of her. I bet he takes good care of all his women. He's a billionaire, for crying out loud, ladies. He will spend money on her. That's given."

"Joe!" Laura snapped at him.

"I'm sorry," he muttered in a quick apology. "Let's just go."

"You will apologize to Lara before you leave, Joe," Meredith declared harshly, annoyance fully etched in her voice. "The fact that you don't respect her choice is condescending. You belittle her ability to make the right decisions for herself."

Joe's lips parted, his eyes widening in an instinctive attempt to raise a protest against Meredith's words. Slowly releasing his held breath and heaving a defeated sigh, he looked at Lara. "I'm sorry. I'm only trying to look out for you, Lara. I do not intend to hurt you or belittle you." His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "If you are happy with him, then I guess it's fine by me. Good luck and congrats." He twitched his lips and pinched the bridge of his nose swiftly while it flared. He turned to Laura. "Let's go home. Meredith, Kyle. I beg your pardon. Good night."

"Sure." Kyle nodded slowly, waving at both of them as they walked towards Joe's car.

Meredith looked mad, hissing under her breath as she watched him leave. "He's impossible, isn't he?"

Kyle sidled closer to Lara and tucked her hands around her arm. "Don't take his resentment to heart, Lara. He means well."

"Oh, he does," Meredith snarked, another hiss escaping the space between her clenched lips.

"You've made the right decision, Lara. Don't be swayed by Joe's misguided opinion," Kyle said.

"I wasn't. I understand Joe's worries vividly. I've done that as well, but Shane has proven me wrong."

"Of course he has." Kyle beamed and steered her towards the spot where she parked her car. "Now you will fill us in about how you two hit things off."

"He's made a tremendous impact on everything about you since you met him. Playboy or not, I like him. You've changed significantly since the time you met him. It's obvious you are happy with him," Meredith said.

"I am," Lara acceded, biting down on a smile.

"Why won't she? She's dating a freaking multi-billionaire," Kyle whooped. She pulled her to an abrupt stop and pulled her into her arms. "You deserve all of it, baby girl. You've been through more than people twice your age have ever experienced in their lives. No

matter what anyone says, you deserve this much happiness."

Lara pressed her lips tightly as she swallowed; emotions surged within her in reaction to her girlfriends' support. "Thanks, Kyle." She returned the embrace.

Meredith patted her firmly on the back. "I'm happy for you, Lara."

"Right, thanks." Lara pulled back from the hug.

They continued their walk to the car and got in.

Kyle turned to face Lara, placing an arm over the headrest of the driver's seat. "When did you two..." She gestured with her fingers. "You know...do the deed?"

Lara coughed. "Kyle!"

Kyle winked nonchalantly at her. "What? You're not a saint anymore. No need to go all prudish on us. Is he as good as rumored?" She asked eagerly.

Meredith was as enthusiastic as Kyle was to fill in the details. "Alright?" She urged.

Lara rolled her eyes. "I'm not having this conversation with you. Drive, Kyle."

Kyle pushed her lips up to the bridge of her nose in faux annoyance and disappointment. "You are so boring." She pushed out her lips at her and turned to key in the ignition.

"Thank you," Lara mouthed at her back and settled in for the ride as the car was ignited into motion.

She relaxed in her seat with a contented smile on her face and savored the ride home.

FOURTEEN

"Congratulations, man," Derrari said, giving him a big hug. "You finally got your girl. This calls for a celebration." He tweaked a finger at Shane as he walked back to his seat across Shane's.

"Of course," Shane agreed, raising his wine glass to his mouth.

"You've popped her cherry yet?" Derrari inquired with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Shane twitched his lips. "That's not up for discussion."

Derrari scoffed. "Stunning. I wouldn't expect just a girl to throw you over the edge as much as this." He raised his wine glass to his mouth and drank from it. "So, what are your plans now? You've had her."

Shane raised an eyebrow at him, his nose flaring slightly. "Not enough," he replied flatly.

"You plan on keeping her for a while?"

"Not for a while. I'm sure it will take more than that."

Derrari choked on a scoff, washing it down with his drink. "Incredible!"

"What's the deal, man?"

"I'm..." Derrari frowned, shaking his head briefly. "I just feel like you've been swapped for another person. Still the same person on the outside, but damn, who the hell are you? What have you done to my friend? On second thought, I should be asking Lara, not you; it's obvious you are not in your right frame of mind. You haven't actually been since you met her."

Shane shook his head, an amused smile touching the corners of his lips. "Quit it. Stop being ridiculous."

"I am. Not. You are so different." He twitched his eyebrows, heaving an exhale.

"Congrats, anyway. You've successfully been entrapped in Lara's snare. It's a lovely entrapment, by the way."

Shane snickered. "Of course it is. Let's stay caged in for as long as it lasts."

"No way," Derrari disagreed quickly, waving him off. "You stay in there, and I indulge in the excitement carrying on all around for as long as I want."

"Deal." Shane raised his glass to him and drank from it.

Derrari did as well, and they both drank in cheer for the resolutions they had made.

Unexpectedly, a pair of slender arms snaked across Shane's shoulders, the heavy scent of a seductive woman's perfume wafting strongly through his nose.

A corner of Derrari's lips lifted in a smirk as he saw her. He flashed a wink at her. She flashed a smile in acknowledgment at him and planted a kiss on the side of Shane's face.

He stiffened immediately in annoyance, shocked by his reaction to the lady's touch. It felt familiar, but he couldn't place who it was, however hard he tried to recollect from where he had known the scent.

"Missed me, baby?" She purred in his ear, her mint breath washing enticingly over the side of his face.

Shane balled his hands into tight fists, struggling to hold in his annoyance at the woman's—whoever she was—abrupt intrusion into his private moment with his friend. At a time, he would have condoned this; he loved this more than anything and would always crave more of it, but now, it irritated him.

Derrari was right. Who was he, and what had happened to him?

"Get your hands off me," he seethed out in a growl through his teeth.

He heard her gasp at the harshness in his tone as she retracted her hands from his neck.

It was about time he started hanging out with Derrari in a more refined environment than the usual clubhouse he was accustomed to. Although he loved the excitement in the air and virtually everything about the club, he thought it was high time he reconsidered his preferences.

She came forward so he could fully observe her features. She was scantily but lushly dressed in a way to make a man swoon.

Even looking at her up close, Shane couldn't vividly recall their meeting; he had had a lot of women over the years, but constantly the tinge of familiarity spurred through his veins.

"Shane."

"What part of the no-attachment policy I gave don't you get?"

She parted her lips intermittently, speechless. "I.. I.." She sucked in air harshly through her teeth. "What the hell got over you? You've changed." She hissed and stormed away in anger.

Shane's jaw twitched as she left. He felt nothing. She was just a hussy looking for another quick shag from him.

He would have happily obliged, then.

It was as if he had gone sterile since meeting Lara. His arousal was only heightened for her. His infatuation with her had robbed him of being sensitive to other women's touches, however delectable they looked—only hers.

Derrari had his gaze fixed intently on him.

"What?"

"What have you done to him?" Derrari said in a half-whisper.

Shane furrowed his brows in confusion. "Who?"

"Fuck! Where's Shane? What the fuck have you done to my friend? Who the hell are you?"

Shane rolled his eyes, raising his wine glass to his mouth to wash off the acrid taste that had coated his tongue.

"I need to meet with Lara and ask what exactly she has done to you. Damn!"

"And have you been bewitched as well as I have been? Nah!" Shane shook his head, his lips turning down in disapproval.

Derrari chortled. "Good thing you know you've been bewitched by your new girl. But you've never had a problem sharing. I could as well revel in some bewitchment."

"Not with this one. Find yourself another to get bewitched by."

Derrari laughed. "Man! You are smitten beyond redemption."

Shane snickered.

"Cheers to you, buddy. To getting bewitched." Derrari tilted his wine glass in Shane's direction.

Shane raised his glass to his as well. "Well, thanks. Cheers to you as well in anticipation of your bewitchment." He touched his glass to Derrari's, a grin cupping his lips.

"You wish, but it's not happening." Derrari twitched his eyebrows, raising his wine glass to his mouth and taking a long drink from it.

Shane drank the wine in his glass as well, both keeping an eye on each other till they emptied the wine in their glasses.

"If I can be as smitten as this, there's no escaping for you either. Your heart will beat for only one woman, and all your thoughts will revolve around satisfying her."

Derrari sneered at him. "Quit fooling yourself. It's never going to happen."

Shane smiled. "We shall see. Only time will tell."

"Of course. That's why I'm your mentor in this game, remember?"

"The game has an end, Der. Every game does."

"Not this game, Shane. Why will I stick to a woman when I can have the company of every woman? Just like eating the same dish every day when there are varieties of enticing cuisines to try out. It makes no sense."

Shane nodded. "To you, it doesn't. In time, it will."

"So, what are your plans now?" Derrari asked in a more serious tone, changing the subject of their conversation. "What is your goal in this relationship you are pursuing with Lara?"

Shane pressed his lips tightly together. "I have no idea either. But I will worry about that later."

"You want to settle down with her? You want to marry her?"

"Woah! Woah!" Shane gestured to him to take it easy. "It's not that fast. We only started dating recently."

"You're not certain it will work out."

"It will work out," Shane said firmly, nailing a glare at Derrari.

Derrari snickered. "Cool. Then marriage is surely a discussion at some point given how taken you are with her."

Shane parted his lips briefly and smacked them close. He hadn't thought as far as Derrari had taken it.

He was aware of his feelings for Lara, but was he willing to take their relationship as far as walking down the aisle with her?

Marriage had never been an issue for him to consider. He had no plans to settle down given the harem of women he had at his disposal, but with Lara now, he was considering it.

"Probably?" He muttered under his breath, envisaging the future with Lara approaching, where he would be standing at the altar.

She would be breathtakingly beautiful. His lips parted, and his heart soared within his chest with an inexplicable euphoria.

Derrari's lips parted as well, with a knowing twinkle in his eyes as he watched the expression on Shane's face.

"I will be honored to be your best man when you're ready." He twitched his lips and raised his glass to his mouth, taking a drink from it.

Shane's lips parted as he watched Derrari in a daze. "Oh!" he replied.

After the evening with Derrari, he drove the rest of the way home in a blur. The awareness of just how much he was obsessed with being with Lara stunned him.

He hadn't expected his drastic change from being a dispassionate playboy to a heartfelt lover of just one woman.

He could actually foresee making commitments with Lara, but as he had told Derrari, they had only just started dating.

He needed to tread this path carefully and wisely so that neither of them would end up getting hurt or being spiteful in their relationship.

The thought of his future with Lara frightened him, yet it intrigued him too.

He needed another drink. He wiped an imaginary stain of the wine he had shared with Derrari off his mouth and huffed out an exhale.

As he pulled into his parking lot, his phone's ringtone gave off

"Mom," he called as he watched the name on the caller ID. He touched the answer button and raised the phone to his ear as he got down from his car, pressing the security button.

"Yes, Mom," he answered the call as it connected to his mom's line.

"Son, how are you doing?"

"Good, Mom. You? How's dad too?"

"He's here with me as well. You haven't been calling home, son. I missed you. Your dad and I missed you. I know you're busy, but sometimes you should reach out, don't you think?"

"I'm sorry, Mom. Extend my apologies to dad as well."

"When will you be coming home? You realize your birthday is in two weeks?"

"Oh!" Shane swept the tip of his tongue over his lips, making his way towards the wine cellar.

"You have to come home soon so we can make plans for the necessary preparations in advance for your upcoming birthday."

"No problem, Mom. I will put that in mind."

"You should come over by this weekend too. I really missed you, son. Nicole too."

Shane snickered. "You could have said, Dad, Mom."

"He's your older brother. Stop being childish. Of course he misses you."

"He misses taunting and teasing me, Mom, evidently."

His mom heaved a deep breath. "Boys. You two are adults now. There can't be as much fooling around as when you were boys. I still remember those times. You were both cute, but as troublesome as they come." His mom snickered over the phone.

Shane rolled his eyes. "Here we go again!" He pressed his phone against his ear, holding it in place with his shoulder, and poured himself a glass of wine.

"Were you two in high school then? I can't vividly recollect." She sighed. "How time flies!"

Shane nodded in agreement. His older brother might be annoying, but there was no denying the fact that he loved and respected him as much as he loved their father.

He left a few months ago on a business trip and was set to arrive in a week's time for

his birthday. His mom had already announced the plan to host a reunion dinner for the family upon his arrival.

Besides being an elaborate speaker, his mom loved planning and hosting events.

"Nicole and I talked a few weeks ago, Mom," he replied, halfway through emptying the full bottle of wine he had taken from the cellar.

"Really? That's great, then. I will give him a call after my conversation with you."

"Okay," he replied flatly. "I love you, Mom," he said quickly before she broached another subject of discussion.

"I love you more, son. Remember to stop by on the weekend."

"I will check if I can. I might have plans." He bit the tip of his tongue as he realized he had just missed his chance to end this conversation with his mom.

"Plans?" His mom inquired, excitement etched in her voice. "With whom? You have someone you are dating?" She clapped excitedly over the phone. "That's lovely. You should bring her home by the weekend. More plans are to be made for the weekend." She sounded extremely excited.

"Mom?"

"You're not talking me out of meeting your girlfriend. Wait a minute, are you serious with her or not?"

Shane heaved an exasperated sigh. This was happening all too fast. He feared Lara might freak out. First, Derrari had his head reeling with an eventual marriage in his relationship with Lara; now his mom was asking for her to be introduced to the whole family.

His family was well aware of his reputation, and taking Lara home would stamp a mark that went far beyond just introducing her as his girlfriend.

He couldn't deny the genuineness of his relationship with Lara, either. "I am, but we..."

"No buts," his mom cut in. "She's coming home with you by the weekend, and that's final. It's a cause to celebrate, son. I'm glad you finally decided to let love have its way. There would be no more dalliances, I believe."

"There wouldn't be," he replied, taking a swig of the last content in his cup and setting the wine glass down.

"Very good of you, Shane. I've never been more proud of you, son."

Shane smiled briefly. "Thanks, mom. I love you too."

"Take care, son. Good night. I look forward to meeting her this weekend. Rest assured, she would love every inch of it."

Shane's lips lifted in a faint smile. "Of course, Mom. Your hospitality is the best. I will work on it."

"Good. Good. Sweet dreams."

"You too, Mom. Extend my greetings to dad as well."

"Of course I will. Bye." She ended the conversation.

Shane twisted his lips, a slight frown creasing his forehead as he stared ahead. He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, huffing a sigh.

He had no choice. He would have to introduce her to his family. He was totally up for the idea, but he doubted Lara would be as up for it as he was.

He pushed in his lips, pressing them tightly against each other.

He would work things out somehow. He trudged the rest of the way to his bedroom, his eyes heavily lidded with sleep.

FIFTEEN

"Morning, morning, morning," Lara said in a sing-song voice as she stretched awake on the bed, a pleased smile on her face as she sat up on the bed.

She was always ecstatic to get up on Monday mornings and resume work, as opposed to her usual response when she worked at her part-time jobs.

She was even more happy to get to work this morning, courtesy of spending more time in the company of her oh-so-handsome boss, the legendary Shane Williams.

A smile touched the corners of her lips as she got down from bed and slipped her feet into her slippers, heading towards the bathroom to get dressed for work.

The alarm had yet to ring. The familiar tinge of excitement not associated with waking up before the alarm—a competition she had become obsessed with lately—speared sharply with a thrilling shiver through her veins.

She took extra care to pamper her skin, feeling particularly delighted about making an impression this morning.

On someone, isn't it? Her treacherous mind giggled.

Shane, perhaps.

She lifted her lips briefly to the bridge of her nose, a scowl flashing across her face.

"I'm not," she argued heatedly. "I just felt like dressing up today. I feel good about it. It's definitely not for him." She frowned. "Maybe a bit for him. To tease him, perhaps?" Lara muttered to herself as she assessed her appearance in the mirror. She loved how Shane ogled and exaggerated his attraction for her whenever he saw her.

It made her belly do flip-flops and cause a rush of excitement to spread through her body.

Taking one last look at herself, she smiled and nodded in satisfaction, picked up her bag,

and headed for the company.

"Here comes my heartthrob!" Diana squealed with delight as she saw Lara approach the lobby. She blew a kiss in the air toward her, a smitten look on her face. "I could glue my eyes on you, Lara," she breathed, shaking her head in adoration as she took in Lara's physique and appearance.

She gave her two thumbs up. "You get an 100."

Lara pinched the inside of her cheek to hold back from smiling widely at Diana's lavish compliments. "Please don't flatter me, although I don't mind the part where your eyes are glued on me," she teased.

Diana rolled her eyes, making a face, and they both laughed. She tsked. "You are too beautiful, Lara."

"Says the lady who looks like the sun goddess herself," Lara returned, her face beaming with smiles.

She loved Diana's vibe. It always gave her a fresh start for her day at work. She just had that way of making everyone around her feel alive.

"Please." Diana waved dismissively in the air, a blush painting a healthy glow on her face. "I can't believe I'm blushing."

"Right? I'm surprised anyone can blush as quickly as you do."

The ladies laughed again.

"It's good to see you again. I missed you over the week."

Lara pressed her hands to her face. "Uh-uhn! I'm flattered. I missed you too. It's a happy Monday morning for me, as always, with you."

"Good morning!" Diana beamed at her.

"Good morning, Diana," Lara returned. "Enjoy your day."

"That's a given," Diana replied. "You too."

"Of course," Lara said, moving towards the elevator.

She spotted Andrea heading towards the lobby. Their gazes met briefly, but then she looked over her as if she hadn't seen her and continued walking.

Stunned, Lara turned to watch her to be certain she had not mistaken her for someone

else. "Andrea," she called, then bit down on the tip of her tongue as she pointedly ignored her.

She angled her head to one side, her brows furrowed in confusion.

What was wrong? Why was Andrea snubbing her? She bit down on her lip, unable to come up with a reasonable excuse for Andrea's attitude.

Perhaps she had things on her mind and had not seen her as she had thought. She decided to meet with her at lunch and see if she could help with anything to alleviate whatever it was that could be the cause of her trouble.

It nipped at her, though, that her snobbish attitude toward her could have been deliberate. She got in and waited as the elevator counted up to the floor her office was on in the building.

Getting into her office, she settled into her seat and took a minute to catch her breath from her encounter with Andrea in the morning.

She felt disturbed. Andrea had been distancing herself from her over the weeks, and she had always felt the widening strain in their friendship as the weeks progressed.

After that lunch she had had with her and Liam, her countenance towards her had changed, and Lara had hardly been given the chance to make amends for whatever it was that could have caused her to keep her at arms length.

Without any doubt, she had deliberately ignored her this morning.

Lara huffed out a sigh in exasperation, more motivated than ever to get down to the root of the issue causing a drift in her friendship with Andrea.

If she wouldn't talk to her about it, then she would confront her until she was forced to address it. She was done being given the silent treatment for a matter she was in the dark about.

But first, she needed to work. She assembled the files she had been working on the previous week and started sorting through them to prepare for all that she would need to do for the day.

She went through her calendar to check the tasks she had mapped out for today.

The telephone on her desk gave off, and she promptly picked it up, raised it to her ear, and spoke into the receiver. "Hello. Good morning."

Shane's voice came in through the receiver, warm and sensual. "Morning, Lara. Meet me

in my office, please."

"Okay." She placed the phone back on hold and fished for her notepad and pen before making her way to Shane's office through the adjoining door connecting their offices together.

"Good morning, Shane. You wanted to see me?" Lara said as she entered.

Shane looked up from his desk, his eyes twitching as he saw her. He swept his tongue over his lips, swallowing dryly down his throat. "Yes, Lara. Please have a seat." He extended his hand towards the chair before his desk.

Lara bit down on a knowing smile as she approached the seat he had directed her to take, aware of his struggle to keep a cool and professional facade.

She knew she had been the one to demand that they keep their relationship covert at work, and she was definitely playing with fire with how she was teasing him, but she reveled in the delights of teasing him. She enjoyed the strained look on his face to mask his arousal at the sight of her.

A wicked glint lit in her eyes, a deliberate smile cupping her lips as she sat.

Shane surely could see through her game, and he mentally noted that he would emerge the winner nonetheless. Two could play the game. "I wanted to discuss our business talks and get your input on some new projects."

"Of course, Shane. I'm glad to be here," Lara replied, keeping her face neutral. "I must say, our trip to France was a success. Our expansion deal with the distributor company is progressing well."

Shane nodded. "I'm pleased to hear that, Lara. Have you been in touch with them since our return?"

"Absolutely. I've been maintaining regular communication with the distributor company," she said, adding quickly. "I haven't taken up Mr. Dupont's offer for a guided tour, by the way."

Shane tsked. "Of course." He twitched his eyebrows, not revealing that he was amused by her humor.

Lara clicked her tongue silently to the roof of her mouth and continued, "They're happy with our progress, but there have been a few challenges with logistics. I have a detailed report with all the recent updates." She brought out the file.

"Excellent, let's go through it together. What challenges are we facing, and how can we

overcome them?" Shane said, perusing the report Lara had come up with.

"It seems that the delivery timeline needs to be adjusted to ensure smoother operations. I've discussed this with the distributor company, and they are open to exploring solutions. One option is to establish a dedicated shipping channel, which would streamline the process."

Shane nodded thoughtfully. "That's an interesting suggestion, Lara. Now, let's shift our focus to the new projects we're working on. What ideas do you have?"

"Well, Shane, based on market research and recent trends, I believe that incorporating influencer collaborations into our marketing strategy could greatly enhance our brand visibility. Additionally, I've noticed an opportunity to enhance our product offerings with innovative features our competitors don't offer."

Shane leaned into his desk chair, placing the file down on the table, clasping his hands, and tapping his thumbs against each other. "Those are some great ideas, Lara. I appreciate your insights. What are your thoughts on how we can leverage influencers effectively, and what kind of product enhancements would resonate with our customers?"

"For influencer collaborations, we need to identify key personalities within our target market and build authentic relationships with them. As for product enhancements, I think we should focus on incorporating sustainable materials and introducing new packaging designs that align with current consumer preferences."

Shane nodded in approval. "I like where you're going with this, Lara. Sustainability is definitely important. Let's start planning influencer partnerships and consider how we can incorporate sustainability into our products."

"Absolutely, Shane." Lara nodded. "I'll start researching potential influencers and gather more information on sustainable materials and packaging options."

Shane clucked his tongue at the back of his throat. "Great. Let's move on to my appointments for the week. Anything I should be aware of?"

Lara brought out her notepad. "You have a few important meetings this week, including a presentation with our suppliers. I've already confirmed the time and location for all of them. Additionally, your travel arrangements for next month's conference have been finalized."

"Good. Thank you, Lara. Your organization and attention to detail are invaluable to me."

Lara smiled briefly. "It's my pleasure, and I thank you for the opportunity, Shane. I'm

excited about the future and committed to executing the strategies we discussed. I'll keep you updated on any progress or challenges that arise."

"I have no doubt you'll do an excellent job, Lara. Thank you for your hard work."

"Thank you, Shane. I'll get started right away. Have a great day!" Lara pushed herself out of her seat to her feet.

"Not so fast, Lara," Shane said, getting off his chair and prowling around the table towards her.

Lara felt weak in the knees at the huskiness of his voice and the intensity of his gaze as he rounded the desk towards where she was standing.

Her chest felt constricted, and the air in the office suddenly felt too thick to aid proper respiration for her. "Pardon." She tried to keep the professional mode on. "Uhm.." She swallowed dryly.

Her heart thumped as he closed in on the distance between them.

A shiver jolted down her spine as he placed his hands tenderly on either side of her hips.

"We're in the office," she hissed at him, her eyes drifting to his lips.

Another shiver coursed through her as she remembered how good his lips felt on her skin.

She swallowed quickly and shook her head. "I should go. This won't happen."

"It won't?" Shane asked, his hands caressing her back as he held her closer to himself.

His minty breath fanned the side of her face as he spoke, "You look beautiful today."

"Of course, I do." She stepped back from his hold.

"So?" He urged, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"So?" She angled her neck towards him, her eyes narrowed in faux confusion.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "It appears to me you purposely made extra effort in looking as good as you do today."

"Excuse me. I didn't." She rolled her eyes.

A smirk cupped his lips. "Really? You had no intention of seducing me," he whispered softly.

Her eyes fluttered rapidly in denial. "I am. I .." She slapped her palm frustratedly against her forehead. "Fine. I didn't plan on seducing you, though. A little tease."

"Tease. Seduction. It yields the same result, Lara."

Lara's breath hitched in her throat as without warning, she was slammed against Shane's muscularly built chest.

"Stop it." Her voice sounded weak and almost inaudible. Her eyelids slowly drifted to a close as Shane angled his head towards hers and took her lips in his.

His fingers raked through her hair and she purred, leaning closer into his embrace.

She gripped his shoulders while he pleased her, emitting several gasps and moans.

All her resolve to keep off each other while at work eluded her mind while he lowered her over his desk, slowly taking her down the throes of unbridled pleasure.

SIXTEEN

"Let's have lunch together; what do you say?" Shane asked after the heat of the initial moment had dissipated.

Lara shook her head. " No."

"Why?"

"I can't seem to keep a clear head around you, and I often fail to keep my resolve to keep from pursuing our romantic interests while at work. Besides, I have to meet with Andrea. It's important I do."

"Oh!" He twitched his lips. "No problem, then." He raised his hands quickly as her lips parted. "And I know what you are going to say. This should never have happened, but it did. We would have to work on keeping our arms off each other at work."

"Primarily, you are at fault." Lara glared at him.

"Wait a minute. What? I'm at fault. You dressed purposefully to tease me. Perhaps you should work on looking less breathtaking every morning, and I could keep myself from reacting."

Lara scoffed in disbelief. "Now I'm at fault for being too beautiful?"

"Right," Shane confirmed.

Lara rolled her eyes. "I'm not having this argument with you now. It's too early for that on a Monday morning. We should get to work." She turned to head back to her office.

"Sure. We should. But I'm not done."

Lara stopped in her tracks and turned to face him. "What?"

"With our argument. How about we meet after work and pick up the pieces from where we left them?"

Lara arched an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"A date, if not by lunch, then after work. I will drive."

"Of course you will. Let's keep each other at arm's length for the rest of the day. You are at fault for being too handsome. I could have stopped this from happening if you hadn't been too charming and..." She bit her tongue.

"And what?" Shane urged, slowly covering the distance between them.

"And..." Her lips parted wordlessly, her breath hitching in her throat at his proximity again. His nearness to where she was standing was unknotting series of emotions and desires she had struggled to bottle up after the epic climax they had both had earlier.

She wouldn't think about that now.

"Lara, get to work." Shane's voice sounded strained.

She jumped at the emotions evident in his voice and rushed out the door to her office, muttering an abrupt "Bye."

She slammed the door behind her and pressed a hand to her chest to steady her racing heartbeat.

Her lips remained parted as she heaved out her pants. She closed her eyes briefly and heaved a shaky exhale, finally regaining a modicum of her breath.

She could still feel him between her legs as she walked back to her seat and settled down to work.

No sex or thinking of having sex with Shane at work, Lara.

She snapped at her mind to stop bringing up images of her make-out session with Shane earlier in his office.

Didn't you love it? She heard her annoying subconscious mind giggle in mockery at her.

Calm. She inhaled deeply, balancing her fingers in the air to type away on the keyboard and lose herself in the flow of working.

She snapped out of the trance she had been held in as she digested the information she gained from her research on the project she had been assigned by Shane, the sound of her fingers dancing over the keyboard with a soft click-clack being the only thing reverberating in her ears.

She pushed the lazy strand of her hair dangling over her face behind her ear and

checked the time on her watch.

As she had surmised, it was time for a break. She saved the page she was working on and went out for lunch.

Her stomach rumbled in glee at her decision. Finally. She heard it sigh—literally.

She remembered she hadn't been able to eat the breakfast she had packed for herself in the morning, given the fact that she had been kept busy by someone.

Her face felt hot, and she quickly shook her head before she imagined the events of the morning in vivid detail.

She would have waited back in her office to have her breakfast for lunch then, but she had a mission set for lunch.

She spotted her sitting alone at a table adjacent to where Liam was sitting. Liam's face brightened with a smile as he spotted Lara approaching with her lunch. He waved her over.

Lara shook her head politely at him and angled her chin towards the table where Andrea was sitting.

Andrea's face darkened as she saw the exchange between the two. She pushed up abruptly from her seat, carried her tray, and disposed of her lunch in the trash, barging out of the cafeteria while bypassing Lara.

"An..." Words stuck in Lara's throat as she watched her go.

Lara walked with harried steps towards Liam's table and placed her tray down. "Could you watch this for me, please?"

"Lara," Liam called after her, but she was already a distance away from where he sat, walking hurriedly to catch up with Andrea.

He raked his fingers through his hair, huffing in annoyance.

"Andrea, Andrea." Lara walked with a fast pace towards Andrea. "Please, wait."

She stopped at the balcony, sucking in a deep breath of the cool air outside, her hands firmly gripping the railings.

Lara slowed her steps and gingerly approached her. "I demand an answer, Andrea. What's up with you avoiding me and snubbing me for no reason? What have I done to deserve this kind of treatment from you? I thought we were friends, for crying out loud.

First, you snubbed me in the morning. Now, you wouldn't even look at me?" She scoffed in disbelief.

"I tried to make up some excuse for how you snubbed me in the morning, that perhaps your mind was occupied with thoughts and you hadn't seen me, but..."

Andrea turned on her and snapped at her, "Shut up!"

Lara retreated a step, her lips parting with a gasp. She looked taken aback at Andrea's outburst. "Andrea?" She breathed disbelievingly.

Tears pooled down the corners of Andrea's face as she looked at her. "Just leave me alone, please. Why does it have to be you? Why?"

"You mind elaborating on what exactly is the reason why you are acting out against me, because I'm in the dark as to why I have to withstand this harshness from you? This is utterly absurd!" Lara seethed in smoldering annoyance.

"Absurd, you say." Andrea hiccuped. "Funny, that was what he told me too."

Lara furrowed her brows. "Who, and how does that have anything to do with me?"

"Liam loves you," Andrea spat. She paused for a breath as she realized it wasn't new to Lara. "You know."

"Of course. I do. I'm not blind."

"Then you should have known I'm in love with Liam," she cried.

"What?" Lara furrowed her brows. "So, has that got anything to do with me?"

"Because it's all your fault for being more beautiful than I am. He would have noticed me and accepted my proposals if he had not been too taken with your charms," she accused.

"Excuse me. That's perhaps the most idiotic excuse I've ever heard, Andrea. If you love Liam, work on winning him over to yourself. Your resentment toward me won't make him like you. I have nothing to do with Liam, so just stop being childish."

"I'm childish because I'm hurt, Lara. You have..."

"You are right, Andrea. I have no idea how you feel. That's why I don't appreciate why I have to endure being treated unfavorably by someone I hold in high regard as my best friend at work. You hurt me, Andrea. You really let me down. I thought I had done something wrong to deserve this, but this..." Lara shook her head. "I shouldn't be the one

to bear the brunt of your unreciprocated attraction for Liam."

Lara retreated a step. "I'm sorry, but this is a huge letdown from what I'd expected." She sucked in the air harshly through her teeth and turned away from her.

Andrea stood, deeply embarrassed, as she watched Lara's retreating figure. She sank to her knees and heaved out her dry pants to catch her breath. Her chest felt too heavy to allow her to breathe.

She clutched her chest tightly and hit down hard to hold in her tears uncontrollably.

"How did it go?" Liam asked as Lara approached the table. He got his answer, though, from observing the expression on Lara's face.

"I'm sorry. I lost my appetite." Lara picked up her tray.

Liam held her back. "Whatever she said to you, Lara, your stomach shouldn't bear the brunt of it."

"No. I will have it packed and eat in my office instead."

"No, Lara. Once you get into that office, all you will do is work. So, you're having lunch. No arguments."

"Please, Liam. I promise I will eat my lunch when I get to my office. I can't just stomach anything in here."

"I need to know what happened between you and Andrea. What did she say to you?"

Lara turned on him. "Why do you think my mood is sour because she has said something to me?"

"I know Andrea more than you do, Lara. That girl..." He shook his head and clicked his tongue noisily at the back of his throat.

"Liam. She likes you."

"I'm aware. She told me."

"What exactly did you tell her to make her hate me as much as she does now?"

"I told her I liked you instead."

Lara scoffed.

"I didn't intend to inconvenience you as much as this, Lara. I confessed how I felt, just as she confessed how she felt to me."

"You are..." Lara narrowed her eyes in disbelief at him. "I can't believe you did that, Liam." She shrugged off his hold on her wrist. "I don't want to be involved with either of you and your attraction issues." She shook her head and walked away from him.

"Lara, please..." Liam tried to stop her from leaving. He closed his eyes with an exasperated sigh, raking his fingers through his ears.

He picked up his tray and placed it down in the section for used dishes, following Lara. He caught up with her in the hallway.

"Lara, please. You can't shut me out because of her."

Lara turned to face him. "Of course I can. I've had enough of the office romance drama you two are attempting to rope me into. I want no part of this."

"What exactly are you expecting me to do, Lara? Do you want me to be with her for the sake of keeping your friendship with her? If at all, she doesn't deserve to be your friend if she is taking my response out on you."

"I never implied any of that. I don't care whether she stays my friend or not. It's her choice, alright?"

"As it is my choice to love you and not her," Liam returned heatedly.

Lara hissed at him, her eyes meeting Shane's in the hallway. "Oh, my God!" She gasped, her heart skipping a beat at the sight of him.

"It's her."

She heard Andrea croak behind her.

"Oh!" Lara moaned, glancing occasionally from Shane to Liam. She couldn't bring herself to meet the scorn that would be evident on Andrea's face at Liam's open confession about whom he truly desired between the two.

SEVENTEEN

Lara felt an ache settle in her head as she stood in a triangle formed by the three.

"Excuse me," she said, and she walked away quickly from the trio. She heard retreating steps in various directions behind her, but she knew without being told who it was that was on her trail.

"You mind telling me where you are heading to?"

"Anywhere away from the three of you. We promised to stay off each other's radar at work, remember?" she said over her shoulders, increasing her pace, but there was little pace she could keep on heels.

He covered the distance between them in a matter of seconds and pulled her to face him.

He kept an arm around her waist to steady her as her legs rocked sideways on her heels from the abrupt pull.

Lara jerked back from his touch, hissing at him. "What if someone sees us?"

Shane tsked. "You are bothered about anyone spotting me bracing your fall and not about the epic confession you've received earlier." He seethed the last words through his teeth.

Lara's lips twitched.

"I thought you two were just friends."

"We're not having this conversation here, Shane."

"Of course we aren't. We are at work. We meet after work, and you tell me exactly what the deal is you have going on with my staff."

"Pardon me? Your staff?" Her lips parted intermittently as the weight of his words hit her

hard. The ache in her heart at his words and the ache in her belly from being starved all day sent dizzy spells washing over her face.

Lara retreated a step.

"Lara, that came out wrong."

"It was exactly what you meant, Shane. I have neither the qualifications nor the eligibility for this position, I assume, but..." She huffed a breath. "I get it." She turned her back on him, half-running and half-walking away from him.

"Lara, that wasn't what I meant to say. Please." Shane called after her, extending his hand to stop her.

"Stay away from me!" Lara barked at him, her eyes clouded with tears.

"La.." Shane stopped, anguish piercing sharply through his heart as he saw the stain of tears on her face. "Lara, please."

"Please, Shane. I've had enough drama for the day. I need to breathe. I need to be anywhere. Away from you, please," she told him.

He nodded slowly in acquiescence. "I'm sorry."

"No, I am. It's all clear to me now what I am really to you."

"That's not what I meant, Lara!" Shane groaned.

Lara advanced on him. "Then, tell me what it is you meant by that word." She bellowed back at him. "Your staff? What have I been doing with your staff? How..." Her shoulders sagged as she looked at him, lost for words to describe the emotions overwhelming her at the moment.

"You are taking this all wrong, Lara. You are an exclusive, Lara." He leaned closer to her and dropped the pitch of his voice so that only she could hear it. "You are the woman I love, Lara. So of course, I'm jealous as well as mad that that boy had the audacity to confess he loves you in my presence. Fuck! He's in my employ, and he's asking out my woman." Shane swallowed to keep his voice down, as it had risen to a pitch from annoyance.

Lara's lips parted wordlessly as she looked at him. "I didn't realize that was what you meant," she said softly, her eyelashes fluttering.

Shane leaned back. "We are reversing roles here. I should be mad, not you. Technically, I caught you cheating on me."

"Please. I wasn't the one confessing my feelings. He was, and of course, it shouldn't be a shock to you that he is attracted to me. I am gorgeous." Lara cupped her face, pouting her lips.

Shane hiccuped. "Of course, I won't be once I have him discharged from his employ."

"You won't," Lara hissed through gritted teeth.

"Is that a dare?"

"No." Lara shook her head, looking at him with a plea in her eyes. "He's still a friend. I can't have you do that to him."

He looked away from her and turned.

"Please, Shane."

"We will discuss this after work. I have a call to make," he said over his shoulders, walking away.

Lara bit down on her lips and heaved a sigh. She felt depleted of energy. She staggered as a wave of vertigo hit her, almost making her lose her footing on the floor.

She walked, biting down on the wincing that escaped her throat as she walked towards the bathroom.

She turned on the tap as quickly as she got in and splashed water on her face. She bent over the tub as she turned the water off, trying as hard as she could to bite down on the pain that swarmed in her belly.

It hurts a lot. She tightened her hold on her stomach and sucked in breath harshly through her teeth as she stood straight, staring at her reflection in the mirror.

She should get something to eat before she gets back to work.

She doubted she would be able to do any work if she failed to eat. She had grown weary of the hunger and emotions she held within her.

She raked her fingers through her hair and heaved a sigh, her eyelids fluttering to a brief close.

"Abortion pangs?"

She jumped, her eyes flashing open and locking with Claire's gaze in the mirror at the sound of her voice.

She pinched her nose in irritation at the question, turning to face her. "What?"

"I would expect nothing less from the likes of you." Claire stepped inch by inch closer as she seethed the words through her teeth. "Gold diggers. Filthy wenches..."

"Cut to the point, will you? I don't need you listing out your attributes to me," Lara cut in.

Claire smiled crookedly. "You," She pointed a finger at her. "Are sleeping with Shane."

Lara didn't bat an eye. She stared at her, unshaken by her words whatsoever.

Claire scoffed. "You are not even denying it."

"Why should I?" Lara asked drily.

Claire angled her chin haughtily, her lips parting in surprise at Lara's audacity. A smile tipped the corners of her lips in amusement. "Now you think you are on top of the world because you are fucking, bitch-assing the CEO." She tsked under her breath, rolling her eyes.

"For your information, Claire, Shane and I are official," Lara hissed.

Claire snickered. "Official. Indeed. Trust me. He's only having as much fun as he gets from bitches like you. When he's done with you, you won't be any different from the others."

"Stop being a hater, Claire. I'm not responsible for your misery," Lara quipped in return.

"What misery, bitch?" She sneered in her face.

Lara rolled her tongue in her mouth and sucked in her lip ring to calm her temper. "Call me that one more time, Claire, and you will regret ever uttering a single word today."

"You dare threaten me?"

"I'm not threatening you, Claire. I'm only warning you to stop being bitchy. It's not my fault Shane ignored your advances despite your throwing yourself countless times at him."

Shock washed briefly over Claire's face at Lara's words, and she retreated a step, her mouth parting in surprise.

Lara inched closer to her and whispered in her ear, "How many times did you offer him your body? Once? Twice? I lost count. And guess what, Claire? I didn't even have to try. He craves my touch and company every time." She seethed out the last words to mark her point before she leaned back to face her squarely.

Claire was biting down hard on her lips as she glared at her with murderous looks in her eyes, her hands tightly balled into fists beside her.

"Now who's the bitch between you and me?" Lara angled her chin. "Excuse me," she said and walked away.

Claire gritted her teeth hard as she watched her retreating figure and groaned in annoyance, raking her fingers furiously through her hair.

"You bitch!" She spat through her lips, her chest heaving.

Lara sagged down on her seat first thing as she got into her office.

She had been walking on shaky legs from the restroom down to her office.

She clutched her chest, bit down on her lips, and swallowed hard, as she could still feel the tinges of shock that had rippled through her body at Claire's accusation.

She mentally reproached herself for giving in to her desires at work. Chills snaked down her spine throughout the rest of the hours at work.

No matter how hard she tried to get over those words, her brain kept replaying them in her head.

By the time the closing hour was up, she sagged back against her chair, staring at the time.

She couldn't bring herself to walk out there and face anyone.

What if Claire had told everyone about her relationship with Shane?

Although Shane had given her his word countless times to make her feel assured that her affair with him wasn't just a fling; he wanted her, it did nothing to assuage her fear of the reactions from her co-workers should the information be exposed.

She covered her face with her palms and groaned into her palms. "Oh! God." She sighed heavily.

She waited a few minutes before she began to wrap up things for the day.

She hadn't been able to concentrate at all.

She heaved another sigh, slapping her palm against her forehead.

How much worse could the day go for her?

She had been through worse situations. Surely, she would pull through whatever

outcome this situation brought.

She decided, and with a light shrug, she got off her seat and squared her shoulders, walking out of her office.

Her strides faltered as she moved to the elevator. Sweat broke out occasionally on her skin as she came in contact with a few of the staff on the floor.

They spoke in hushed whispers after nodding in acknowledgment at her, and she could swear they were whispering about her.

She bit down hard on her lips as she stepped into the elevator, meeting the accusing glances of the few in there as she stepped in.

Their looks were practically screaming, "Bitch! Whore!"

She forgot how to breathe during the brief ride down to the lobby. Her chest felt tight, and she had to gasp intermittently to get a hold of her breath.

Sweat coated her forehead despite the chill in the air, and heat rushed in waves through her body.

She could feel their gazes on her back.

She silently prayed that the elevator would descend quickly and open its doors.

She doubted she could last another minute in there.

Finally, the doors opened, and she dashed out. She walked hurriedly out of the building towards the gates.

She wanted nothing more than to hail a cab, get home, and scream her burning lungs out into her pillow.

But first, she needed to catch her breath.

Her phone's ringtone gave off, and she checked the caller's identity.

Shane.

She swallowed the lump that formed at the back of her throat at the sight of his name.

She picked up the phone and raised it to her ear.

"Where are you, Lara?"

"I'm sorry. I have to cancel out on today."

"Something's wrong, Lara. What is it?"

She shook her head. "It's nothing, Shane. I have to attend to some urgent matters at home. I have to go, alright? Till tomorrow, I guess."

She ended the call and walked the last distance to the road. She waited for the traffic signal to show the green light and crossed the road with the rest of the pedestrians waiting to get to the other side of the road.

She rolled her eyes in her head and continued walking down the sidewalk as she spotted Shane's car approaching.

The car was pulled to a stop a few steps away from where she was, and his driver got down to have the back door opened.

"Get in, ma'am, please. I will drive you home," he informed her.

Lara waved her hand dismissively. "No. I will take a taxi."

"I insist, ma'am. Please allow me to take you home."

Lara furrowed her brows. "Where's Shane?" She peered through the opened doors.

Her phone's ringtone gave off, and she raised it to her ear.

"I was hoping not to cause a scandal since that would be the last thing you would want. So, get in, Lara." His voice came in through the receiver.

"I told you..."

"You don't fool me, Lara. Something's off with you, and you're talking it out with me."

"Come on.." Lara groaned under her breath in protest.

"Lara," he said firmly.

"Ah!" Her shoulders sagged in defeat. "Alright. I'm getting in." She walked closer and got into the car.

The driver closed the door and walked back to the front seat to get the car moving.

Silence ensued in the car throughout the ride. Lara gritted her teeth, uncomfortable at the silence.

She looked out the window at the next turn and observed that the car was being turned in the opposite direction from her house.

"What..?" She swiveled her head in his direction.

"Have you eaten?"

"I don't want to eat. I have to be at home."

"Well, I do have to eat, and you will be keeping my company as we have unfinished business to go over."

Lara furrowed her brows. "Are you becoming a dictatorial boyfriend?"

"No," he replied flatly, holding her gaze. "We agreed to be an open book with each other and to never keep secrets from one another."

"There's..." Lara cut in defensively and bit down on her lips. "I'm sorry."

"What is it?"

The car pulled up to a halt.

"Claire knows about us," she said in a whisper.

"Lara."

"I am not comfortable with others at work finding out about us yet. I'm not mentally prepared for it."

"Lara." Shane laced his fingers with hers, holding a side of her face so she could face him.

Lara bit down on her lips nervously, questions arising in her mind. "What did she say to you?" He asked. "Look at me, Lara."

Lara shook her head against his hand and took it off the side of her face. "I'm only bothered."

A brief silence filled the air around them as they sat before Shane asked, "Why are you hellbent on keeping us a secret, Lara?"

It confused him. Women would love nothing but to be publicly known to be his lover, if at all, his mistress.

Her lips twitched. "I'm not keeping us a secret. I affirmed to Claire that we are dating, but the fewer people that know about our relationship at work, the better."

Shane searched her face momentarily before he nodded once in agreement. "As you wish, then. Let's go."

Lara's stomach rumbled in delight at the arrays of delectable sea foods set on the table. They all looked and smelled tantalizing; she couldn't wait to dip them in her mouth and savor the richness of their tastes.

"Thought you didn't want to eat?" A smirk cupped a corner of Shane's face. "Whose stomach is rumbling here?"

"I skipped breakfast and lunch," Lara said without thinking, biting down on her tongue as she became aware of what she had said.

"What? Why did you?" Shane demanded fiercely.

Lara sucked in her lower lip. "I kept losing my appetite."

"Your health should be of the utmost importance, Lara. You are not to work until you're well fed henceforth, am I clear?"

Lara nodded. "Yes, Sir." She gave a salute to him.

He tsked, and they both settled down to eat.

Shane tilted most of the dishes toward Lara. "Eat up."

"I've not regained my appetite yet," Lara refused, tilting the dishes back. "I can't take in much or else my stomach will hurt."

"You will, Lara. My mom won't let me off if she's introduced to a gaunt form of you."

"Pardon?" Lara arched an eyebrow at his words.

"My mom would love to meet with you by the weekend. It's all too sudden, I know. I can just cancel out."

"When?"

"The weekend. By this weekend."

Lara nodded, twitching her lips.

"She's actually delighted about meeting the lady who finally tamed her rake of a son."

She bit the inside of her cheeks to stifle a smile.

"Okay." Lara nodded.

"Okay? Okay." Shane beamed with delight. "I doubted you would agree to come along."

Lara tsked.

"My birthday is coming up the following week."

"Really?" Lara's eyes lit up with a smile. "Happy birthday in advance."

"Honey, thanks."

The dessert was served after the main dish had been eaten, and it was just as yummy and delicious as the main dish was.

"I'm well-fed now." Lara leaned back in her seat.

"You eat too little."

Lara arched an eyebrow. "Perhaps your expectations for my dietary intake are too high."

"It's not. You should eat more to make up for the ratio you've missed."

"Says which dietician?"

He pointed his thumbs towards himself, and Lara giggled.

"Figures." She nodded sarcastically, beaming. "A roving ambassador of romance turned unlicensed dietician." She raised a glass of wine to her mouth and took a drink.

"I may be an unlicensed dietician, but I know how to satisfy your appetite." He added a wink following his statement.

Lara choked on her drink and set the glass back down to stifle her cough.

"Dirty mind, Lara. What did you think I implied?"

Lara clutched her chest lightly. "Beats me. It is obvious what you were implying."

"Nah! You enjoyed these dishes we've had right from the sight of them, didn't you? I know how to regain your appetite and satisfy it. Am I not the best man you've ever had?" He spread his arms wide, palms upturned, in a welcoming gesture.

Lara's lips parted, and she smacked them close. She twisted her lips and furrowed her brows. "Well, you're the first man I've had."

"I'm a lucky man, am I not?" Shane beamed.

Lara pinched her nose, pouted her lips subtly, and rolled her eyes. "I haven't had a chance to make comparisons. Perhaps..."

"There won't be a need for that." Shane planted his hand palm down on the table.

Lara leaned up in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest. "You're that confident?"

"Is that a dare?"

Lara rolled her eyes. "Don't make me swoon too much. It's not good for my mental and emotional health."

"Want to take a promenade afterwards or a ride on a yacht?"

"Both sound nice, but I'm afraid I feel too drained rather than energized after eating to indulge in either of the two."

"Then we should hit the gym or the spa," Shane suggested.

Lara shook her head. "What I need is to fall into a bed and zone out into bliss."

Shane's eyes lit with a glint.

"Mine? I'm up for it. Let's set off."

Lara rolled her eyes. "Mine, and I want personally derived bliss from much-needed sleep. It's been a long day."

"You're mean." Shane sulked.

Lara laughed and shook her head at the look on his face, stifling the sound with the back of her hand.

EIGHTEEN

It remained only three days before she would have to meet Shane's family; Lara felt tense. She had never been the type to fret about anyone's opinion of her; not that she had ever had the time to care, but she felt the need to impress Shane's family when she met with them.

More to her discomfort, Liam seemed relentless in pursuing his romantic interests in her, optimistically hoping she would come around to acknowledging his feelings.

Shouldn't she just tell him that he was risking losing his job by keeping up with his attempts to woo her?

Andrea, by the way- Lara heaved a dramatic sigh and shook her head as she stepped out of the elevator and into the lobby at the close of the day- loathed her guts with each passing day. Their relationship had drastically soured, from BFF to EF.

Lara had deliberately stayed behind after the close of the day so that virtually everyone at work would have left before she made to leave.

She had successfully accumulated more enemies than friends at work since the start of the new month.

Thankfully, Shane had gone for a brief meeting with one of his old acquaintances, and she was still mentally preparing herself for the occasion by the weekend.

Despite how persistently he had assured her over the week that she would be fine and would love her parents when she met them—they would do as well—she couldn't keep out the anxiety that had accompanied her since he had told her about the upcoming visit.

She was nervous. What if his mother probed too much about her background and disliked her upon finding out she wasn't from an affluent and influential family like they were?

She knew the rich, most especially their women, were always haughty and contemptuous of ladies with humble upbringings like her.

Her shoulders sagged as another sigh escaped her. Perhaps she was worrying too much. Perhaps she should trust Shane and refrain from fretting. She might actually warm up to his mother, as he had assured her.

Nonetheless, doubts encircled her mind.

She had a fair share of experience with rich women during her part-time jobs to cement her thoughts on their disposition toward ladies of her financial status. However, Shane had assured her.

She swallowed drily and nodded, muttering through her breath. "It will be fine, Lara. You worry too much."

"Why are you talking to yourself?"

Someone asked out of the blue as she reached the entrance, and she shrieked at first in fright before finally registering the owner of the voice as she looked at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for you," he answered. "You've been avoiding me, Lara."

Lara pursed her lips into a frown. "No, I haven't. What makes you think so?"

"You stopped coming to the cafeteria. You are keeping us all at arm's length."

"Not everyone. Just a selected few," Lara notified

"Same thing, Lara."

"I see no reason why you had to be waiting for me, Liam. I already told you I had no interest in you that way. We can be friends, and that's all I can be with you. Wait a minute, for how long have you been waiting up for me?" She looked at her wristwatch. "It's been almost an hour since work hours have been up."

"I monitored your exit time. I purposely stayed behind, working in my office, to catch up with you. Besides, you still owe me a date?"

"Pardon?" Lara arched an eyebrow.

"I wanted to treat you to a meal," Liam reminded her. Lara looked ready to oppose that, so he quickly added, "You promised, Lara."

Lara paused with her mouth lightly agape, the words she had wanted to say choked at

the back of her throat. She smacked her lips together, her lips parting wordlessly, before she finally said, "I wasn't prepared to go out after work today. I have plans."

"With your friends," Liam cut in. "It's on weekends, not today. You told me, and beside your friends and work, I know you spend the rest of your time at home."

Lara looked flabbergasted at that. "How do you..."

"I have my sources." He added a wink to that.

"I refuse to be cornered into taking up your request, Liam. I've been clear with you about my decision. It's not that hard to take in, I believe."

"I'm persistent. I don't give up on what I want until I get it."

"So am I. I don't alter my decisions easily until I see my point has been acknowledged," Lara said firmly. "We can't be together." She spelled out the words for him to drive home her point.

He wasn't swayed, however; he looked even more determined by the moment.

Lara mentally rolled her eyes with an exasperated sigh.

"You realize you are aggravating, Liam. You are becoming obsessed, and it's not healthy for either of us."

Liam smiled at her. "I can tell just exactly what's healthy for me once I see it." He planted his hand on the left side of his chest. "I can feel it right here, and I won't stop persuading you until you go out with me."

Lara hissed through her teeth, biting down on the retort that promised to leash itself at Liam's promise.

"A promise is a debt either way. You still have to go out with me."

"Fine," Lara snapped through her teeth.

"And you will stop trying to avoid me. Eating lunch with you has always been pleasurable for me."

"Only if you promise to stop chanting about your interest in me," she told him.

"Office romances are a no-no for you," he concluded for her, smiling when Lara watched him with surprise. "Alright, Missy. No more gushing love poems that would make you want to run and hide from me."

Lara stifled a laugh at that, nodding cynically. "Run and hide from you. Indeed."

True to Liam's words, he refrained from muttering sweet nothings while they talked over the meals they shared in the evening.

Liam was really fun to be with, and Lara actually admitted to herself that she missed the old times when she shared her lunch hours with him and Andrea.

But there was no going back now. A chasm had been wedged between the three in their friendship with one another.

Lara checked her wristwatch, as she noticed the sun had fully set by then and it would soon start to get dark.

"I have to go, Liam. Thanks for the meal. I thoroughly enjoyed myself." She tipped her chair back to get up from it.

"Come on!" Liam caught her wrist and pulled her back to a seat. "I have just started. We should order more drinks and food. I'm willing to lavish you today, Lara. I mean it."

"I know you mean it, but that's as much drink and food I can take. I can't walk home drunk and with a bloated tummy from overeating."

"I will take you home if you get drunk, and if I do, you can take me home as well."

Lara forced a smile, pinching her nose.

"You made me miss you way too much, Lara. I don't want you to ever leave my side. It's like I'm drawn to you as bees are to honey."

Here we go again.

Lara rolled her eyes. "Bees make honey, Liam. They are not drawn to them. They are drawn to nectar."

"Well, you're like nectar to me, Lara. You make me feel brand new."

Lara rolled her eyes and moved to get up from her seat. "I have to go, Liam. Come on. I have to be early to work tomorrow." Her phone's ringtone gave off just then, and she hurriedly answered the call, latching on the opportunity to make her escape from having her company with Liam extended.

"Hello, Oh! I will be right there. Give me a few minutes, please." She glanced at Liam and mouthed a quick goodbye, not waiting for a response before she picked up her bag and hurried off under the pretense of still talking to whomever had called her.

She only called him back when she got home.

She dropped her bag on the table and plopped down on one of the sofas, closing her eyes briefly to catch her breath before she dialed his number.

"Where were you, Lara?" he demanded, undoubtedly smoldering with annoyance at having his calls screened four times.

"I was out with a friend as well," she clipped, annoyed by how he had roughly demanded her whereabouts.

At the moment, he wasn't her boss, but her boyfriend. God help her!

She could deal with him being an overbearing boss—well, she was indebted to him—but an overbearing boyfriend was something she wouldn't settle for.

He paused for a breath at the annoyance etched in her tone. "Are you doubting my loyalty to you again, Lara?"

"What?" Lara frowned. "No."

"Then you're jealous. I told you explicitly with whom I was meeting, Lara. Why are you getting all worked up? I asked you just a simple question, woman. Damn!"

"Woman! Woman?" Lara huffed and puffed. "I'm done with this conversation," she announced and abruptly ended the conversation, throwing her phone down on the sofa with a low grunt.

She raked her fingers through her hair and heaved an exasperated sigh as her brain assessed her conversation with Shane.

He wasn't at fault.

She admitted it drily. She ought not to have taken out her annoyance from enduring the last moment before her departure with Liam on Shane.

Although she enjoyed Liam's company, she couldn't help but admit that his insistence on having a romantic relationship with her distressed her greatly and made her cranky.

She stared blankly at the ceiling for a minute before she decided to take a quick shower and hit the hay.

She picked up her bag and shoes and sauntered into her bedroom.

She was just stepping out of the shower when she heard the doorbell ring. Her eyes darted to the alarm clock in her bedside drawer.

It was late in the night. Who could be calling in at this time of night?

She rarely had visitors on weekdays.

She fished out a t-shirt from her wardrobe and draped it on, walking out to get the door as it rang again.

She unlocked the door, her mouth parting in surprise. "Shane!"

He looked furious. "You cut me off from a call, Lara." He gritted the words out through his teeth.

"Ah!" She bit down on her lips. "I didn't expect you would be showing up at this time of the night over that, though."

Shane raised an eyebrow. "I'm offended by your action, and that is all you have to say."

"I'm sorry, alright?" She twitched her lips and stepped back from the door. "Would you like to...uh... come in?"

He walked in, and she turned to face him after closing the door.

"Who did you meet with?"

"Now, who here is having trust issues, man?" She spat at him, with an emphasis on the last word.

A knowing glint sparked in Shane's eyes. "Man?" Then he laughed, and the sound was a deep and melodious rumble in the room.

"You are mocking me?"

He held his arms up in surrender. "No way. Damn, wo.." He caught himself at Lara's glare, closed the distance between them, and pulled her flush against himself, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Was that what made you mad, love?" He asked, leaning down to nibble her earlobe.

A shiver coursed through Lara as his teeth grazed her skin, a jolt running down her spine as if she had been touched by an electric current.

"It's late, Shane. We have work to do tomorrow." She protested weakly against his sensual kisses, her breath hitching in her throat as he kissed the soft bob on her neck.

"I'm sorry I ended the call abruptly earlier. That was rude of me." She murmured feverishly as he caressed her. "I can't think, Shane."

"I don't want you to," he returned, kissing his way up to her jaw, his voice as druggy and

hazy as Lara felt.

"Now, that's not very logical," Lara murmured.

His mouth closed down on Lara's, and he kissed her fiercely, his hands raking through her damp hair.

Their lips locked for several minutes before he pulled back, both gasping for breath.

"I'm spending the night here," Shane announced.

It took a moment before his words fully registered through her pleasure-fogged mind. She jerked back in an instant. "Wait, what? No way!"

Shane kicked off his shoes and walked toward her room. "Well organized," he said, taking note of the appearance of her room. "I'm pleased."

"The hell I'm spending the night with you, Shane. Go home."

"Come on, Lara. Have a modicum of affection for your man. Most girls would love having their men over on spontaneous visits."

"I'm not most girls."

Noting that there was no point in arguing with him, she threw in the towel. "Fine, you take the cushion; I take the bed. I'm off to bed."

"Such a romantic you are!" Shane smiled at her.

"I don't have any clothes for you to change into. I've never had to entertain a male guest overnight," she told him, ignoring the sarcasm dripping from his comment.

"I sleep naked."

Lara choked on her breath.

Shane added a wink, and a grin spread on his lips. "Don't bother. Now, where is the bathroom?"

Later, while Lara had gotten into bed, snoring softly in satisfaction, Shane slipped beneath the covers beside her with an arm draped around her waist.

She turned, snuggling closer into his embrace and muttering inaudibly in her sleep.

Shane bit back a smile and kissed her forehead.

Damn! This woman was his undoing.

She was unwrapping sides of him he had never known existed until now.

He hugged her to himself and fell asleep in contentment, smiling happily to himself.

NINETEEN

"Calm down, Lara." Shane placed his hand over Lara's folded ones as they were driven in his limo to his parents house. "Don't be nervous."

She sucked in her lip ring. "I can't help not to." Her chest heaved, and she squared her shoulders with a light shrug.

He raised her slender fingers to his mouth and planted a kiss on her knuckles. "You look beautiful. They won't be able to resist loving you, I promise."

She held his gaze briefly and nodded. "Okay. I'm trying not to be nervous, alright?"

"You are still not relaxed yet. You're all tensed up." He slipped an arm behind her lower back and massaged it gently. "Better?"

Lara rolled her eyes. "Worse. You are turning me on."

Shane choked on an amused laugh at her bluntness.

"It's probably because it's my first time and they are people so important that I must not make a mistake to mess things up around them."

"No one's placing expectations on you, Lara. Just be yourself. They will love you for who you truly are."

"But there are expectations." Lara scoffed. "I'm getting overly anxious, am I not?"

Shane nodded in the affirmative. "I will be with you every step of the way."

Lara pressed her lips tightly together and nodded.

The car pulled to a stop a few minutes later.

Lara's breath caught in her throat as Shane helped her down from the car, observing the elegance of her surroundings.

It was profoundly breathtaking.

The magnificent estate house stood proudly on the waterfront, its white marble exterior gleaming in the sunlight. A grand entrance with a double staircase led to the front door, which was flanked by two large, arched windows. The windows offered stunning views of the water, and the sound of the waves crashing against the shore could be heard from inside the house.

The interior of the house was just as impressive as the exterior. The floors were made of polished marble, and the walls were covered in expensive wallpaper. The ceilings were high and coffered, and the rooms were filled with beautiful furniture. The living room was a spacious room with a large fireplace and a comfortable seating area.

Shane placed his hand lightly on her lower back as they met his parents in the living room. He had felt Lara stiffen in another bout of nervousness beside him as she saw his parents.

"Mom, Dad, and..." He glared at his brother, who was unabashedly ogling her. "Nicole." His tone was one of deep warning as he called his brother's name. "Meet Lara, my woman," he said to them, his gaze on Nicole.

His brother grinned at his glare with a knowing glint in his eyes.

Ignoring the brothers with an amused shaking of her head, Shane's mom rushed to meet Lara and pulled her into a warm hug.

"Oh! Dear," she said when she pulled back from the hug, holding her lightly by the shoulders with her face beaming with smiles. "I've longed so much to meet you since Shane told me about you.

I can see why he's so smitten with you. Darling, you are captivating."

Lara smiled shyly at her, hiding her surprise at Shane's mom's reaction.

It was the stark opposite of what she had been bracing herself for, despite how much Shane had assured her that her parents were actually cool.

His mother was beautiful and classy; one could hardly tell she was old unless one took a closer observation of her features.

She had caramel brown hair that matched the dark brownish shade of her eyes, dazzling eyelashes, and a contagious smile.

And she was warm and friendly; Lara liked her immediately.

"Thank you, Mrs. Williams. It's a pleasure to meet you too." Lara's smile widened as she excitedly led her to meet the rest of the family.

She glanced at Shane, her lips flattened with stifled smiles.

Shane winked at her. "Told you," he mouthed to her, smiling as well.

Shane's mom looked even more impressed by the exchange between the two. She clapped her hands in delight.

"I have a good feeling about this. Call me, Miranda, please," she told Lara.

Lara had barely reacted to that before she asked, "Can I be casual with you? You will be my daughter-in-law in a few months, without any doubt."

Lara choked on her breath. "Par..."

"Mom!" Shane cautioned from where he stood, muttering inaudibly under his breath about his mom being too forward.

Nicole looked even more amused by his brother's reaction and looked on the verge of exploding from stifling his laughter.

Miranda turned to face him. "Why? I'm sure she's the one. Are you...? Do you plan to break this lovely girl's heart in the future?"

"Mom, please," Shane begged.

"Actually," Lara was saying, but Miranda beat her to it as she glared at Shane.

"You dare not break her heart, son, or you will be unleashing the dangerous side of me."

At that, Nicole snickered. Even Shane's father looked amused, a hint of a smile playing across his lips.

She ignored the men and offered her support for Lara. "I'm your official godmother henceforth, dear. If he ever offends you, report it to me instantly."

"Yes, Ma'am." Lara couldn't help but chuckle at the vehemence in her voice.

"Miranda. Let the lady have some peace and stop being sanguine. You might scare her off," Shane's dad said with a tease in his voice.

Shane's mom stifled a gasp, waving her hand to shun her husband. "Don't say that, darling. That's bad."

Shane's dad faced Lara and smiled warmly at her. "Beautiful dear, it's a huge pleasure to meet you. I am Richard."

Lara tilted her head forward in a polite nod. "The pleasure is mine, sir."

"And I'm Nicole," Nicole introduced herself, flashing a wide grin at her. "I honestly didn't believe it when mom told me he would be bringing you home with him by the weekend. He's quite an unserious boy, you see."

Lara nodded cynically, smiling.

Shane rolled his eyes at his brother's statement. "Quit it, Nicole."

Nicole glanced at Shane and looked at Lara. "Just in case he breaks your heart, I will treat you right."

"Shut up!" Both Miranda and Shane barked at him.

Nicole's eyes flashed with a twinkle. "Welcome to the family, Lara." He winked at her.

Lara pinched her nose to keep from chuckling. Shane immediately stepped in beside her, wrapping an arm possessively around her.

Lara glanced at him and shook her head, finding it harder now to hold back her smile.

"Your man is scared I might steal you away from him with my gaze," Nicole explained to Lara.

"Nicole! For crying out loud, keep mum!" Miranda barked exasperatedly at her son.

"It's not my fault Shane's woman turned out to be an enrapturing beauty. I'm bewitched by her allures already."

"Dunking your head under water for a minute will clear the daze off your eyes in less than a minute, I'm sure," Lara said before she could help it.

She bit down on her lips as they all stared dazedly at her.

She feared she might have overstepped her boundaries with her statement, then reflected otherwise when they all burst out laughing.

"She's the perfect match," Nicole said.

"For your brother," Miranda concluded with a finality to her tone. She frowned with displeasure at her older son and turned to Lara with a full-throated smile. "Come, come, darling. I already had some refreshments prepared for everyone. You must have been exhausted from the journey down here. Would you like tea, juice, wine—name it? Anything you want, dear?"

She had already taken her from Shane's arms and was leading her to a seat on one of the cushions in the large room. She clapped immediately to alert the staff to get on with

bringing in the refreshments for the guest and everyone, and it was promptly done.

"Tell me about you, love. I want to know as much as I can. I approve of anything unless you are involved in illegal stuff. How did you two meet?"

Lara glanced at Shane, stifling an awkward smile.

"I don't need to be told of my son's expertise at sweeping girls off their feet with his charms."

"Why, thanks, mom. I'm flattered." Shane chuckled.

Nicole snickered.

"Right, Lara. Tell us about yourself. What do you do? What about your family? Have they met Shane too?" Miranda asked. "I would love to meet them as well." She beamed.

"She's still my girlfriend, mom. Stop barreling her with questions as if you are questioning my bride-to-be?"

"She's not going overboard with the questions she's been asking," Richard said in his wife's favor.

"Oh! Darling. You are wonderful," Miranda praised him with delight, turning back to drilling Lara with questions.

"Shane and I met in a not-so-romantic spot. You see, I was wary of him at first when he proposed to me."

Miranda urged her to continue.

"He has this reputation of being a rake." She slapped her hand lightly over her mouth. "I hope you don't mind my description of your son. That was my opinion when I first met him."

"He sure is a rake," Nicole agreed, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"I had a lot to deal with and would rather not suffer another heartbreak."

"Another heartbreak?" Miranda planted a hand in surprise on her chest, stifling a gasp.

"I lost my parents. It had been years ago, but the pain lingers."

"Oh! Dear. I'm so sorry," Miranda said. She shook her head, her eyes clouded with empathy. "Then, what changed?"

"After spending more time with him, I realized he isn't as bad as he is portrayed to be.

He is fun to be with, a passionate lover, and the most beautiful man with the most beautiful heart I've ever seen." Lara's gaze locked with Shane's at that moment, and she felt her heart constrict from the emotions she beheld in his eyes.

She wasn't sure if it would be a good idea to tell his parents of the true arrangements between them before they fell in love with each other, but she was telling such a heartfelt and beautiful story about how they had met without deviating from the truth.

Nicole rolled his eyes, holding his tummy while he choked intermittently on his laughter. "He has enough pride to drown out a volcano; don't feed him more, please."

"You have to tell me all about it," Miranda said excitedly, her lips wide with grins.

"I'm however sorry to tell you I'm from quite a humble background. My family isn't as affluent as yours is," Lara expressed her fears, looking down her laps.

"Nonsense," Miranda said immediately, waving her hand dismissively in the air. "When has that ever mattered?"

Lara's gaze shot up to meet Miranda's at that point, her lips parting briefly in disbelief.

They all looked at her with amused smiles on their faces as they saw her expression.

"I believe we have more than enough to make up for that," Richard assured Lara with a pleased smile.

He loved the fact that she was eloquent; it hinted that she was smart.

A beauty with brains. She was perfect!

And she was honest about her background. Although shy of it compared to theirs, but not ashamed of it to tell a lie about it.

Richard nodded in approval. "Let's have lunch together. The table has been set." Richard got up from his seat and made his way toward the dining room.

Miranda gaily pulled Lara up with her, and they both walked to the dining room together.

Shane smiled as she watched the two. He knew without any doubt that both women had become fast friends.

The dining room was more formal, with a long table and chairs that could seat up to twelve people. Both rooms offered stunning views of the water, and the sound of the waves crashing against the shore could be heard from inside the house.

When Miranda heard that Lara majored in fashion design, she had a blast.

Conversations flowed seamlessly between the two; it was as if they had known each other for ages.

Shane was more than pleased that Lara was having fun. She looked more than beautiful as she laughed hard at one of Miranda's comments.

Later in the evening, after lunch, the men left them to their chattering to view the scenery and get back to old times.

They played soccer for a few minutes before they decided to take a break. Shane had the lowest scores, as it had been years since he had practiced.

He raked his hands in annoyance through his hair as Nicole wouldn't stop taunting him about losing to him.

He was returning back to the house to get a quick shower in his room and change before Lara and he set off to go when he heard her laugh heartily.

Miranda giggled as well at her response, and he couldn't help the smile that spread on his lips.

He watched as her eyes shone with delight as she animatedly talked with his mom.

Lara was a great conversationalist, as was his mom. The two were a perfect match for each other.

Richard planted a hand firmly on Shane's shoulder from behind and smiled as he turned to look at him. "It was high time you eventually found love. I'm amazed you've been able to find a woman as wonderful as Lara is."

"In other words, considering all your grievous actions of leaving heartbreaks in your wake, he's surprised you could still find a woman like Lara and get her to fall heedlessly in love with you," Nicole added, walking up to them.

"Shut up, Nick." Both Shane and Richard barked at him.

"Mom and Shane now, Shane and dad. You trio are unbelievable."

"Perhaps you should do the needful like your brother and bring home a bride-to-be," Richard said in a clipped tone.

Nicole grimaced heavily at that, his irritation spiked by the amused glint in Shane's eyes. "Girlfriend, not bride to be, dad. He hasn't made clear his intentions to her."

"Oh! He would," Richard returned as a matter of fact. Then he told Shane, "She's a

keeper, son. Don't let her slip from your grasp."

Shane beamed at his father and nodded firmly in understanding.

After a few hours in Miranda's company, Lara was laughing so hard that she felt her stomach explode from too much excitement.

Nicole went to join the women after he had showered and changed into neat clothes.

Shane had freshened up and changed as well. "Isn't mom just the perfect host?" He asked Lara.

"She's perfect. I love her," Lara said amidst laughter.

Miranda beamed, even more pleased by her compliment. "Shane's birthday party is by the weekend."

Lara nodded. "I won't miss it for all the gold in the world."

"Woah!" Nicole slapped Shane playfully across the back, grinning widely. "Someone's gloating over here."

Shane flipped his brother's hand off and glared at him, stifling a smile as well. "Mom, Dad, we have to be leaving soon."

"So quick?" Miranda frowned. "We still have a lot to tell."

The men exchanged amused glances briefly with each other.

Shane smiled at her. "You two can pick up from where you left your discussion when she comes by the following week."

"Alright, the upcoming birthday man wants to steal his bride away." Miranda laughed and pulled Lara to herself for a quick hug, brushing a kiss on the side of her face. "Till next week, dear."

"I can't wait to see you too, Miranda," Lara returned, hugging her back. "Thanks for your hospitality and reception. I was nervous at first, but I'm more than glad I came. I look forward to our next meeting."

Miranda beamed with pure adoration in her eyes. "Me too, dear. You're a girl after my own heart. Safe journey back." She waved goodbye at her.

"Won't you hug me too, goodbye?" Nicole asked with an expectant look on his face, extending his arms out in invitation.

Lara grinned at him and hugged Shane instead. "Extend my hugs to your brother and your dad, please."

Richard laughed at that; his roars of laughter were followed by Nicole's snicker and Miranda's amused giggles.

He extended his arms to Shane. "I will accept my hug."

Shane walked into his dad's arms and embraced him, pulling back to hug Nicole too, his arms extended in an invitation. "Here comes your hug, big bro."

Nicole tried to pry his hands off him, but Shane caught him and trapped him in a bear hug.

Everyone chuckled and laughed at the interaction between the brothers, waving a final goodbye to Lara and Shane as they prepared to leave.

"So, what do you think of my family now?" Shane asked Lara later as they settled in the car.

"Oh! I love them all. I'm so glad I came," Lara gushed in excitement.

"I'm glad you had fun too. You did exceptionally well. You surpassed their expectations at that." He grinned at her. "From the outset," he added.

"Thanks, Shane."

"You're always welcome, love," Shane replied and laced her fingers with his, settling in for the drive with Lara.

Lara leaned her head against his shoulder, and he smiled in satisfaction, wrapping an arm around her to hold her closer to himself and intertwining their fingers once again through the ride.

TWENTY

The party was held on Sunday evening. Miranda gushed about how she missed Lara so much over the week when she met her again.

She had invited most of her friends to the party, and she held nothing back to show her off to her other wealthy friends.

Every party for Miranda was just another chance to socialize and expand one's connection. Shane's mom wasn't necessarily vain, but she was good at making and expanding her influence in the world of wealthy women's groups she was a member of.

Virtually all the women Lara had been introduced to loved her and were immediately taken with her. Thankfully, Miranda did most of the talking, so when she was asked anything personal she would rather not answer, Miranda expertly answered in a way that made sense but was a deviation from the actual truth.

Not that she knew it was a deviation; her forward nature had prompted her to answer the questions, deducing her answers from the conversation they had had over the previous week when she had come to visit with Shane.

Lara smiled and greeted the dignitaries she was introduced to throughout the party, never having to smile as much as that.

Shane's world was far higher in standards than hers, and it didn't matter that she had been made up to fit in or that she had been singled out by the host as a guest of honor to be introduced to the moguls; she couldn't help but still feel a tinge of awkwardness settle within her as she associated with those way-out-of-her-league and upper-class ladies and women.

While Shane was kept busy by the rest of the well-wishers, he stole glances at where Lara was with his mom. He knew she was in his safe hands, and from where he was, he could see Miranda was doing a great job getting Lara to warm up to the party.

She would be a proud mother-in-law.

A smile tipped the corners of his lips, and his heart leaped in excitement at the thought

of that. He had always known that he was attracted to and couldn't get over Lara for a reason.

She was the woman for him.

Shane excused himself from the company of his other acquaintances and walked over to where Lara was as he observed she had excused herself from his mom's group.

Lara picked up a glass of wine from the tray raised by a waiter passing by and took a drink from it. She felt relieved as she felt the liquid wash down her throat.

Shane smoothly stepped into her side, planting his hand lightly on her lower back, and she smiled, relaxing into his embrace.

"Hey," he whispered against the side of her ear, nuzzling her cheek with the tip of his nose.

"Hey," Lara returned.

"How are you feeling?"

"Wonderful. Your mom has been a perfect host all through the evening. Her personality is superb. How are you feeling as well, birthday man?" She smiled up at him, leaning up to plant a kiss on the corner of his mouth.

A mischievous twinkle lit in his eyes, and he held her by the waist. "I feel cheated that my mom had to steal you away for herself for half the hours of the evening, but I have the perfect plan to make me feel good. Want to check out the house?"

Lara smiled back. "I believe, Mister, your presence is still needed here."

Shane lowered his lips to meet hers and softly kissed her. Lara stroked his chin teasingly and kissed him back, their lips puckering in delight.

"Now you are making me reconsider not taking you up the stairs," Shane murmured over her lips.

"I thought we were checking out the house," Lara teased in return.

"My room is also a part of the house," Shane notified.

Lara stifled a giggle at that, nodding. "Of course, it is."

Shane wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her closer to himself. "I can't seem to get my hands off you, honey. The things you do to me..."

Derrari approached the two right then and noisily cleared his throat.

The two pulled back and turned to face him. Lara tipped a polite nod at Derrari as she noticed him, a brief smile tugging at the corners of her cheeks.

Derrari smiled at her, glancing at Shane. "When were you going to introduce your woman to me?"

Shane rolled his eyes. "As if you hadn't met her earlier in the evening."

"Twice," Lara added.

"Was that you?" He looked incredulously at Lara. "I believed I had encountered an angel instead."

"Derrari, stop trying to charm me, please. It would be a wasted effort," Lara told him with a twinkle in her eyes and a wide smile.

Shane chuckled at that, hugging his woman closer to himself.

"That's too direct, Lara. I may have a heartbreak." Derrari placed an arm to the side of his chest, feigning hurt.

Lara raised a corner of her lips in a smile at him. "You're a survivor, Derrari. You will pull through it, surely."

Derrari paused a breath, pinching in his nose to hold back the smile that threatened to form on his lips.

Lara was witty, and he had always enjoyed exchanging banter with her since the time he was introduced to her. She made it feel so natural to exchange banter with her. She was not just beautiful; she had several alluring inherent qualities too. He was glad for Shane for hitting the jackpot, though not pleased that he had done it before he could.

"Don't you think I'm more handsome than he is?" He flashed a wink at her.

Shane's possessive side came to the fore right then. He tilted her face to meet his and kissed her heatedly and hard. "She's mine." He turned back to glare at him.

"I never argued otherwise." Derrari smiled at the two, raising his hands in surrender.

"Congratulations, once again, man." He slapped Shane playfully across the shoulder.

"See you around, Lara." He raised a salute to Lara and retreated to join the rest of the guests mingling at the party.

"That wasn't necessary." Lara chided him softly when Derrari was gone, her voice still

breathless from the passionate kiss they had shared.

"You have no idea, Lara." He shook his head at her, and holding her by the hand, he led her through the back door outside.

"Where are we going?" Lara asked as he led her across the expanse of land to a bridge that magnificently stood in the distance.

The bridge was intricately and artistically designed with a lush, quality framework that glimmered under the moonlit night.

Shane took off his jacket and draped it over Lara's shoulders.

"Thanks," Lara said, pulling the jacket closer to herself as she followed Shane closer to the bridge.

On second thought, Shane swept her off her feet into his arms amidst Lara's surprised squeal, her hands instinctively holding on to his neck.

"You could have warned me," she chided him.

Shane flashed a wink at her. "Now, where would the fun be in that?"

He carried her in his arms and walked the rest of the distance to the bridge.

The smell of the water coated the air strongly as they walked further, the chill in the air dancing with a tease on her face as it breezed softly.

He stopped at the center of the bridge and set her down. Lara's breath caught in her throat at the sight that welcomed her.

"It is beautiful," she whispered, enthralled by the scenery.

He stood behind her and wrapped a hand around her waist, planting his chin on the crook of her shoulder as they both stood, staring out at the expanse of deep blue waters stretching out into the distance and darkening with a luminous glow under the starry night.

"I built most of my childhood memories here," he explained. "It was my favorite place in the house when I was a boy."

"Why do you bring me here then?" Lara whispered over her shoulder to him.

"I knew you would love it as much as I do," he answered.

"I do. You've been surrounded by beauty in all its forms all your life."

He turned her in his arms so that she was facing him. "You are now a part of them, and just as they have stood by me all these years, I want you by me through the years as well."

"Shane." Lara gasped.

"Lara," he said, holding her gaze.

Her lips parted. "You.."

"Calm it, Lara. I'm not proposing marriage now, but keep it in mind."

Lara laughed. "What?"

"You have no idea how much I'm in love with you. I'm insanely in love with you, Lara."

"Me too. Happy birthday, babe."

A wide grin spread on Shane's face at the endearment she had given him, and he kissed her deeply to express just how much he loved and appreciated her.

"Everyone would have noticed our absence at the party by now," Lara said, withdrawing from the kiss.

"I'm sure they have an idea of the mischief we are both up to at the moment," he teased her, taking her mouth for another kiss while cupping her hips with a firm squeeze in his hands.

Lara stroked her fingers lazily over his stubbles, moaning into the kiss in satisfaction, and pulled back. "We should head back now."

"Right," he agreed.

By eleven, the party ended. Most of the guests stayed over for the night while others, including Shane and Lara, left for their respective houses.

Lara hugged Shane a final goodbye as the car pulled to a stop before her apartment.

"Sweet dreams, babe." Shane kissed the corners of her mouth. He buried his face into the crook of her neck and planted a kiss on her shoulder. "Dream of me."

Lara laughed and pulled back from him, holding his gaze with a brilliant smile on her face. "Good night."

She stepped down from the car and walked into her apartment, listening to the distinct sound of Shane's car gliding away into the distance.

It was 2:00 a.m. by the time she got home. She decided to take a quick shower and get some sleep within the few hours left before she had to go to work in the morning.

She changed into a baggy t-shirt, reaching down almost to her knee, and plopped down on the bed, stifling a yawn as she pulled the blanket over herself and dozed off.

★ ★ ★

The driver was just pulling the car into Shane's driveway when he saw the notification.

He logged in to the company's group page to check out what it was all about, then spat in fury as he watched the uploaded video.

He placed a call immediately to the chief operating officer. "Who the hell did this bullshit?" He demanded it angrily.

"I'm sorry. I'm just watching it now. I will take action immediately to pull it down."

"The hell, Wesley. Don't just pull it down. Find the idiot who had the guts to do this and be sure to contain the video so that it doesn't leak to the media," he barked in annoyance.

"Of course."

"Report to me at my office by morning."

"Sure."

Shane disconnected the call, balling his hands into tight fists as he walked the rest of the distance into his house.

He raked his hands through his hair in annoyance.

He watched the video over and over again, working through the night to find clues to root out the culprit.

He had placed a call to Damien, his private investigator, to track the IP address and report to him by morning. Damien was faster and more efficient.

By the time dawn broke, Shane had gotten an inkling of who had placed a bug in his office and leaked his and Lara's sex video to the company's group page.

TWENTY ONE

Shane called Claire to his office first thing as he got to work in the morning. He had arrived earlier and had told Claire she had better resumed before he did.

Wesley was there as well to report to him as soon as he sat in his desk chair.

"Well?"

"The IP address was traced to Claire Whitmire."

"Claire," Shane repeated dryly, his eyes burning with smoldered rage.

Wesley nodded in confirmation.

"The bug in your office has been detected and removed by the security team earlier in the morning and that goes without saying who planted it there.

The video has been pulled down and its distribution is being tracked on social medias and other online platforms to ensure it doesn't resurface or go viral," Wesley reported. "However, something seems to be off with the address the leaked video was tracked to."

Shane furrowed his brows.

Wesley was about explaining further when Claire walked in.

"I'm sorry." She fixed her gaze to the floor, unable to raise them, twiddling her fingers in anxiety as Shane looked at her with an icy calm.

Shane gestured to Wesley that he could take his leave and once he was out of earshot, he said through gritted teeth, "You had the guts to plant a bug in my office."

Claire shook her head. "I'm so sorry. I apologize..."

Shane hissed, cutting her off her statement. "An apology won't cut this, Claire."

She raised her gaze to meet his, her eyes clouded with tears. "I didn't post the video. I swear I didn't."

Shane scoffed. "All evidence points to you and now you are denying it in my presence. You are testing my patience, Claire. I might have overlooked your attraction to me... Now that I'm thinking about it, I should have relieved you of your job since. Perhaps I could have averted this nasty situation from occurring. I thought I hired a smart and efficient woman not an incompetent fool swayed by the influences of her emotions."

At that, Claire cried out in a sob, "I said I didn't upload the video. Andrea!" Her eyes flashed in recollection. "Andrea must have done it against my knowledge."

"Andrea?" Shane's eyes narrowed as he recalled who that was. "She was involved in this as well?"

Claire nodded amidst tears. "I only threatened Lara in the restroom about my awareness that she was sexually involved with you."

Andrea had been listening to our conversation that day so when Lara left, she approached me and asked what I knew. I showed her the video."

"And let me guess, you gave her the video when she requested for it as well."

Claire sniffed, lowering her gaze again. "I was barely thinking. I was too blinded by my rage and jealousy that you had to be involved with her of all, when you strictly refrained from pursuing a relationship with any of the other female staff who were attracted to you."

Why should she be any different? What does she have that I don't?" She gnashed through her teeth as she demanded heatedly from him.

Shane maintained a calm composure nonetheless, arching an eyebrow while boiling inside with fury at her indignation and audacity. "Are you seriously asking me that now?" He seethed through his teeth, his voice tinged with as much fury and irritation simmering underneath his cool facade.

Claire sucked in her lip ring. "I admit I was wrong to set a bug in your office but I didn't post that video. Andrea told me she had a plan to bring Lara down so we could both have the men we wanted. It sounded like a fair deal to me."

"Get out," Shane seethed with an icy calm through his teeth. "You are fired."

Claire paused a breath in shock as she stared at him.

"I said get out!" Shane ordered.

As if that snapped her out of the daze she had plunged in from receiving the first order, Claire shook her head. "No! No! You can't fire me."

"I have." Shane dialed the security line on the intercom and gave out orders to have Claire taken out of his office with immediate effect.

"You can't fire me!" Claire protested as she was taken out of Shane's office by the men from the security team..

Shane hissed under his breath, once the familiar serenity in his office had been regained.

He placed a call to Wesley to contact Andrea's head of department and have her interrogated as well then ending the call with Wesley, he placed a call to Damien as well.

"The address keeps changing," Damien informed him.

"At first, it was linked to an anonymous account then it was directed to Claire Whitmire. It's switched names again."

"Let me guess, Andrea?"

"Correct, Andrea Johnson," Damien confirmed.

Shane sucked in the air harshly through his teeth. "Both women were part of my employees and they are linked to the case. Do you think Andrea Johnson..."

"Is the actual culprit? No way. The actual culprit either has a grudge on the women involved in the case or has a sinister agenda otherwise. I am on the lookout should any copy of the video be made online."

"Damien, the less people that know about this, the better. I trust your discretion." For Lara's sanity.

He was sure she would be panicking by now upon seeing the video. He had tried to reach her line up to no avail since the time he had learned of the leaked sex video.

"The media won't get a whiff of this," Damien assured his concerns.

"No doubt. I trust you." Shane nodded, closing his eyes briefly in impatience and exasperation.

He couldn't wait for the culprit to be revealed and be thoroughly dealt with. With the suspects now revealed not to be the culprit, he was left disturbed about whom exactly the culprit could be and the culprit's reason for uploading the video exclusively on the company's group page.

If the video hadn't been uploaded by the women competing for Shane's attention or Lara's ruin, who had done it and what was the person's agenda towards doing so?

Shane tried to think up anyone among the hundreds of employees in his organization that could have done such a deed, however, he came up blank with nothing.

Heaving a sigh in frustration, he checked the time on his wristwatch. Lara should be in the office by now.

He switched on his laptop and sent a broadcast message to all the executives and heads of each department for an immediate assemble in the conference room.

★ ★ ★

Lara noticed something was off with the atmosphere as she walked into the company in the morning. Even Diana was acting odd when she greeted her as she got to the lobby; she couldn't meet her gaze when she returned her greeting.

Lara still felt weak from not getting adequate sleep over the night and still waking up early to meet up to her usual resumption time even though Shane had told her that she could take the day off but seriously, a day off?

It was Monday for crying out loud.

However, Lara had had a premonition in the morning and it had been a bad feeling. She arched an eyebrow as she noticed the hostility in the air among the other employees as they walked past and noticed her.

There were hushed whispers with a few heads turned in her direction as they all walked in and out of the elevator as they saw her.

"Something's happened, Diana?" Lara walked up to her and demanded the fact on what exactly was going on.

Diana shook her head uncomfortably, nervously biting down on her lips.

"You have an idea what is going on." Lara glanced around her briefly and fixed her gaze intently on Diana, unease settling into her bones as well. "Tell me!"

"It's a sex scandal," Diana said. "The group page," she said quickly and looked away

from her.

Lara furrowed her brows in confusion and logged in to the group page right then.

"Reach your office first or you will get late to work," Diana advised although Lara noticed had an ominous tone to it.

"Great. Have a good day." Lara angled her chin towards her and went up the elevator.

If gazes could burn, she would have been charred from the gazes fixed on her by the other employees with whom she used the elevator.

She came across Liam as she got to her floor, forcefully walking with her head high and back straight to her office.

She was having a problem positioning her strides well in her heels and her skin kept recoiling in embarrassment for an unknown reason as everyone stared and undoubtedly gossiped about her.

Her mouth felt dry and parted inaudibly as she acknowledged Liam's presence when he approached her.

"What was I thinking?" His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

Lara frowned. "Pardon?"

"You aimed high. I didn't take you for that kind of girl, Lara."

Lara's heart pounded at Liam's words, recalling Diana's words as well. She suspected whom the scandal might be about.

"What kind of girl?"

"I'm deeply disappointed in you, Lara Dunlop. You..." He planted a hand to the side of his chest, "broke my heart." He pinched in his nose. "You are nothing but a whore!" He spat at her and walked away.

Lara's hands balled into tight fists at her sides and she gritted her teeth hard in smoldered annoyance and embarrassment. Her hands shook as she held them in clenched fists, forcefully marching forward in her heels.

She felt as if a container of ice had been dunked, without warning, over her. Heat washed over her face almost making her swoon, torrents of chills snaking down her spine making her body shiver.

She hastened the rest of her steps to her office, plopped down in her seat and logged in

on her phone. She already knew what to be expecting.

When she had it confirmed, she felt darkness wash over her, a wave of vertigo hitting her hard as she saw what was on the video.

It was a filming of her in the throes of pleasure with Shane in his office. She remembered that day.

Tears moistened her eyes, her heart weighed heavy with embarrassment, shame, and mortification at the situation she was in.

She raked her fingers through her hair, a icy chill spreading through her veins.

A few minutes later, a meeting was called in the conference room to address the issue. To add to her embarrassment, Lara was the last to come in as she had to be called by the COO, Wesley, before she noticed the notification that had been sent to everyone for a meeting.

All eyes turned on her as she walked in and at that moment, she wished she had a shell to crawl into like a tortoise in the face of this height of embarrassment she experienced.

She had no idea she was rooted to a spot and had not moved further from the door until Shane walked down from the boardroom to where she was and gently placed a hand on her lower back.

She jumped at his touch, a gasp emitting her throat as she gazed up at him.

"Lara and I had been acquaintances before she started working for me so you had better all not get any wrong idea before you start making assumptions about her character.

And although, she's the reason why we've kept our relationship secret, Lara and I have been dating before she started working for me.

Since there's nothing to hide now, I don't want to hear any gossips or rumors about this leaking to the media. My girlfriend's image is at stake. My image is at stake, and most importantly, the company's image is at stake. Each heads of department should work on amending this situation as deftly and swiftly as possible. That will be all."

Everyone nodded once, avoiding even so much as a single glance in Lara's direction as they all filed out of the room.

Lara stood numbly, staring blankly into the distance. As soon as the last person was out of the room, Lara turned on her heels and made to leave.

Shane stopped her. "Lara." He held her by the wrist.

"Let go, please." Her lips quivered as she said over her shoulders. Her sight was now fully clouded by now and she was having a hard time containing her tears.

She didn't want to cry in front of him. Damn! She wanted to be away from him.

She couldn't keep a clear head around him. She wouldn't have gotten caught up in a sex scandal at work had it been she kept up restraint on her desires.

Office romances were in proven fact, a no-no for her. She shouldn't have indulged in it.

"I'm handling the situation..."

Feeling now on the verge of tears, she turned on him in a flash and thundered, "I said, let go!"

Shane released her hand.

"I'm deeply embarrassed, Shane. I can't stand the sight of myself or anyone. I just want to blank it all out."

"Lara..."

"Just stay away from me, Shane." She blanked her face, furiously wiping off her tears. "I will be leaving now, Sir," she said with an emphasis on Sir, dipped a polite nod, and walked out of the conference room.

TWENTY TWO

Lara felt weak in the belly and queasy from embarrassment as she stepped out of the conference room.

She dry-heaved as she reached out to press the buttons on the elevator, and she felt dizzy spells wash over her.

She darted out through the doors of the elevator as a wave of nausea hit her in the chest, heading for the nearest restroom.

She pushed the door ajar and fell down to her knees, retching her throat out into the toilet. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks as she vomited, her unease settling heavily in her throat and mid-belly.

She pulled out some tissue from the tissue roll and wiped the stain on the corners of her mouth off, flushing the mess off.

She breathed heavily as she pushed herself off her feet to the tub to wash her face, and the aftertaste of bile coated her tongue.

The day seemed to stretch even longer before work hours were up, as if it wanted to deliberately rub her shame in her face.

She slumped on the sofa as she got home; her shoulders sagged. She was grateful she had been able to walk out of the company without faltering in her steps, despite the contemptuous looks surreptitiously cast in her direction by most of the staff as she walked out.

She rocked her temples against the ache that threatened to set its roots within her head, her eyelids drooping to a close in exhaustion.

She had no idea for how long she sat staring into oblivion, but she was jolted out of her thoughts by the sound of the doorbell.

Startled, she shook and paused a breath, looking towards the door.

Fear once again raced through her heart at the possibility that something even worse had happened.

Perhaps the media had gotten a whiff of the leaked video, and they were here to assail her with interrogations.

The doorbell rang again, and she got up, gingerly walking towards the door, silently hoping it wouldn't turn out to be what she had thought.

She unlocked the door and pushed it open, her breath escaping her at whom she saw.

He smiled at her as he said, "Hello, Lara."

Damn! Her mouth hung open in shock and disbelief. Something bad had definitely happened for him to be here, and it was far worse than what she had feared.

"George!"

★ ★ ★

Shane twisted his lips into a frown as Wesley gave him feedback on the investigation he had been carrying out.

"So, Andrea copied the video into a flash drive and gave it to Liam, but Liam denied watching the video until it was leaked on the company's group page," Shane repeated dryly.

"Yes. He didn't deny being given the clip, though, and he has no idea how he misplaced it, but judging by his sour countenance towards Andrea, he let it off at that."

Shane swiped his palm over his face, muffling a sigh. "You can retain Liam. Claire and Andrea, however, should be discharged from their employment."

Wesley nodded. "Yes, Shane."

"Give me a heads-up once you are able to apprehend whoever is behind this."

"The culprit's location is being tracked. He will be caught and brought to order soon enough."

"Good." Shane nodded and gestured with his chin for him to take his leave.

Wesley tipped a polite bow and walked out of Shane's office.

Shane drummed his fingers absentmindedly over his desk table, thoughts racing in his mind.

There were still no clues to find out who had uploaded the video. There was a missing link with no clues to fill it from the time Liam had been given the video clip to when he had misplaced it.

There was no footage of him to decipher the clue; whoever had leaked the video was a master planner.

He raised his phone to his ear, tapping on a speed dial. "Any updates?"

"Still working on it. The culprit is a formidable opponent, but no matter how skilled he is, there is always a loophole," Damien told him.

"Source out the loophole fast and expose the identity of the bastard who is behind this," he bit out impatiently through his teeth, balling his hands into a fist on the table.

"Okay."

With that said, Shane disconnected the call.

He itched to call her, but he knew she wouldn't pick up. She was emotionally affected more than he could ever relate to the released video, and he felt bad about it.

She had every right to be annoyed, but he wasn't pleased that she was shutting him out over it. He wanted to be there for her and offer her the comfort she needed at a time like this. If at all, they should be sticking together to fight against the odds against them, but...

Shane sighed. He was being insensitively logical.

Whoever did this, once he was sniffed out, will regret ever trifling with him or his woman.

Shane silently promised himself.

★ ★ ★

Lara's legs weakened at the sight of him, and she inched back dazedly as she watched him.

"What are you doing here?" She wanted to make her voice sound tough and uncaring, but it had betrayed her, sounding all weak and breathless.

He walked into her apartment, flanked by his men on either side of him, and took a seat on one of the cushions.

Lara rolled her tongue back in her mouth, raking her fingers exasperatedly through her hair.

She turned on him with a glare.

"We meet again, don't we? It's such a small world."

She swallowed the lump that formed at the back of her throat and forced annoyance through her shaky voice. "I asked, What the hell are you doing here?"

"Ask Rufus," he told her, a mischievous glint appearing in his eyes and a smile cupping a corner of his lips.

Lara closed her eyes briefly at the mention of that name, releasing a breath of smoldered annoyance and exasperation.

"You know I have nothing to do with him." She swallowed, trapping air in her mouth before she added, "Again."

"This time, I should warn you, is more than the last one, and the due date is shorter. You can whore yourself out to the billionaire who paid up your initial debt," he said, and his men snickered behind him. "Or perhaps I may consider waving it off if you would..."

"Shut up!" Lara barked at him, her chest heaving from the force she had used. She gritted her teeth hard as she glared at him, her chest heaving. She was on the verge of tears, but the hell would she reveal her vulnerability to him.

"I can give you as much pleasure as that bastard did," he told her, apathetic to her glare. "Threesome, perhaps?"

His men snickered like giggling idiots behind him, leering at her.

"If you don't get the hell out of my apartment this instant, George, I will report you to the police," Lara warned.

At that, George and his men chortled. "Police. You can't buy your way out of this by threatening me, Lara. You've sure grown up. Pay me my money," he stressed out those last two words to her, getting on his feet. "I will be back in two weeks. Either be ready with my money or be braced to whore yourself out to all of my men. It's what you do after all." He hissed through his teeth and walked out of the apartment.

Lara's legs shook as she stood rigidly, balling her hands into tight fists beside her. She

moved mechanically towards the door and latched the lock on it, sliding down the door frame to a crouch.

Tears sprawled to her eyes, and she let it out, too overwhelmed by the waves of emotions coursing through her to cage it in.

She identified the fault she had made after getting herself rid of the first debt he had incurred on her.

She had only broken ties with him nominally; she hadn't gone through the official process to disown him.

She was still his next of kin, whether she liked it or not, and he had plunged her into another abyss of debt.

The rest of the week, Lara was a shadow of herself. She rarely had time to ruminate about her ruined identity at work. She was plagued constantly with inner turmoil; however, she tried as much as possible not to let her personal issues disrupt her efficiency at work. She poured her aggression into work instead, keeping up late hours to ensure she didn't have to run into anyone on her way home.

She visited the hospital for a checkup given the fact that she kept feeling heady momentarily and felt weak and queasy often in the morning.

She guessed her constant worries and the stress she had been putting herself through lately might be the reason.

"Congratulations, Miss Dunlop. You are three weeks pregnant," the doctor said, smiling lightly at her.

Lara's face fell at the news, her heart taking a deep plunge into her belly. She stared silently at the doctor.

Taking that as a cue to continue, the doctor said, "You will have to be coming for the prenatal treatments and try to keep away from stressful activities. It is hazardous to your health and the baby's."

The rest of the doctor's words droned off into an echo in Lara's head, another wave of vertigo hitting her hard. She stamped her palm hard against the desk table to steady herself, unaware of how loud the sound had been.

The doctor looked appalled, having been cut off abruptly from her statement.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," Lara apologized quickly, realizing what she had done.

"Are you okay, Miss Dunlop? You don't look good."

Lara shook her head quickly and pushed herself out of her chair. The chair made a screech on the floor as it moved back.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go now." She excused herself from the doctor's office, rushing out of the hospital.

She held her stomach tenderly as she moved out onto the streets, half-walking and half-running. She hailed down a cab immediately and got in, biting down on her lips to hold in her feverish breaths till she got to the safety of her home and could let it all out.

She counted upwards in her head to distract herself from poring over the thoughts lurking around her mind. She dared not blink as the car was driven, silently praying she would reach her destination quickly. She couldn't hold it in any longer.

She sniffed back tears, rushed out of the cab, and dashed towards her apartment.

She fumbled with the keys in her hands, tears clouding her eyes heavily.

She felt unusually lightweight and heavy, her body numb and cold from the chills jetting through her blood.

She swiped off the sheen of tears in her eyes with the back of her hand, eventually being able to put the key into the lock.

She unlocked the door but paused as she was about to push the door open.

"Lara!" Kyle called from behind.

"We came just in time," Meredith said, the two walking up to her.

They were quick to sense that something was off with her, as she didn't turn to exchange pleasantries with them.

"Christ, Lara!" Kyle exclaimed as she saw her face.

"What happened to you?" Meredith asked.

Lara's lips trembled, and she lost her resolve. Her shoulders sagged as she broke down into sobs.

Kyle wrapped her hands immediately around her, moaning in empathy. "Oh, my! Poor dear."

Meredith opened the door while Kyle gently guided the heartbroken Lara inside.

She helped her to a seat in the living room and offered her as much comfort as she could, urging her to stop crying.

Meredith went into the kitchen to brew some coffee and was back a few minutes later. Lara was hiccuping when she handed the mug of steaming coffee to her.

"Thank you," she muttered dryly under her breath, inhaling the fragrance and taking double sips before she set it down on the stool to cool down.

Meredith and Kyle had their gaze fixed on her, waiting for her to spill what had disheartened her.

Lara brushed a finger beneath her eyelids and sniffed. "I'm sorry. I got over myself for a brief moment. I'm fine now."

"As if." Meredith scoffed. "You look down in the dumps."

"What's wrong, Lara? Is it about Shane or an issue at work?"

"It's... It's..." A frown creased her forehead in frustration, and she tsked, looking away from them. She had no idea how to express her thoughts, where she should start from, or how she could talk about her worries with anyone.

It was all too much for her to bear. A triple whammy in the space of a week

"Calm down, Lara." Kyle inched closer to her, rubbing her hand over her back. "Take a deep breath," she instructed her. "Slowly, exhale... Good girl! Now tell us what happened. Be calm about it, alright?" Kyle told her softly.

Lara let out a feverish breath as she announced, "I'm pregnant."

Meredith and Kyle paused their breaths for a moment, their eyes flashing with surprise.

"Does Shane know about this?" Meredith asked.

Lara shook her head. "I just learned about it now. I went to the hospital today."

"Why then? Is it bad? Hasn't he shown a sign of commitment?" Kyle asked.

"It's not that," Lara croaked. "There's just a lot going on right now, and it's just not the opportune time for me to deal with this."

"What exactly is going on, Lara?"

"George." She sobbed.

"George?" The two spat, annoyance etched in their voices.

"He came around. Told me Rufus took up another loan." Her voice shook as she spoke, and she sucked in the air to steady her breath.

"What the hell?" Meredith cursed through her breath.

"Does Shane know about this as well?" Kyle inquired. "Damn! He's your man for crying out loud. Why are you keeping things from him?" She hissed irritably through her teeth when Lara shook her head against not telling Shane about George as well.

"We had a quarrel over the week. Besides, this is my problem. I won't bother him with it again. I will find a way around it myself."

"Can you? Will you?" Meredith asked. "This is insane!"

Kyle let out a deep breath. "What about the baby, then?"

"I can't."

"What?" Meredith asked. "Wouldn't he take responsibility for the baby?"

"It's not that he won't, but..." Lara was saying, but Meredith cut in, hissing heatedly through her teeth.

"Well, you've got to be kidding me, Lara."

TWENTY THREE

Shane raked his fingers exasperatedly through his hair as he looked at who had been making everyone go through hell and back over the week.

He still found it hard to believe she was the culprit although he was immensely enraged by the troubles she had put him through. That had clouded his initial shock when her identity had been revealed.

"Miss Gilbert, do you mind explaining the reason behind your actions?" He glared at her.

"I only needed to bring Lara down. Let's say I was envious of the privileges she had upon her employment," she replied, not an ounce of remorse on her face.

"And what exactly do you know about Lara's employment?" He bit out through clenched teeth.

She gave a noncommittal shrug. "Nothing. She was an opponent, and I had to get her out of the way."

Shane furrowed his brows. "You too. Ah! Shit!" He groaned under his breath.

"I'm not sorry for my actions."

"Shut it, Diana." Wesley hissed at her.

She rolled her eyes, twisting her lips into a pout.

Shane smiled crookedly. "I know you aren't, but trust me, you will regret ever trifling with me or my woman."

"Lara is not..."

"Get out," he ordered her.

She harumphed and walked out of his office, accompanied by two uniformed men.

"Ensure she serves a long term in jail with enough labor to prompt her to reflect on her actions," Shane said over the phone to the Chief of Police.

"Alright, Sir."

He disconnected the call.

Diana had perpetrated more than enough criminal acts to last her a lifetime in jail. She was a professional hacker with a history of causing chaos on the internet with several anonymous accounts she worked with. She was a smart young woman with a promising future. Shane couldn't fathom why she would relinquish all of that just to have a man.

Her obsession had turned insidious. She could have destroyed Lara's career with her ploy, and he didn't put it past her that that was her intent.

She had listened to Claire's and Andrea's conversation about bringing down Lara in the bathroom, hence why she had hacked into the accounts of the two of them to cover leads on her identity.

When Andrea had given Liam the video clip, she had planted someone to pickpocket it off him while she tampered with the CCTV footage within that period.

Her plan had been thoroughly effected, but as Damien had said, there was always a loophole.

"Run a thorough profile check before you employ any new staff, Wesley. I want no swooning idiots or jealous nincompoops in my company, am I clear?"

Wesley nodded once. "Noted, Sir."

"Good. I appreciate the effort you and everyone have put into apprehending her. You may take your leave."

Wesley nodded once. "Right, Sir."

Shane leaned back in his seat as Wesley walked out of his office, the doors sliding back to a close.

A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He felt pleased now that the issue had been settled.

He had instructed Diana to wait behind after work hours were up before he had the police call in on her after she had confessed to her actions. Not that she could deny them; there was more than enough evidence to sue her.

He raised his phone to his ear after dialing Lara's number. "Hello," he said, getting off his seat to leave as well.

Someone else picked up the call. "Hello," she returned.

"Where's Lara? Why are you picking up her calls?"

"This is Kyle, her friend. You mind telling me what the hell you did to her?" Her voice had risen to a furious pitch over the phone.

"Oh, my God! Kyle. Is that Shane?"

He heard Lara's voice in the background, and after a bit of struggle and furiously muffled words, Lara's voice came in through the receiver. "Hello," she croaked.

Shane furrowed his brows. "Lara. Where are you?"

"I'm at home."

"Can we meet, please?"

"Is it work calls?"

His frown deepened, knowing what her response would be. She had been purposely keeping him at arm's length over the week, except for work calls.

"It is," he lied. "I will pick you up."

"No. Don't. Just tell me the location. I will meet you there."

He smacked his lips together, his jaw twitching. "Okay."

He disconnected the call.

He texted her to meet up with him at the cafe in her neighborhood, got into his car, and his driver keyed in the ignition, driving out onto the streets.

He had thought she looked miserable over the week from being disheartened over the leaked video, but she looked more pale from the distance she was sitting in as he walked to join her on the table she had taken.

She applied more makeup than she had done in the morning to enhance her face, but Shane could see through the facade, the listlessness lurking beneath the shadows around her eyes.

"Lara."

She was lost in thought and was startled when he called her.

"What's going on with you, Lara?" He took a seat, worry etched on his face.

He was disheartened by the glum look on her face. She was doing a poor job concealing her emotions behind the facade of make-up she wore.

"Is this about my performance at work? I will..."

"Please, Lara." He groaned. "Just, please. You're hurting yourself, and I hate it, alright?"

She looked blankly at him.

"I've taken care of the issue. The video has been taken down completely. Diana will be sued for her actions."

"Diana?" That caught her interest.

"Yes," Shane confirmed. "She was the culprit. It turns out I have lots of admirers in my company."

She didn't look an ounce amused by the dry humor he had made. "So?"

"I'm sorry, alright? I should have listened to you when you said we should keep our hands off each other at work."

"You shouldn't be apologizing. Neither of us could have foreseen what happened. We were in the safety of our offices after all."

He deflected a hint of sarcasm in her words, but it was not the time to call her out on it.

"Right, we couldn't." He nodded. "So?" He prompted her.

"Is that all? I thought you called for work-related issues."

"Come on, Lara. Let's just put things behind us and get back together. There's nothing to hide anymore. Thank God."

Lara choked on a scoff. "You have no idea." She shook her head. "I can't get back with you. I'm sorry."

"What?" He frowned. "No. Come on!"

"You have lots of admirers, you say. I have no idea how I will get over the trauma I've had from this experience yet. What if another of your admirers pulls another ploy like this? God forbids me; I will be ruined."

"Lara..."

"No." She raised a hand to hush him. "I was foolish. I thought I could have that kind of life. I ought to have learned from my mom's experience, but I was blinded by love. I was befuddled by the pleasure I gained. But I'm just not mapped out for this. I can't deal with a relationship. I fear it will wreck my sanity."

"Lara."

"Shane, please. If that's all, I will be taking my leave now." She got to her feet.

"I'm not giving up on you," Shane declared.

She looked at him, her breath hitching in her throat. "Do. As I am."

With that, she walked away from him.

She swayed as she walked, and Shane leaped out of his chair, catching her in his arms.

She shut her eyes briefly, her lips parting intermittently for breaths.

"Let me go," she said weakly, struggling against his hold.

"I will take you home." He led her out of the cafe to where his car was parked. "Get in."

"No. I don't want you to. Just leave me alone."

"You look as if you won't last a minute standing on your feet, and you expect me to let you go in this state," he hissed heatedly.

"What is it to you? We're not at work. You aren't obligated to drive me home."

"You are my woman," he stressed emphatically to her.

"Not anymore. I broke up with you." She glared at him.

It was then that he noticed the puffiness of her eyes. He held her face in place in her struggle to escape his scrutiny. "You've been crying today as well."

His lips parted. He realized he had undermined how affected she was by the leaked video.

"Every time I see you, I recall that video, and I have to relive the shame and mortification I've felt all over again. You see, I've been marked. It's indelible."

"It will pass, Lara. Once another storm brews, this wind will clear off."

"For now." She sucked heavily in the air, her chest heaving. "I don't think I can deal with being in a relationship. Thank you, Shane. From now on, you will only be my boss. Don't

try to convince me. I will make sure to repay each and every one of my debts to you as quickly as possible and spare the two of us the misery of being around each other."

She dipped a nod at him and turned away. Her hands were tightly balled on her chest as she felt heady again.

Tears clouded her eyes, and she silently prayed they could hold on till she reached her apartment before they flowed down her cheeks.

She planted her palm over her mouth, hiccuping into her palm while tenderly holding her lower belly and half-running towards her apartment.

She had said her goodbyes to Meredith and Kyle before she left home to meet Shane, and the two had strongly warned that should she not call them about the outcome of her meeting with Shane, they were so going to give him a piece of their minds.

Lara questioned the wisdom of her decision to keep Shane in the dark about his baby, but she wasn't sure if he would want it either.

Although he had made clear his intentions to walk down the aisle with her if given the chance, a baby at the moment was too soon.

Neither of them had planned for a baby. She had enough to worry about, but since this had happened too, Lara felt she had no choice but to find a way around it.

She wouldn't be able to keep her pregnancy to herself for long, but at the moment, she wanted to keep a clear head around him.

She wouldn't be giving him a reason to stick around her for romantic pursuits as of now. She was strictly business until she was able to get over her distress completely and pull herself together.

She wouldn't think about him, nor would she think about being betrayed by those whom she thought were her friends at work. She had no friends at work.

Everyone she thought were her friends was actually plotting her downfall.

She would stay focused on why exactly she was working in Shane's company from the outset and find a way around gaining the independence she had always sought for herself in the long run.

She wiped off the tears that clouded her eyes with the back of her hand and walked the rest of the way home with her face set with determination.

★ ★ ★

Shane raked his fingers through his hair as he watched Lara go. He itched to follow her and hold on tight to her, strongly refusing to let her go, but he knew Lara was as thick-willed as he was.

He had to give her time to cool things off before he set his target again. He silently cursed under his breath when he thought of the three wenches that had cost him his relationship.

Hell! They would regret ever messing with him.

He got into the car and gave his driver instructions as he got in, closing the door after him. "The Broken Shaker, please."

He needed some jazz to mellow out his temper.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Derrari cheered his wine glass towards him as he approached their regular table and took a seat.

A grin spread across Derrari's face as Shane ignored him.

He was served the regular wine, which he took a few minutes later, and he began chugging the contents down his throat.

"Let me guess, you got dumped." Derrari arched an eyebrow, a corner of his lips raised in a smirk.

Shane paused with his cup half-raised to his lips and glared at him.

Derrari took that as confirmation and laughed so hard he had to hold his throat from hiccuping. "Made my day. But I can relate to your pain." He nodded approvingly at him.

Shane swigged the wine, aiming for the next serving. "What's with you?"

"I got slapped in the face."

Shane's eyes flashed in surprise. "Really?"

"Literally." He tsked. "That spoilt brat. I'm going to teach her a well-deserved lesson."

Shane nodded flatly, his shoulders rising as he sucked in the air. "To every man with his own worries." He raised a glass to that.

Derrari touched his glass to his as well, and they both drank its contents in one swig.

A brief pause settled between the two, accompanied by only the sound of the music played.

"What happened? What did you do to her?"

Shane tsked, raising his glass to his mouth and taking another swig before lowering it to the table. "Funny how you're quick at accusing me of being the reason why I was dumped." He twitched his eyebrows. "Correct though."

Derrari waited for him to continue.

"I'm not saying much," Shane told him. "I will rather blot it all out and kick-start a new course of action tomorrow to win her back. Tonight, I'm drinking it down."

Derrari nodded in acknowledgement. "Suit yourself." He tilted his glass lightly towards him before he took a drink from it.

Shane returned the gesture and kept up with his plan to get thoroughly drunk and drink down his worries.

His phone vibrated on the table, and he checked to see who the caller was.

His mom.

He suppressed a groan as he had a guess of what she was calling for. He excused himself from the table and headed for the restroom, away from the loud music pervading the air.

"Shane!" As always, Miranda was as excited as birds in the morning.

He tried to rub in some of her excitement as he answered, "What's up, Mom?"

"Nicole's getting married," she announced, and he almost snickered at how fallacious it was.

"A joke?"

Miranda wouldn't have called him and sounded so excited about it if it were a joke.

"We will be making preparations for the celebration starting next weekend. Could you bring Lara over? It would be great to have the whole family present."

"Lara wouldn't be around. I will put in an appearance for the celebration," he said drily.

He knew something was up with Nicole getting married out of the blue, but he was not in the mood to entertain being told every tidbit of the gist.

"But, Shane..."

"I have to go, Mom, please," he said firmly.

He was grateful she let it go at that. Her excitement about the preparations for Nicole's upcoming wedding had grown so much on her that she hardly noticed the listlessness in his voice.

"It would have been great if Lara could be there. She would have helped with picking out the dresses for the occasion."

An idea popped into Shane's mind at that, and he said quickly, stifling a smirk, "She will be there. I will find a way."

"Oh! Shane. You are such a darling boy."

"I love you too, mom."

When Miranda disconnected the call, a grin spread across Shane's lips at the new plan he had hatched in his head on the spur of the moment.

TWENTY FOUR

Lara tossed and turned with a low groan under her breath as she stirred awake in the morning.

She felt so drained of energy that it was as if she had worked laboriously all night instead of sleeping.

Unease settled within her belly for an inexplicable reason, and she pushed herself off the bed, sauntering into the bathroom to relieve herself.

She rubbed her hand tenderly over her belly, the urge to wipe away the unease strongly surging within her and her inability to do that spiking her annoyance consequently.

She hissed again as she stood on her toes to stretch, exhausted.

Thank God, it was Saturday. She would have hated having to call in sick at work.

She went through her daily routine and headed for the kitchen to prepare herself a light breakfast after she had cleaned and dressed herself up.

The day, although bright, didn't reflect on her mood.

She worked perfunctorily through her chores, dry heaving as she raised the cup of tea she had prepared to whet her appetite to her mouth.

Nausea surged rapidly into her chest, making her lose control of the cup in her hands.

She rushed quickly to the restroom, ignoring the sound of the cup shattering on the floor as it fell off her grip, the tea spilling in a splash over the surface.

She gagged and coughed restlessly to force out the vomit clogged at the back of her throat, but to no avail.

All she was able to retch out was a small amount of water, despite her attempts to puke out all the nausea irritating her belly.

Her chest felt constricted as she heaved drily, falling back against the wall. She beat her chest repeatedly to clear off the nausea clogged in her chest, dry-heaving intermittently.

Her head swayed on her shoulders as she crouched down against the wall.

For the love of Christ! Why did she have to be as weak as this?

Of all days to feel sick, why did it have to be now that she was still trying to nurse her emotional hurt?

She moaned exasperatedly and pushed herself with a groan to her feet, treading to the sink to wash her face and the grime off her mouth.

Sighing wearily, she walked cautiously to the kitchen, weary of unsettling her stomach again.

The manner in which she ran to the restroom earlier had sapped away the modicum of strength she planned on using to carry out the rest of her chores.

Fueling herself on force, she cleaned up the mess she had made on the floor, forfeiting making breakfast and opting for a quick smoothie.

The blender droned on for a few minutes, and she poured out the thick liquid into a cup.

She walked to the sitting room and took a seat, mentally planning to take a short rest after drinking the smoothie before she prepared an actual breakfast.

She would regain some or most of her strength in a few minutes.

She raised the glass to her mouth and drank down its contents, setting it down on the table.

She pressed her palm lightly against her belly when it rumbled in protest again, as if on the verge of attacking her with another bout of nausea.

Her body was tense as she sat, bracing herself to leap off the chair and dash to the restroom in any minutes from then.

Minutes ticked by before she eventually relaxed, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand as she leaned back against the headrest.

She stared into oblivion for a few seconds, her mind devoid of thoughts, too weakened and drained to ponder over anything.

She was glad she didn't have the strength to ruminate over her worries, but the unease weighing heavily on her body altered her opinion.

Her eyes were drifting to the side when a call came in on her phone.

She leaned forward and picked up the phone from where she placed it, glancing briefly at it to check who the caller was before she answered the call, raising it to her ear.

"Hello." Her voice came out in a wheeze, despite her repeatedly coughing at the back of her throat and swallowing down the lump in it before talking.

"Good morning. Are you sick, Lara?" Kyle sighed over the call as she asked.

"Just a bit of morning sickness. I will be fine after a few minutes of rest," Lara assured her.

"You don't sound like someone who will get better after a few minutes of rest. I will be coming over to your place soon. Have you had breakfast?"

"Smoothie," Lara replied weakly, her eyelids growing heavy and drooping to a close again.

"Jeez! Lara. I'm coming over."

Lara nodded absentmindedly, stretching out on the settee to sleep.

"Okay," she mumbled sleepily into the phone, turning over to her side to place the phone down on the table.

The doorbell rang, stirring her awake.

"Uh!" She groaned, hissing through her breath as she pushed herself to her feet to get to the door.

"Kyle?" She called as she approached the door.

It couldn't have been Kyle. She thought the two spoke a few minutes ago, or had it been an hour already?

She didn't feel as if she slept for that long.

She opened the door, surprised to see who it was. "Oh!" She swiped down her face with her palm to clear the half-grogginess off it.

"Hi, Lara," Laura said flatly.

"Laura. It's a surprise to see you pay a visit," she said. "Alone," she added.

Laura rarely came around unless Joe was present, unlike Meredith and Kyle.

"Where's Joe?"

"He's the reason I'm here."

Lara furrowed her brows briefly at that. "Oh! Manners!. Come in, please." She stepped aside to allow Laura in, closing the door behind her and following after her to the sitting room.

"Have a seat, Laura." Lara gestured towards one of the chairs as she stood in the center of the room. "What will you like to have?"

"Why?" Laura said over her shoulders.

Lara furrowed her brows in confusion, pulling to a stop a few steps away from where Laura was standing with her back turned to her.

"Why what? I don't understand your question, Laura. Is something wrong?"

Laura's shoulders heaved as she turned to face her. "Why does it have to be you?"

"Please, Laura. I'm confused here. Perhaps we might take a seat."

"Hold it," Laura cut in her words with a hiss.

Lara's frown deepened, smacking her lips together. "Wow!" She whispered through her breath.

"Joe and I broke up," she told her.

"What? Why?" Lara asked, surprised.

"Well, you're the reason we did."

Lara tsked, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "Please. Why will I be the reason?"

"With you around, I've always been the second best to Joe." Laura hissed through her teeth, glaring at her.

Lara couldn't help but roll her eyes this time.

Oh! Please. Not another Andrea.

"So, why are you here now?"

Laura scoffed at her question. "Why am I here?"

Lara nodded in confirmation.

"I'm here to give you a warning, Lara. Stay away from Joe."

"Like hell, it's been a while since Joe and I have talked. I can't believe you're trying to push the blame for the fallout you two had in your relationship on me."

Damn! Lara. I thought you were cooler than this. This is utter bullshit. I have enough to deal with without adding your tantrums to it.

Get the hell out of my house, please, if you have nothing tangible to say," Lara told her, hissing through her breath at the absurdity of her accusation.

Laura closed the distance between them, taking one step after the other.

She moved so close that only a few inches separated their faces, glaring at her.

"You." She sneered in her face. "You were nothing; we helped you become what you are now. How dare you order me out of your apartment?"

Lara scoffed, rolling her tongue in her mouth. "Of course, Lara. You're from a distinguished family, while I am not, but don't you dare talk about being involved in my getting to where I am now?"

I worked my butt off to survive through the years, and the job I own currently, I didn't get it through your influence. So what bullshit are you spouting about you making me into who I am now?"

Laura scoffed, a corner of her mouth raising in a smirk. "Tell me. Tell me, who helped you out countless times when you were in financial crisis the most through out school? And talk about the other tips I gave you."

I supported you the most, Lara, and the best you can do to repay my goodwill is to seduce my boyfriend to fall out of love for me."

"Did he tell you he broke up with you because of me?" Lara barked at her in annoyance.

"He doesn't have to; I'm not dumb!" Lara barked back in response.

Silence enveloped the air around them following their outbursts.

"I've been trying to endure it for so long, but I'm done tolerating bullshit!" Lara spat.

"Every conversation we have, he mentions you. At times, he even confuses my name for yours!"

What the hell, Lara? If you were in my shoes, how would you react? How will you feel?"

"I understand your pain, Lara, but it's still not my fault. You and Joe can talk things out."

A gasp tore out of her throat as Laura slapped her hard across the face.

Lara choked on a cough, her hand pressed tightly against the burning side of her face. She gritted her teeth hard as she stared at Laura, all her pent-up frustrations and anger surging to the surface in an overwhelming wave.

Her body pulsed with the urge to take revenge.

"Shut up!" Laura cried. "I hate you so..."

Lara slapped the rest of the words out of her mouth. The two lunged at each other in a frenzy, trading barks and insults at each other as they fought.

"What the hell is going on here?" Kyle thundered at the top of her voice as she entered to see the two engaged in a brawl. "Laura! Lara!"

She dropped her bag on the nearest chair and stepped in to stop the fight.

"Stop this nonsense. Will you, ladies?" She demanded at the top of her voice, holding Laura away from prying at Lara's hair.

Laura protested against her hold, trying to reach Lara while Lara watched her, rolling her eyes and huffing a sigh.

She had sustained a few bruises on her face from the fight, as had Laura.

"Come off it, Laura!" Kyle snapped. "This is so unlike you. I thought you stopped this behavior of yours."

At that, Laura calmed down and snagged herself out of Kyle's firm grip.

She glared at Lara for the last time while she adjusted her wrinkled clothes, picked up her bag, and barged out of the apartment.

Both Kyle and Lara stared after her until she was gone.

Lara raked her fingers through her hair as Laura left, loudly slamming the door behind her.

"What happened with the two of you? What caused the rift?" Kyle asked as she turned to face Lara. "Your hormones are triggering a fighter within you, perhaps?"

Lara rolled her eyes, feeling her head sway on her neck as she did that.

She raised her hand to her forehead to nurse the bump Laura had given her while she jabbed her during their fight.

"She just came in here spouting nonsense," Lara was saying, then winced as a wave of dizziness swept through her vision. "I need an ice pack," she said, turning in the direction of the kitchen to get one.

Or else this will scar...

The rest of her words got drowned at the back of her throat as suddenly, the world turned pitch black around her, and she felt as if she were floating.

She mentally registered Kyle's screams in alarm as she lost control of her body and sagged down.

Kyle was trembling in fear as she rushed to hold her before she could hit the floor.

"Lara!" She cried in panic as she held her.

Fear gripped her heart as she gently laid down and rushed to get her phone. Her hands shook, numb with a chill, as she called an ambulance quickly for help.

She noticed Lara was bleeding too while she called the ambulance, pacing at a point of distress and silently hoping the ambulance would arrive sooner before she developed more complications.

Why on earth was Lara having a fight with Laura while being aware of her condition?

Kyle huffed exasperatedly through her breath, having no idea what she could do to help before the ambulance's arrival.

Her heart thumped rapidly in her chest, the sound of its beat reverberating in her ears.

She placed a quick call to Meredith and Joe.

"I'm at Lara's, Joe, Meredith." Her voice shook as she spoke, sniffing back her tears.

"What's wrong, Kyle?" Meredith asked, her voice etched with urgency at Kyle's tone.

Kyle sobbed, hiccuping as she tried to speak, glancing occasionally at Lara's unconscious form. "God! I'm scared. Lara."

"Calm down, Meredith. What's up with Lara?" Joe asked.

"She's hurt. She fainted out of the blue and is bleeding heavily."

"What?" Joe spat. "I will be on my way over," he said in a rush.

"Me too," Meredith said over the call.

"I have no idea how to stop it." Kyle cried.

"Have you called the ambulance?" Joe asked.

"I've called the ambulance; they will be here any minute from now."

"Good. Keep watch on her till it arrives," Joe told her.

The ambulance arrived a few minutes later, and Kyle quickly grabbed Lara's phone and hers, getting into the van with them after Lara was wheeled on a stretcher into it.

TWENTY FIVE

"I'm so sorry to have to share this news with you. Your friend has experienced a placental abruption, which is a serious condition in which the placenta separates from the wall of the uterus. This can cause heavy bleeding and other complications.

The good news is that we caught the condition early, and she is receiving the best possible care. She will need to stay in the hospital for a few weeks, but we expect her to make a full recovery.

In the meantime, we will be closely monitoring her condition and providing her with the support she needs. We will also be keeping you updated on her progress.

I know this is a difficult time for you, but I want to assure you that she is in good hands. We will do everything we can to help her through this," the doctor informed the three when he came out of the ward Lara had been administered in.

"Okay, doctor. Thanks," Meredith replied to the doctor, after which he excused himself to attend to the other patients.

Joe looked at Meredith and Kyle, a confused frown etched on his face. "Placental abruption? I'm not quite following. That bastard knocked her up already."

Kyle rolled a side glance at him.

"Meredith!" Joe snapped impatiently.

"What!" Meredith returned, hissing through her teeth.

"Yes," Kyle answered, huffing an exasperated sigh. "She is pregnant." She looked at Joe.

Joe's mouth parted wordlessly in disbelief. "I knew that guy was bad news for Lara, but you two insisted," he seethed through his teeth at the two.

Kyle scoffed at the accusation etched in his voice. "Well, perhaps you should have

cautioned your girlfriend from putting her in that condition!"

At that, Joe calmed down, thick tension wafting through the air between the three.

"Laura did this?" Joe breathed disbelievingly.

"We warned you, Joe." Meredith told him. "Laura had anger issues. Severe anger issues. You pushed her to her limit undoubtedly after years of her keeping her temper under control."

Joe raked his fingers through his hair. "I didn't expect her to have taken out her annoyance on Lara. She called off our relationship herself."

Meredith nodded briefly. "Now, it makes sense. She never liked Lara to begin with, and you gave her more reason not to."

"What the hell did I do?" Joe argued defensively. "I didn't break up with her. She broke up with me."

Kyle answered, "I've always known a day like this would occur. You're always complimenting Lara. She doesn't like it."

Joe scoffed. "Please. Am I not allowed to compliment a friend? Lara needs encouragement. The girl has it tougher than any of us," he said heatedly.

"Well, your encouragement led her to this," Meredith returned, nailing a glare at him.

"Damn, ladies! We're all friends for crying out loud!"

"It's an exception when there's a jealous girlfriend among us," Meredith quipped.

Joe swiped his palm down his face. "So, what now? Are you trying to blame me for what occurred, Meredith?"

Kyle stepped into the conversation quickly, knowing what Meredith's response would be. "Nobody is blaming you, Joe. We're sorry for lashing out at you." She glanced at Meredith to offer an apology as well.

Meredith rolled her eyes and mumbled the apology under her breath.

"We just felt if you had taken heed to our warnings, then all these may not have occurred. Meredith and I knew Laura years before Lara and you came into the picture.

She's gotten a hang of her personality over the years, but she's very serious about you, Joe."

"Not just about him," Meredith chipped in. "She's very possessive and jealous when it comes to anything she owns, so you, as her boyfriend, should learn not to ever cross the boundary."

Joe rubbed the side of his neck, nodding flatly and huffing an exasperated sigh.

"Is it over between you two, or do you still plan on getting back together?" Meredith asked.

"I don't know." Joe shook his head.

"Well, you better make up your mind. You can't end things on a sour note with her. She's still a friend."

"What do we know about Lara?" Joe asked, purposely prevaricating his response to Meredith's statement.

Kyle twitched her lips. "We wait, I guess, for her to recover."

Silence settled between them briefly.

"Does he know?"

"What?" Kyle muttered.

"Shane." Joe's jaw twitched in smoldered annoyance as he uttered his name. "Does he know about Lara? Her condition?"

"The two seem to have some sort of misunderstanding," Kyle told him.

"He's not willing to take responsibility, isn't that it?"

"No." Kyle shook her head. "Lara didn't brief us much on the details, but I think she found out about her condition after that occurred, and she's unwilling to reach out to him."

"The hell. Call him," Joe said.

"I think we should respect Lara's decision. If she doesn't feel up to telling him about it now, it's her choice. She will tell him eventually," Meredith said.

Ringtones from a phone pierced through their conversation, and Kyle checked through her bag to pick out the phone being called. "Talk of the devil," she said as she raised Lara's phone out of the bag, flashing the phone forward so that the other two could see the name of the caller.

She picked up the call and raised it to her ear.

"Hello, you are speaking with Kyle," she said.

"Kyle. Again. You're answering her call. May I speak with Lara, please?"

"Lara isn't in a condition to speak with you at the moment."

"I need to have a word with her. Where is she?"

Kyle considered telling Shane about their location; she doubted Lara would be pleased about it, but she eventually decided to.

"We're in the neighborhood hospital. Lara collapsed."

"What?" Shane spat over the phone. "Text me the address quickly. I'm on my way over."

Kyle disconnected the call and forwarded the address to Shane, shrugging briefly as she looked at Meredith.

Joe nodded in approval at her. "You did the right thing, Kyle. Keeping him in the dark about the situation is not the best option for Lara. Unless he's going to shirk from taking responsibility for it when he becomes aware." An ominous tone accompanied Joe's last words.

Meredith cut in quickly to Shane's defense. "He's serious about Lara. There's no doubt about that."

Joe gave a light shrug. "Let's hope he does."

Shane arrived half an hour later.

"How's she now?" His breath sounded ragged as he inquired, glancing over at the three as he arrived.

"She's not awake yet. She had heavy bleeding before she was rushed down here," Kyle answered.

Shane looked pale at that. "What happened to her?" He cut in on her words.

"The doctor said she would be fine. She had a placental abruption, but her condition was caught early, so she will recuperate in a matter of time."

Joe and Meredith watched Shane intently to gauge his reaction while he registered Kyle's words.

"I don't get it. A placental abruption?" He furrowed his brows in confusion.

"Lara is pregnant," Meredith told him.

Shane paused for a breath at that.

Joe narrowed his gaze at Shane, his mouth pursed in readiness to pounce on Shane at any sign of rejection from him.

"Are the two safe?" Shane asked, worry strongly lacing his tone and etched on his face.

Joe relaxed at the question he asked, relaxing his shoulders and the fist he had balled by his sides, while Kyle nodded in response to his question.

Shane huffed a breath in relief. "Thank God."

"What happened between you and Lara, by the way? Lara doesn't get easily enraged. You hurt her?" Meredith accused rather than asked.

Shane lowered his gaze. "I know I hurt her a lot. That's why I'm trying to gain her forgiveness more than ever."

"Lara became a shadow of herself, following whatever occurred between you two. What the hell did you do to her?" Meredith snapped at him.

Kyle sidled closer to Meredith's side, dragged her by the arm to a farther corner, and whispered in her ear. "You know he's not really the cause of what Lara is hurting over."

"But he's part of it," Meredith hissed in return through her teeth. "Shouldn't we tell him about it? He might be able to help Lara."

"Learn from your own words, Meredith. We should respect Lara's decision."

"It took him days to resolve the issue Lara battled with for years."

"What are you two whispering about?" Joe asked, leaning closer to the two.

The ladies jumped and separated abruptly upon Joe's interruption.

Meredith nailed a glare at Joe. "He's another part," she told Kyle, pointing up at Joe's face.

"Another part of what?" Joe frowned in confusion.

"Forget it, Joe. Don't mind Meredith, please." Kyle gestured to him.

Joe ignored the two and turned to face Shane. "Do you mind if I have a word with you?" He requested. "In private," he added.

Meredith and Kyle exchanged suspicious glances at Joe's request.

Meredith was about to call him off when Shane agreed to his request, giving off a light shrug.

Shane nodded once in acknowledgement. "After you." He gestured.

The two men excused themselves from the company of the ladies.

"You're the boy friend," Shane said as they reached a hallway less occupied and a few distances away from where the ladies were.

Joe stopped walking and turned to face Shane, arching an eyebrow. "What?"

Shane huffed a breath. "Lara mentioned you. I put two and two together, but..." He sucked in the air through his teeth, covering the distance to Joe and standing closely by his side in such a manner that their shoulders briefly brushed. "Is that all Lara is to you?" He asked, staring ahead.

Joe glanced at the side of Shane's face, his nose flaring with annoyance. "What the hell are you trying to insinuate?"

Shane glanced at him as well and stepped back from his side to face him squarely. "Prove me wrong. Is all Lara is to you, a friend, and nothing else?"

Joe held his gaze firmly as he answered, "That's by far the most ridiculous question I've ever been asked, but yes. Lara is my friend, and nothing more."

Shane blinked subtly, pursing his lips into a firm line.

"Now you, what exactly are your intentions toward her? You've knocked her up, so you should take responsibility for her."

"Of course I will. Lara is my woman."

Joe resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the obvious jealousy seeping through Shane's words.

"I'm not your rival, Shane."

A corner of Shane's mouth lifted in a smirk as he said to Joe, "You could never be."

"Kyle, Meredith, and I are all Lara has close to a family, disregarding her father."

Shane's nose and jaw twitched in annoyance at the mention of Lara's father.

"So, I'm deeply worried about her. She's had to go through so much already. A heartbreak from you is the last phase I want her to go through."

And judging by your reputation, that goes without saying.

Those words were left unspoken but were thoroughly conveyed to Shane through Joe's eyes.

"You don't have to worry about that. I've decided to spend a lifetime with Lara from the moment I saw her," Shane told him.

"Good," Joe muttered after a brief scrutiny of Shane's face.

"If that's all, I will be taking my leave now." Shane turned to leave.

"You were right to suspect me," Joe said after Shane had taken a few steps away from him, halting him in his stride. "I harbored romantic feelings for Lara."

"So?" Shane asked over his shoulders. "That changes nothing. She's mine."

Joe smiled briefly and walked over to meet Shane. "I have a good feeling about you now. Your personality is quite different from what you've been rumored to be."

"Not all books can be judged by their covers."

Joe nodded in agreement. "Be good to her."

"I will," Shane assured him, a silent message passing between the two as they held each other's gazes firmly.

Lara regained consciousness a couple of days later.

"God! Lara, I had the biggest scare of my life," Kyle cried as she held on to her, sobbing happily over her shoulders.

"Thanks, Kyle. I'm so proud to have you all as my friends," Lara returned over Kyle's shoulders, moaning weakly.

"Give her some space, Kyle. Stop being too clingy. She's just recuperating," Joe chastised softly.

Kyle pulled back from the embrace, allowing Lara to sag against the bedrest.

"Where's Laura?" Lara asked Joe, observing the presence of just the three in the room.

Meredith hissed through her breath. "You're kidding me, right? She got you into this."

"Technically. But it's not entirely Laura's fault. I'm sure she must be beating herself up wherever she is if she's aware of my situation after her fallout with me."

"Please." Meredith rolled her eyes. "She should have at least shown some remorse for her actions. Either calling to check up on you or paying a visit to express her regrets for being the cause of this, though unintentionally."

"Let it lie, alright, Meredith," Joe said softly.

"Yes, Meredith," Kyle and Lara agreed.

The door to Lara's ward was opened, and Shane stepped in.

Annoyance flashed in Lara's gaze at the sight of him.

"Who called him here?" Lara demanded from her friends, her gaze fixed on the undoubtedly mastermind, Kyle.

"He called. I had no choice but to tell him," Kyle said quickly. "I will go and have a word with the doctor to know more about how you are faring."

Kyle gestured awkwardly to the doctor, retreating step after step towards the door, away from Lara's glare.

"We should come with you as well," Meredith piped, pulling Joe along with her out of the room.

Lara huffed a breath when all her friends were out of the room. "What are you doing here?"

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose briefly with his finger, covering the distance to where Lara is lying on the bed. "Seriously, Lara. Are you still going to shut me out?"

Lara pursed her lips into a thin line and looked away, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Lara, please."

"Can you just... leave?" She turned to face him.

"I can't just leave, Lara. You're having my baby, and I want to be with you through every single moment from its fetal growth to its birth and advancement in age."

Shane took one of the seats by the edge of the bed and tried to hold her hand, but she moved her hand to the other side.

"Lara, please. I know you are hurt. I should be blamed for being so negligent that we were caught on cameras, but..."

"Why?" Lara cut off his words.

Shane looked confused as he watched her.

"Why do you have to be blamed for what happened? It's neither of our faults."

"Right."

"But I can't get back with you nonetheless, Shane."

Shane's eyes flashed. A frown creased his forehead as he questioned, "Why?"

Lara sighed. "There are several reasons beyond this, Shane. I've thought long and hard about it. I realized you've done more than enough for me, whereas I haven't been able to do a thing.

You and I are like two parallel lines. We ought never to have met. So, I will prefer things remain this way between us."

"What the hell are you saying, Lara?"

"I can't be with you, Shane. I will work twice as hard to repay my debts to you, but..."She shook her head. "I can't go on with the relationship between you and me. I'm sorry."

"Lara!"

"I will like to have some rest. I feel a bit drained."

"Come on, Lara."

She pulled the covers over herself and slept, turning her back on him.

Shane blew an exasperated breath through his lips and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

A tear slipped down Lara's cheek on the pillow after Shane left. Her body shook as she cried, muffling her sobs with her hand.

TWENTY SIX

"Hey, Mom," Shane breathed exasperatedly into the phone as he got down from his car and headed in.

"Shane, dear. You don't sound too well. Is everything alright with you?" Miranda asked over the phone, her voice laced with concern.

He nodded flatly. "Sure."

"You aren't. Something's going on. Is this between you and Lara? How about you two come over the weekend so we can help sort things out between you two?"

"No. It's not necessary, Mom. Lara and I will be fine. I mean, we are fine."

Silence settled over the phone.

Shane knew there were questions waiting to be asked on the tip of his mother's tongue.

He exhaled softly in gratitude when she didn't push it or let it lie.

"I guess I shouldn't bank on Lara helping out with the preparations then. You had better reconcile quickly with her. You two mustn't miss Nicole's wedding.

I will send the invitation to both of you once it's ready."

"Sure, Mom."

"Alright, Son. Extend my greetings to Lara."

"Yes, Mom. Take care."

The call was ended on the other end of the receiver as Shane stepped into the foyer.

He loosened the tie around his neck, walking with long and powerful strides towards the sitting room, and plopped down on one of the sofas, his head thrown back over the headrest.

He stared up at the ceiling, his mind blank—only for a moment.

He had visited the hospital for two weeks straight, yet Lara wasn't willing to bend her resolve not to get involved with him.

He couldn't fathom what exactly was going on with her.

She had accepted that it wasn't his fault, just as it hadn't been hers that the situation with the leaked video had occurred.

Then what other grounds did she have against getting back with him?

Why did it feel as if he was the only one hurting inside from their separation?

He closed his eyes briefly and huffed a deep breath. "Damn!" He muttered under his breath and pushed himself up to his feet.

He had a premonition that there was something going on with Lara that he wasn't aware of, and he would get down to the root of the matter and win her back to himself no matter what.

There was no way he was letting go of her for another man. She was his, and she would remain his forever.

Determined, he headed towards his bedroom to take a shower, drained from all his engagements in the day.

"Morning, sir!" The new receptionist that had been employed upon Diana's retrenchment, Audrey, dipped a polite bow as she spotted him enter the lobby.

He nodded once in acknowledgement, heading towards the elevator.

He walked in and pushed down on the button to his floor. The doors were coming to a close, then pulled back open.

Shane's nose twitched in smoldered annoyance as his gaze locked with Liam's. He promptly masked his irritation at the sight of him and stared down at him instead.

Liam stiffened as he came face-to-face with Shane, hesitating at first to get on the elevator with him.

"Good morning, Sir." Liam dipped a bow quickly, tugging on his shoulder bag.

"Aren't you getting on?" Shane asked in a low, husky voice.

Liam nodded quickly with a stiff smile and got on the elevator with him, pushing the button to his floor.

The doors pulled to a close, and the elevators began to ascend.

Liam's throat bobbed with each passing minute, tension thickly wafting through the air around them.

He kept his gaze on the elevator car indicator, silently praying he would get to his floor quickly and get the hell out of Shane's sight.

It was undeniable that he despised him following the recent occurrences in the company.

Guilt tripped him once more as he recalled the latest events. He hadn't heard from Lara since then.

He could only hope she was fine. He knew better than to ask about her from her so-called lover, the CEO.

Finally, the elevator gave a low bleep, signaling his cue to leave.

He gave one hurried bow to Shane before dashing out of the elevator to his office.

He huffed an exhale in relief, as finally he had gotten away from Shane's presence.

He felt choked for air throughout the elevator ride, and it was only when he had escaped being trapped on the elevator with him that he could regain his breath.

He dared to look backwards at the ascending elevator before continuing to his office, his heart thumping hard within his chest.

★ ★ ★

"Morning, sir," Wesley greeted as he walked into Shane's office upon his request to meet with him.

Shane had been fuming in rage after his encounter with Liam in the morning.

He just didn't like having the man around. He would have gladly terminated his employment alongside the others, but he felt Lara wouldn't have appreciated that.

He hadn't been among the guilty ones in the leaked video issue, but how much he wished he had, then he could have found a way to get rid of him.

"Morning, Wesley. How are you doing?"

"Great, Shane. Yourself?"

Shane nodded. "I'm doing alright. Tell me about Liam. I would like him to be added to the list of our employees to be transferred to our branch in Chicago."

Wesley arched an eyebrow at that, suspicion etched in his gaze.

"Is he up to the task? No worries. If he isn't, he will learn from scratch. It will be a beneficial opportunity for him after all."

"Am I permitted to ask why he's been transferred out of the blue?"

"No," Shane answered flatly. "Discuss this with him and begin to make preparations for his transfer."

Wesley pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded once. "Alright, Sir. I will get right to work on it."

"How far is the recruitment process?"

"We're screening down the list of interviewees for the secretarial positions. Or will you partake in the selection of the secretary and personal assistant for you?"

Shane waved his hand dismissively. "That won't be necessary. I trust your decision, Wesley. However, you can leave out recruiting a personal assistant for now."

"Lara will still be resuming her position?"

Shane shook his head. "It's not that. I won't be needing one for now."

Wesley nodded in acknowledgement. "Alright. Noted, Sir."

He excused himself and walked out of the office.

With everything settled, Shane leaned back into his seat and focused on his work.

Lara would be getting discharged today, and he made a mental note to be there early.

He had teamed up with her friends to give him a call once her discharge was approved by the doctor so he could come to pick her up.

By noon, he had wrapped up his work for the day and called his driver over to take him to the hospital.

"What do you think I should get for her to celebrate her discharge? Flowers, chocolates, or jewelry?"

"Which do you think she will appreciate best?"

Shane brushed the crook of his finger thoughtfully beneath his chin as he pondered that. Lara wasn't vain, or he would have bought her a luxurious gift.

He settled on getting as many gifts as he could think of for her. Hopefully, one of them would resonate with her and let her understand how much he truly felt about her.

As he sat in the backseat of his chauffeured car, he took in the city's skyline as it whizzed past him.

Their first destination was a flower shop nestled in the heart of Miami.

As Shane stepped into the shop, a wave of fragrant beauty enveloped him. The air was infused with the sweet aroma of blooming blossoms, creating a sensory delight. The shop's large windows allowed sunlight to pour in, casting a warm glow on the vibrant array of flowers that adorned every corner.

He approached the polished wooden counter, where a blonde florist greeted him with a warm smile. Her name tag read "Sage".

"Good afternoon! How can I assist you today?"

"Hi, I'm looking to create a special bouquet for my girlfriend. She's getting discharged from the hospital, and I want to surprise her with something beautiful."

Sage clapped in delight. "That's wonderful! Congratulations to her! We have a wide selection of fresh flowers. Are there any particular blooms or colors that she loves?"

"I'm not sure. Roses and tulips, perhaps," he said, his gaze narrowing subtly in doubt of the choice he had made. "Maybe lavender."

Sage beamed widely in approval, her pearly white teeth flashing between her painted cherry pink lips. "Perfect! We have some exquisite lavender roses and delicate tulips right here. Let's create something truly enchanting for her. Would you like a hand-tied bouquet or a vase arrangement?"

"I think a bouquet would be lovely."

As Sage skillfully selected the most stunning lavender roses and tulips, she arranged them with complementary foliage. The colors danced together, creating a harmonious blend of elegance and charm within the arrangement.

"This bouquet is truly a sight to behold. The soft hues of lavender, the velvety petals, and the gentle fragrance will surely delight your girlfriend."

Shane nodded in agreement as he looked at the bouquet. "It's absolutely stunning! Thank you so much."

"You're very welcome. I hope it brings joy to her heart. Is there anything else I can assist you with?"

"There is nothing else I can think of. This is perfect. Thanks a lot."

"The pleasure is mine, sir."

After he had made the payment for the bouquet, he walked out of the shop to where his car was parked and got in.

The car pulled up to a glamorous shopping district known as the Miami Design District. The area was renowned for its architectural brilliance and high-end boutiques. Shane stepped out of the car, glancing up at the gleaming storefronts, each exuding an air of sophistication and grandeur.

His eyes settled on a jewelry store called "Aurora Jewels," which was popularly known for its exquisite craftsmanship and exclusive designs. The store's exterior was adorned with sparkling crystal chandeliers, and the large display windows showcased a dazzling array of jewelry pieces, drawing passersby into its luxurious embrace.

Shane pushed open the heavy glass door and was instantly greeted by a warm and welcoming atmosphere. The store's interior was adorned with plush velvet drapes, delicate orchids, and soft lighting that accentuated the brilliance of the jewels. An impeccably dressed sales associate named Gretchen approached him with a graceful smile.

"Good afternoon, sir. How may I assist you today?" Gretchen inquired, her voice as elegant as her appearance.

Shane returned the smile and explained, "I'm looking for a special piece of jewelry for my girlfriend. I want to surprise her with something extraordinary."

Gretchen nodded understandingly, a twinkle lighting up in her eyes. "We have a stunning

collection of personalized jewelry that I'm sure will make her feel cherished. Allow me to show you a few options." She gestured.

She led Shane to a glass display case filled with delicate necklaces and pendants. The first piece she presented was a shimmering diamond pendant in the shape of a heart. The diamonds sparkled brilliantly under the store's soft lighting, casting a mesmerizing glow.

Shane's eyes widened with admiration. "It's beautiful, but I want something truly unique. Something that reflects her individuality."

Gretchen nodded and guided him to another section of the store, where an assortment of handcrafted rings awaited. She carefully unveiled a ring adorned with a rare pink diamond center stone, surrounded by intricately designed white diamonds.

Shane's gaze lingered on the ring, a tingling sensation coursing through him and down his spine.

He loved it immediately, images of how beautiful it would look on her fingers flashing through his mind. "This is exquisite. The pink diamond is breathtaking. It's perfect."

Gretchen smiled, recognizing the spark of desire in Shane's eyes. "I'm delighted that you found a piece that resonates with you."

He glanced down at the time as he settled down in the backseat of his car later, after making the purchases.

He only had an hour to meet up with Lara's discharge time. He could only hope time wouldn't be against him as he was driven back towards the hospital.

"Oh! It's Shane," Kyle announced cheerfully as he stepped into the ward.

They had already packed her things and were about to leave when he walked in.

Lara's smile faded at the sight of him, her gaze shifting with an accusing glare at Kyle.

"I didn't tell him," Kyle said immediately.

Joe snickered at how defensively she had said that, tipping a nod towards Shane. "Good evening. Welcome."

The ladies took turns greeting him, stifling a delighted smile as they looked from him to Lara.

Shane nodded in approval. "Evening," he returned. "Congratulations on your discharge,

Lara."

Lara rolled her eyes. "Get me out of here, Kyle." She reached to pick up one of her bags.

Meredith snagged it immediately out of her reach. "No way. You're just recuperating. There's no way I'm letting you go through any stress."

"We will ensure your belongings are safely tucked in your apartment, so you don't bother," Kyle told her.

Lara furrowed her gaze. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're coming with me," Shane told her.

Lara's heart jumped at his words, and she swirled to face him. "Says who?"

"You're coming with me, Lara. And that's it."

Kyle and Meredith leaned their foreheads against each other and giggled silently.

"We should leave," Meredith said, hoisting one of Lara's bags over her hand and waving a quick goodbye to Lara and Shane.

Joe and Kyle carried the other bags and exited the room, leaving the two behind.

Kyle flashed a wink at Lara before she closed the door after her.

Lara bit her lower lips, huffing an exasperated breath as she watched the closed door.

"We should leave as well."

She stared blankly at him for a brief moment and approached him.

She reached to open the door, but he stopped her, placing his hand over hers on the door knob.

She hissed through her teeth and glared at her. "Hands off." She bit out in annoyance.

"Not until you tell me you're coming with me."

She lowered her hand to her side. "And why should I? We broke up. I ended things with you."

"I never consented to it," he told her. "Until you tell me the reason why you have to break up with me, and unless it's a tangible reason, I'm not letting go of you, Lara."

"I don't want you anymore." She swallowed, holding his gaze firmly. "I regret ever

crossing the line with you. You're my boss until I pay back everything."

A gasp tore out of her throat as Shane snaked his hand suddenly around her lower back and pushed her against himself, slamming his mouth roughly over hers.

Her thoughts were sent into a flurry as Shane kissed her with a ravenous passion, building up heat in every part of her body.

He relaxed his hold on her, his hands streaming down the frame of her body to cup her waist.

He kissed the corner of her mouth. "Now, tell me you don't want me anymore," he whispered over the corner of her lips, pulling back to stare into her gaze.

Lara lowered her gaze and muttered through her breath, "I can't be with you, Shane."

"You've got to give a solid explanation for me to accept that. Right now, you're coming with me. Either willingly or I carry you out of here."

"I want to go to my apartment. You can't just take over my life and boss me around as you wish," she barked at him.

The two glared at each other until Lara was forced to give in.

Her shoulders sagged in defeat as she realized she was holding out on an unconquerable battle with him. "Fine!"

He pulled her to himself and opened the door, stepping out of the room with her closely held to his side.

Lara tried to inch away from him, but he wouldn't let go.

"Stop this. You will be attracting unnecessary attention from us. I can walk."

He looked at her face as he spoke. "This is nowhere near attracting attention to ourselves. I could carry you down the lobby."

"I agreed to come with you. What now?" She said it impatiently.

Shane smiled briefly. "You're still annoyed with me, Lara. I'm not taking chances with you. You're coming with me, where you can be properly cared for as well as my baby."

Lara's breath hitched at how affectionately he said those words.

"I won't keep you away from your baby, Shane."

"It's ours," Shane corrected, holding her gaze. "We made it together, and together, we will

care for it with as much love he or she deserves, alright?"

Tears clouded Lara's eyes at his words, and she pressed her lips tightly to suppress them.

"Come here, love." Shane guided her head against his chest and wrapped his arms around her, planting a tender kiss on her forehead.

Lara sobbed against his chest, allowing herself to be cuddled just this once by him.

TWENTY SEVEN

"Here." He presented the bouquet to her after they got in, with the car immediately gliding through the gates onto the road.

Lara looked at the flowers, then raised her gaze to meet his, not making a move to take the bouquet from him.

"Congratulations on your recovery and your discharge, Lara. Have it." He tilted the bouquet toward her.

"I appreciate the gesture, but..." She turned her face quickly to the side, fished a tissue out of her purse in a flash, and sneezed.

Alarmed, Shane withdrew the bouquet from her proximity. "You're allergic to the flowers?"

Lara shook her head at him in response, another sneeze escaping her.

"Bless you," Shane murmured quickly, expectantly watching the side of her face. "Are you okay?"

Lara raised a thumb up in response, nodding with her nose held within the tissue.

"Are you sure you are okay? Do you need to go back to the hospital? Was it the flowers?"

Lara shook her head, raising her head and turning to face him. "I'm good. It was just a sneeze. It's not the flowers."

"Thank God." Shane breathed in relief. "You were about to say something earlier. What but?"

"You don't have to buy me flowers. I love them, though. They are beautiful." She pasted a ghost of a smile on her lips, nodding subtly in gratitude.

"That's not too nice, Lara. You're opposed to my getting a bouquet for your recovery. What would be your reaction if it was much more?"

"It's not... I shouldn't be receiving gifts from you," she said drily.

"Where are all these guilts coming from, Lara? Something's going on with you, and you're not letting me in on it. What happened to being an open book with each other?"

Lara's lips parted wordlessly, an exasperated sigh escaping her. Her eyelids drifted briefly to a close, and she swallowed. "It's my business, Shane. It has nothing to do with us."

"But it is affecting us," Shane countered. "You're becoming distant, Lara. At first, I thought it was the video, and I've apologized for that. You assured me it wasn't that. What else could be creating a chasm between us?"

"Can we not talk about this, please? I'm not energized enough to engage in this conversation."

Shane leaned back against his seat, looking out the window on his side.

"My house is nearer. I should head to my apartment. I need to take some rest."

"We're heading to mine. You will be properly attended to there." He inched closer and guided her tenderly to lean against him, wrapping an arm around her waist. "There, you can have your rest till we get home."

"It's not as comfortable as laying on a bed," Lara murmured under her breath, searching through her mind for a better excuse she could give to escape going with him.

It wouldn't take him long to figure everything out if she did.

She would be deeply embarrassed if he had to step in for her this time as well.

The first time, she had been desperate. This time, she would end things on her own terms. George and Rufus wouldn't ever be able to disturb her life with debts she had nothing to do with again.

She rehashed her plans, mentally chastising herself for not taking action earlier on them.

Then, she had planned on taking precautionary measures against situations like this occurring, but it had slipped her mind.

"Of all things to slip your mind, Lara," she muttered incoherently under her breath.

"You said?"

She shook her head, quickly uttering, "Not you."

Shane nodded flatly, his nose and jaw twitching as he looked away from her.

Her mind wandered off into an abyss of thoughts as she laid her head on his shoulders.

She felt warm inside with his proximity, and how he wrapped his arm around her made her feel safe and protected.

She wanted to divulge all her secrets and her worries to him at that moment and revel more in the comfort he had to offer.

She couldn't be more indebted to him. She reminded herself of that.

She bit on her lower lips, playing scenarios upon scenarios in her head on how to execute her plans in due time. She could have gotten right to working on it from the time he visited her, but had it not been for her hospitalization...

Her body tensed.

How many weeks had it been?

"What is it, Lara?" Shane asked.

She moved away from him, shaking her head in response. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

She didn't expect him to be convinced by that flimsy lie, and he wasn't. "Lara."

"I mean it, Shane. Being bedridden for weeks might be setting off several reactions in my body." She twitched her lips, pressing them tightly together.

Shane watched her quietly for some time and leaned back into his seat.

Lara checked through her phone immediately, going through her call logs.

There were no missed calls or received calls from him. Nothing from him

That was unlike him.

It has been over two weeks now.

Time was seriously against her, and she doubted her plan would be as easy as she had planned it out to be.

George was a formidable opponent to contend with, with connections to several chains of shady businesses.

Could she pull this off?

She got so lost in the sea of her worries that she missed hearing Shane announce their arrival at his house.

He tapped her lightly. "Are you asleep?"

She fluttered her eyelids open, noticing she was back in his arms.

She sat straight, stifling a yawn at the back of her throat.

"Welcome home," Shane repeated. "You must be really exhausted. You were snoring so loudly." He was saying, then chuckled softly at how Lara's eyes widened immediately. "You truly need rest."

Lara's cheeks reddened in embarrassment, and she bit down hard on her lips, lowering her gaze to hide the flush on her face.

"I was kidding," Shane told her as he got out of the car.

He held his hand out to her to help her out as well.

"Really?" Lara asked, immediately biting on the tip of her tongue.

The bouquet. Lara remembered and took them out of the car from where Shane had flung it earlier before she allowed him to help her out of the car.

"Thank you," she told him.

He nodded. "You're welcome."

They walked into the house, the double doors parting upon their approach.

It had been a while. Lara swept her gaze over the house, unable to help but appreciate its magnificence again.

The grand piano was still sitting powerfully on the corner it was set in the living room.

She remembered the golden moments Shane and she shared.

They reveled in the rhythm of its melodies as their fingers danced on it.

So did their bodies.

She pushed that instantly to the back of her mind and sat on the sofa nearest to her, her hand instinctively touching her lower belly.

"What will you like to have for dinner?" He asked as she sat, loosening his tie.

A woman who looked to be in her mid-fifties approached them upon their arrival.

"Good evening, Shane." She smiled at him.

"Evening, Mrs. Myrtle," Shane returned. "Meet my girlfriend, Lara." He gestured to Lara.

The older woman smiled at Lara. "It's a pleasure to meet you, young miss."

Lara tipped a polite bow to her. "I'm pleased to meet you as well, Mrs. Myrtle."

"She is in charge of cleaning the house. The other three you've met earlier assist her with the other chores. They only come on the weekends since I'm rarely around, but since you will be staying here, I thought they should frequent the cleanings to cater for your health."

He leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "Ladies in your condition tend to have several cravings and sensitivity."

Lara rolled her eyes. She got on her feet. "I will love to get washed up. My bones feel numb from being in bed over that period."

"Sure. I will have dinner ordered," Shane told her, gesturing in the direction of the master bedroom for her to head to. "Check the wardrobe for changes of wear."

Lara nodded in acknowledgement of his words over her shoulders, feeling a strong urge to dip in a bath.

"I will set up a bath for you, miss," Mrs. Myrtle offered.

"Oh! No, please. I can get that done by myself. It's been a while since I've actively engaged in anything."

Mrs. Myrtle nodded and excused herself from the room.

With exhaustion slowly easing into her bones, she entered the room, getting to work quickly on setting up a hot bath to soak in.

She stepped out of her dress and slipped in, sighing in satisfaction as her body was fully immersed in the hot, slick water she had prepared.

She leaned her head against the bathtub and dunked under the water.

It felt like forever since she had a bath as nice and soothing as that, so she took her time to revel in the moment.

She stifled a yawn with the back of her palm when she was done, her body feeling refreshed and supple.

She wrapped a towel around herself and headed to the bedroom to get dressed.

Lara twitched her eyebrows subtly as she pulled open the wardrobe, not at all surprised to find that it was stocked full of several pieces of clothing for her, from casuals to tees and fashionable outfits for outings.

Just how long was Shane planning on keeping her with him? She mused.

She picked out a soft, lightweight, and breathable pajama set that included a loose-fitting, short-sleeved top with a relaxed neckline and a pair of matching shorts. The top was adorned with a delicate lace trim along the hemline. The shorts had an elastic waistband and were designed with a relaxed, above-the-knee length.

It looked chic and comfortable. She loved it.

She air-dried her hair when she was done and was about to wrap up when her phone's ringtone gave off.

She set down the hair dryer and got off the stool she was sitting on to get the call.

A frown creased her forehead, and her lips upturned as she saw the number.

Although she hadn't saved it, she could identify his number easily.

She picked up the call and raised the phone to her ear. "Yes?"

He scoffed. "You finally picked up my call. Don't try to play games with me, Lara."

Lara tsked. "What games, George?"

"Pay me my money. You can't escape from me, Lara. No matter how far you run or try to hide."

"I'm not scared of you, George," she seethed through her teeth. "Get your money from Rufus and leave me the hell alone!" She barked into the phone.

George snickered over the phone. "We shall see, Lara. You..."

Lara ended the conversation, hissing in annoyance.

She raked her fingers through her hair and sucked in the air deeply through her teeth.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Shane asked from where he stood in the doorway.

Startled, Lara turned to face him, her lips parting wordlessly. "I..." She swallowed. "How long have you been there?"

"I heard everything. Why didn't you tell me he was threatening you again?"

"I.." She squared her shoulders in frustration. "I couldn't. Alright? This is my issue to solve. I will find a way around it."

Shane moved closer, covering the distance between them. "It is Rufus again?"

"Shane, please. This is exactly what I've been trying to avoid."

Shane furrowed his brows. "You've been trying to avoid this. Keeping what is causing you distress away from my notice when knowing fully well I could help?"

"Yes. I can't get you involved in this again, Shane. What do you expect me to do? Tell you, my father has obtained another loan using me as collateral again."

Shane watched her silently, then swiped his palms down his face in exasperation, whistling through his breath. "So, what's your plan now?"

"I was naive at first to take up Rufus's loan as mine. I had no choice then. But this time, I've been bitten once; never again am I letting him have that leverage over me.

It's his debt, not mine, and hell, I'm going to be held accountable for it."

"What measures have you taken to actualize your plan?"

"I will get it all sorted out in some way. Just stay out of it, okay? I will deal with this on my terms."

Shane scoffed. "The hell I will, Lara. I'm pissed that you failed to let me in on this, but the hell, I'm letting that mongrel bother you."

"Shane!"

"Lara!" He raised a finger in warning to her, visibly enraged. "You keep away from dealing with George on your own and take care of your health, will you?"

"So what? Are you just going to pay up the debts again and prove to him that indeed, I have a billionaire boyfriend backing me up?"

Shane frowned, hissing in irritation. "No one messes with my woman. George's crossed the line this time."

TWENTY EIGHT

Lara wasn't comfortable with Shane going all alone on the issue between her and George.

She felt she ought to at least be actively involved in the matter as it was her family issue as well, but Shane would hear nothing of it.

She was already deeply embarrassed about her father's actions. To relinquish her responsibility on someone else's shoulders is a great distress for her.

Shane had made a few calls after they had dinner together the previous night and had gotten up early today.

So did Lara.

She hadn't been able to get a good night's rest following the heated conversation she had had with Shane about staying off the matter on the ground when she was primarily involved in it.

She laid down for a while as she felt Shane get off the bed and go through cleaning himself up and preparing himself for the day.

"Morning, Lara," Shane said as he walked out of the bathroom, a large white towel wrapped around his waist down to his ankle length.

Lara moaned softly as she stretched out her back, nodding over the pillow at Shane. "Morning, Shane," she rasped dryly.

She pushed herself down from the bed, a desperate urge to use the bathroom surging in her lower belly; her constant morning accompaniment since she had her condition. "Excuse me, please."

Shane nodded, getting dressed. "Get enough rest afterwards. I will have the cook whip

up breakfast for you, or if you would rather order takeout,

She shook her head quickly. "I prefer home-cooked meals. But what about you?"

"I won't be able to wait for breakfast."

Lara twitched her lips and nodded quickly. "Sure. I have to go." She rushed into the bathroom and relieved herself.

She washed her face afterwards and brushed her teeth.

By the time she was done, Shane was out of the bedroom.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee greeted her as she stepped into the living room, her body stirring awake at the delicious smell that wafted through the air.

"Mmn." She breathed in the air as she stepped into the kitchen, breathing in the air and taking in the delicious sight of him in a dark gray suit.

He turned to face her as he noticed her presence, immediately upon her entry into the kitchen space. "Tea?"

"Coffee, please."

He shook his head. "The less coffee you have, the better. It's bad for your condition."

"When it's taken excessively, I've not had any taste of coffee in three weeks now. I'm emotionally drained. Coffee, please."

Shane clicked his tongue at the back of her throat and nodded, pouring her a mug of freshly brewed coffee.

She took it from him and savored its fragrance before taking a sip from it. She sighed in satisfaction as its taste coated her tongue.

"The cook will be here by six. You can whet your appetite with some snacks in the refrigerator before her arrival."

"I don't eat that early after all, but noted." She raised the coffee mug to her mouth and took another sip.

She propped herself up on one of the stools by the island, setting the mug down on it.

"I've spoken with Derrari. He will introduce you to a colleague of his who is into family law to handle the case with you and your father," he informed her.

"I hate him so much," she croaked.

Shane nodded flatly. "You are doing what's best for you; I support you. You should eliminate the leverage he has over you."

"Right."

"Everything will be resolved quickly, Lara. I will make sure of it," he assured her.

"I know," she said with a light shrug. "I'm just... I feel bad about how things are. I'm always dealing with debt issues." She snickered wryly. "I'm yet to pay the existing one, yet he's incurred another."

Shane stepped close to her and held the tip of her chin between his fingers, tipping her gaze up to meet his. "You owe nothing, Lara, and you will not be held accountable for this again. Not on my watch."

Lara frowned. "What about my loan? I still have to pay you back."

"Your debt is as good as paid, Lara." He planted his hand tenderly on her belly, holding her lower back to himself. "You've repaid me in the greatest way ever.

I've found love, satisfaction, and a commitment with you."

"Shane," Lara said in a low voice, her voice laced with warmth.

Shane lowered his head and touched his mouth with hers. "I love you, Lara."

"I love you too," she murmured in return over their melding lips. "But the agreement was to pay you back..."

He silenced her with another kiss. He kissed her long and fiercely this time, possessively holding her in his embrace.

He pulled back from the kiss later, both panting for breath. He brushed her cheeks tenderly with the side of his thumb; their gazes locked.

"I will miss you."

"I will miss you more." She gave a light shrug. "It's going to feel so lonely here without you around."

"I will call often to check up on you, and I will be back soon."

"I can't wait to get back to work either. Once I've recuperated fully..." She paused as she saw the look on Shane's face, furrowing her brows as well. "What?"

"Do I need to remind you that you're pregnant? No getting involved in any stressful

activity until delivery."

Lara scoffed. "You're kidding me, right? It's eight months away before I deliver, and you expect me to stay idle and do nothing?"

"Go to the spa, babe. The gym, art shows, fashion exhibitions... There are several recreations you can indulge in."

Lara pushed out her lips and stepped out of his embrace. "I've always had to work. I can't go with the flow of being idle. For that much time?" She clicked her tongue at the back of her throat and shook her head.

"I will be there to keep your company once I'm back. I want you to relax and have as much fun as you can. You're going to tell me all about it, so you must."

Lara chuckled softly, closing her eyes, as Shane planted a quick kiss on her forehead.

"I should get going now."

"Don't eat breakfast late either," she told him as she walked him to the entrance.

"Of course. Take care of yourself too."

Lara stifled a smile as she nodded. "I will." She waved goodbye to him as he walked out of the living room and headed back to the bedroom to wash up as well.

★ ★ ★

"What have you gotten?" Shane asked as he entered the car, the car immediately gliding out of the driveway towards the gates.

After the conversation he had with Lara the previous day and after she had gone to bed, he placed a call to Damien.

He had asked him to dig up as much dirt as he could find on George and have the reports delivered to him by this morning. Then he decided to reach out to Derrari to assist him in filing a legal suit against Rufus. The purpose of the suit was to challenge Rufus's guardianship rights over Lara and seek their nullification.

"I will forward them to you now," Damien answered, and he did so promptly.

"Very well," Shane muttered through his breath as he read George's file.

The mongrel of a man possessed a notorious criminal record and had committed a plethora of crimes that warranted a lifetime of imprisonment.

His illicit activities spanned across running drug cartels and underground casinos, participating in drug and human trafficking networks, engaging in racketeering, extortion, and money laundering, among various other offenses.

He tsked. How despicable.

"Set up a meeting with him by afternoon sharp with a printout of the reports."

"Sure. I will get some men to accompany you as well. It's not safe to meet with him alone."

He nodded his consent over the phone. "Do so," he said, and he ended the call.

Later in the afternoon, Shane met with George.

The man looked as ugly as he had remembered him to be from the first time he met him at Adrian's bachelor party.

He had grown uglier over the months.

He sat in his office with as much conceit and arrogance as any other motherfucking bastard like him would have, watching him with a subtle laser gaze.

Shane mentally tsked at the image he posed in contrast to the actual image he might think he actually appeared to be.

He was far from looking formidable.

"Who do we have here? You may have a seat." He gestured to one of the sofas available in his office, sitting in a relaxed manner in his arm chair.

Shane did, with Damien taking a seat beside him. The bodyguards Damien had brought with them, although they hadn't been allowed into the office, were stationed just right out the door should George try to play smart.

Although the men inside and outside were very few, they were extremely skilled and beyond capable of subduing George's men as many as they were.

"I will hit the nail on the head. Stop threatening Lara."

"Well, she has to pay me my money. She's the collateral. I'm only being nice to give her a second chance to buy herself back when she's been technically sold to me," George returned smugly.

Shane smiled briefly, touching the Bluetooth earphone. "Did you get that? He's admitted to one of his crimes."

George narrowed his gaze, twisting his lips into a frown. "What the hell is that?"

"Every conversation we're having here is on record," Damien told him. "And don't try to play smart. If you do, your information will be forwarded to the cops without delay."

"What information?" He gritted through his teeth, a corner of his lips raised in a sneer.

Damien brought out a copy of the reports on him and dropped it on the table before him.

The frown on George's face increased as he went through his file. He glanced surreptitiously at the two, silently cursing them under his breath.

How had they managed to dig up that much information on him when he had been thorough over the years to keep his tracks covered and his identity incognito?

He swallowed the lump that formed at the back of his throat as he set the file down on the table. "So? You can't threaten me with the cops."

"I don't deal with local cops either," Shane answered. "I'm well aware you can easily buy your way around them."

George's nose twitched in annoyance, taking note of Shane's warning.

"You know from whom to get your money. And if ever again you contact Lara or bother her, consider yourself an inmate for life," Shane told him with menace strongly etched in his voice.

George leaned his forearm against his thigh, bracing his position with his other hand on his knee. "Do I have your word that you won't use the information in my file against me?"

"Steer clear off Lara's radar till you take your last breath, and you will have my word," Shane told him.

George angled his chin upward, sitting straight. "Then we have an agreement, gentlemen."

Shane stood up from his seat and stepped out of his office, not sparing him a glance. Damien walked out behind him as well, the guards accompanying them back to their

waiting cars in the parking lot.

Shane tipped a nod in Damien's direction. "Thanks, Damien."

"It's always a pleasure, Shane," he returned.

The two got into their cars, and the cars were driven out of the car park to the road.

Back in the office, George was having a tirade, spewing curses rapidly under his breath in Japanese.

"You incompetent fools! I believed I had this buried." He flung his file on the table at the face of one of his men.

Oh! The embarrassment he had experienced before those two. How much he wished he could have shot them down right on the spot!

They dared to walk into his territory and threaten him.

Fury surged through his veins at an alarming rate, making his blood boil, and he flung the vase sitting at the center of the table at another of his men, a loud crash echoing in the room as it broke against his face, its remainder shattering into pieces on the floor.

He stood immobile as the vase hit him, cutting him on the side of his face.

"Where the hell is that motherfucking bastard and son of a bitch called Rufus? Find him! And when you find him, I swear I'm going to cut him to dregs and rip my money out of him," he gritted hard through his teeth, his eyes cold with fury. "Find him!" he barked to his men, kicking the table out of his way."

They all rushed out of his office, the door slamming shut behind them as they all filed out with a loud thud on its hinges.

TWENTY NINE

The air in the dimly lit casino was thick with anticipation and the unmistakable scent of money. A cacophony of clinking chips, spinning roulette wheels, and the occasional cheer filled the room, creating a symphony of excitement that seemed to hang in the atmosphere.

Rufus had entered the casino with his pockets filled with hope and a burning desire for a stroke of luck. He had always been a gambler at heart, drawn to the thrill of the unknown and the promise of easy riches. But tonight, luck seemed to have abandoned him.

Undeterred by his initial losses, Rufus moved from table to table, his eyes scanning the room for a game that would turn the tides in his favor. He observed the poker tables, where players wore poker faces as they skillfully and strategically placed their bets. Rufus knew he lacked the patience and skill to compete at that level, so he moved on.

His gaze landed on a row of brightly lit slot machines, their screens displaying enticing symbols and promises of jackpots. Rufus slid onto a stool in front of one of the machines and began feeding it coins, his eyes fixated on the spinning reels. He watched as the symbols whirled in a mesmerizing dance, but each time they came to a stop, it was always a disappointing combination.

Despite the mounting losses, Rufus couldn't resist the allure of the game. He reached into his pocket for more cash, fueling his addiction to the adrenaline rush that only the casino could provide. He moved from slot machine to slot machine, desperately hoping that the next one would be the key to his redemption.

As the night wore on, Rufus found himself entangled in a web of desperation and compulsion. He played blackjack, his hands trembling as he placed high-stakes bets, only to be met with a steady stream of defeats. Roulette balls spun around the table, bouncing from one number to another, cruelly mocking Rufus with each spin.

With each loss, Rufus's confidence waned, but his desperation grew. The whispers of the other players and the glances exchanged between the casino employees all seemed to fuel his determination to chase the elusive win. He borrowed money from fellow gamblers, promising to pay them back as soon as he hit his lucky streak. But the streak never came.

The clock on the wall ticked away the hours, oblivious to Rufus's mounting debts. Eventually, the last of his money slipped through his fingers, leaving him drained both financially and emotionally. The reality of his situation hit him like a sledgehammer, the weight of his losses crushing his spirit.

He felt as if the ground had slipped away from his feet, and he was plunging deeply into an abyss. An abyss of debts.

He had obtained the money to settle his existing debts, but he had had a lucky dream overnight and believed he could double his fortune.

His plan had been simple. Double the money he had loaned from George; hopefully the rich guy Lara was now with would help in paying it back, settle all his debts, and live the rest of his life in bliss and rapture.

All he had been able to achieve was incur more debts on himself. He swallowed as he watched the gazes of the men he had desperately borrowed from in the frenzy of making his dreams come true.

"I will pay your money; don't worry," he assured them, laughing awkwardly to lessen the tension coating the air around them.

"The hell you will," One of them spat. "I told you he's bad business. Element of doubt, my foot." He sprang up to his feet and dashed towards him in fury.

"Oh, no!" Rufus exclaimed under his breath as he flung a chair in his direction, immediately dodging.

The excitement in the air was soon turned into an uproar as Rufus was being chased by his creditors.

He leaped over tables, kicking and disorganizing the formation of the tables and chairs to slow down the men after him amidst the frightened squeals and screams of the women there.

His luck hadn't deserted him after all. Despite the hot chase he was given and the disadvantages of being easily caught by the other men, he was able to circumvent being apprehended and was able to make it out of the casino, although not unscathed.

He was bleeding from one side of his head. There was a terrible gash on his left arm, and he had sprained his ankle when he tried to dodge being caught by another group of chasers from the fore.

The night outside was cold and breezy, making his wounds sting, but he dared not slow down.

He wouldn't be able to keep them off his trail. Droplets of blood from his arms trailed down the corners of the alley he had run off to.

It would only be a matter of time before he was caught.

A shot fired loudly in the air behind him, his heart stopping.

He hadn't realized his body had stopped moving until he hit the ground, the scent of his blood dripping onto the dark, asphalt road the last thing he smelled before he blacked out.

★ ★ ★

Pain lanced sharply through Rufus's body as he regained consciousness. The pain burned through his skin as if his body had been doused with acid.

His awareness of it was enhanced when another bucket of ice-cold water was poured without warning over his head.

Shivers coursed through him, and his teeth chattered as he jerked against the bindings that had been used to hold him down on the chair he was sitting on.

He gagged, shaking his head to clear the water off his face, and slowly opened his eyes.

His eyes were about to take in and register his surroundings before they were forced to close by the thunderous slap he received.

He yelled in pain, the ear on the side of the face on which he had been slapped losing its function.

Stars danced in his vision; the pain that burned through his cheek was the only

awareness he had to confirm he wasn't dead.

"You!" A deep, masculine voice that made his body tremble in fear growled.

He tried to speak. To appeal to him, but he couldn't find his voice. Not after the ear-deafening slap he had received.

"How do I get my money from you? You are useless. Weak, repulsive, and worthless," George spat in his face.

Rufus nodded quickly in agreement, quivering. He spread his fingers out intermittently in a gesture for mercy.

"Your blood would have gone bad from all the drinking you've had with my money. Your kidneys must have been damaged by smoking and drugs. Your heart is that of a coward. Nothing about you can fetch me a quarter of my freaking money!" George thundered, raking his hands furiously through his hair.

He clenched his hands into fists tightly by his sides, fuming. He tilted a nod in the direction of his henchman.

The bulky guy nodded once in response to the silent order George had given, and he resumed his torture of Rufus.

This time, he pummeled blows upon blows on every part of Rufus's body.

George stood a few distances apart, listening to Rufus's screams of agony as he was being beaten to a pulp by his henchman.

George faltered in his steps as the sound of gunshots echoed in the air. He took a defensive stance immediately, his eyes alert.

"What's going on up there?" He asked twice, getting no response.

He tried to connect with another of his men above ground level. He figured out that his cover had been blown. Cursing sharply under his breath, he made his escape.

He had barely moved from the spot he was in when the door leading to the basement was kicked open.

The agent was fast. Before George could react, he had fired a shot in his shoulder, easily disarming him.

More uniformed men from the FBI filed in and cleared the basement, taking out the criminals.

"Requesting immediate assistance! Send down a wheeler to the basement. We have an injured male and a hostage situation down here," an FBI agent urgently relayed over the radio.

George muttered expletives under his breath as he was pushed out of the basement to where the rest of his men had been subdued by the FBI agents.

His shoulder burned with each movement he made, and he had to bite down hard on his lips to hold in the pain.

Rage thrummed through his blood as he spotted Damien among the FBI waiting.

"You gave me your word, motherfucker!" He bellowed at Damien as he was led past the spot he was standing on.

Damien raised a hand to stop the man pushing him forward and approached him.

"Point of correction, George. I didn't give you my word. Shane did," Damien told him, a ghost of a grin cupping the corner of his lips. "Take him away," he said with a flick of his finger.

"I will get you for this. You will regret ever betraying me, you motherfuckers!" George screamed over his back as he was roughly pushed into the back of the waiting black van with the rest of his men.

THIRTY

As the first rays of dawn pierced the horizon, painting the sky with hues of pink and orange, Lara found herself standing on the foredeck of Shane's ship, her fingers gently intertwined with the railings. A light breeze brushed against her face, carrying with it the refreshing scent of the sea.

The waters stretched out before her, shimmering like liquid gold under the gentle touch of the rising sun. The waves danced and sparkled, their rhythmic motion creating a soothing melody that serenaded the ship. Seagulls soared effortlessly through the air, their cries mingling with the distant sound of the ship's engine. The sea appeared calm, a mirror reflecting the vibrant colors of the sky above.

Lara closed her eyes, allowing the warm sunbeams to caress her skin. The gentle rocking of the ship beneath her feet created a sense of tranquility, as if time itself had slowed down. She could feel the energy of the ocean, a powerful force that seemed to connect her to something greater.

As she opened her eyes, Lara noticed a school of dolphins gracefully leaping in and out of the water, their sleek bodies glistening in the light. Their playfulness brought a smile to her face, a reflection of the joy she felt in that moment. The seagulls continued their aerial ballet, dipping and diving, their wings glinting in the sunlight.

Lara turned her gaze towards the shoreline, where the Miami skyline rose majestically against the horizon. Tall buildings and palm trees stood as silent witnesses to the beauty of the sea. The distant sounds of the city seemed to fade away, replaced by the gentle lapping of the waves against the hull of the ship.

Lost in the magic of the moment, Lara didn't realize Shane had stepped behind her until he pressed her back flush against his hard, muscled chest, wrapping his arms around her waist, and leaning the crook of his chin against her shoulder.

Warmth spread to her at his proximity, her skin tingling in reaction. She bit down on her

lips to stifle a moan as he planted a kiss caressingly on her nape, his hands tenderly rubbing her belly.

It had been a week since George's and his cohorts arrest. Lara had obtained a restraining order against Rufus, nullified his guardianship rights over her, and changed her surname to her mother's instead, thoroughly disassociating herself from him.

It was indeed a cause for celebration.

"Good morning," Shane said, his voice a soft caress.

"Good morning," she returned, leaning closer into his embrace.

Together, they looked out to the expanse of shimmering blue waters stretched out before them.

"It's breathtaking," Shane said softly. "Just as you are."

"Mmn," Lara breathed, a smile tipping the corners of her lips. "The view looks better with you here with me."

"Really?" He teased, playfully grazing her ear with his teeth.

Lara giggled. "Stop it. That tickles."

Shane smiled, sighing in satisfaction, the sound of her laughter echoing in his ears.

Now, this was bliss.

With all the dramas of their pasts cast behind them and resolved, they could revel in the thrill of the moment without any worries.

"I'm glad I found you, Lara," he told her.

The pleasure he had gained from his previous dalliances was nothing compared to the thrill and comfort he found in Lara's company.

"Not as glad and grateful as I am, Shane," Lara returned. "You changed and saved me. I couldn't have dreamed of having a life as blissful and wonderful as this so soon. You shaped my view to the perfection it is now."

"No, you did. You helped me become a better man than I had intended to be in the end. You helped me discover where really my happiness lies, and it is with you," he whispered affectionately.

"I love you, Lara, and I want to spend a lifetime with you. Together, cherishing the beauty

of nature and exploring the world around us, let's create blissful memories like this for as long as we breathe." He stepped back from her while Lara turned to face him and brought out the ring he had gotten for her.

Shane got down on a knee, holding her gaze, and said, "Marry me, Lara."

Lara beamed. "Yes, Shane. I will marry you." She spread her fingers before him and flashed her teeth happily as he slipped the pink diamond ring on her finger. "It's so beautiful," she moaned in delight. "Thank you, Shane. I love you." She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him.

Shane rose to his height and deepened the kiss, sweeping her feet off his arms with a twirl.

The sun had risen to its peak then and shone brilliantly over the ship, highlighting its radiance.

Shane trailed kisses down the corners of her mouth to her chin.

Lara slid down from his hold. "I have a gift for you too."

His eyes twinkled. "Really?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Follow me." She held him by the hand and led him back to their cabin, fishing out the present she had gotten for him.

It wasn't much compared to the beautiful diamond ring he had gotten her, but she had wanted to get him a present as well.

She brought out the jewelry box from where she had kept it in her bag and walked to sit with Shane on the cushion, revealing two pendant necklaces.

"It's called the "Eternal Love Promise Necklace"," she told him.

"The "Eternal Love Promise Necklace"," Shane repeated, observing the necklace with interest.

Crafted with exquisite attention to detail, the necklace blended elegance and sentimentality.

The pendant of the necklace featured a delicate heart-shaped design, crafted from high-quality sterling silver with a polished finish. The heart pendant was adorned with sparkling cubic zirconia stones, adding a touch of brilliance and sophistication.

At the center of the heart, their names were elegantly inscribed in a stylish font.

S.W. for Shane Williams and L.P. for Lara Perry.

A small infinity symbol charm dangled from the heart pendant. Lara explained that the infinity symbol represented eternal love and served as a constant reminder of their commitment to one another.

"It's nothing much compared to this," Lara said, raising the pink diamond ring he had given her.

"I love it." Shane grinned, checking out the necklaces. "It means a lot to me, Lara. I really appreciate and love this. The gesture, what the necklaces stand for—all of it, I love it."

Lara huffed in excitement, her eyes glinting with happiness. "I'm glad you do."

"You wear mine; I wear yours, right?"

Lara nodded. "We will always hold each other together that way, even if we aren't within each other's proximity."

Shane beamed. "Brilliant, Lara."

He clasped the necklace with his name around Lara's neck, and Lara helped to clasp the other around his neck as well.

They both beamed at each other, a promise of a forever after sealed between them.

"I love you," Lara mouthed to Shane, beaming so widely that she felt pushed to tears.

Shane brushed the tears that stained her cheeks off, kissing her to express just how much he loved her and eliciting several moans from her through the rest of the morning.

Anticipate the **next book in the trilogy**: "THE PLAYBOY'S BRIDE"

Book Blurb:

"Boss, your wife is in labor!"

But he couldn't care less. His hardened expression masked his true emotions.

"She's fighting for her life, losing blood rapidly."

His stoic facade shattered. "Damn it!" he cursed.

"You must hurry..."

Without a second thought, he bolted from his chair, snatching his keys as he raced out of the office.

★ ★ ★

Emily's world spiraled from ordinary to extraordinary after a single night of passion with a captivating stranger, a man of wealth and charm who turned out to be the CEO of her new workplace. The consequences were unimaginable!

Discover the gripping tale of "The Playboy's Bride" as Emily grapples with unexpected pregnancy, tangled emotions, and the rollercoaster ride of love and uncertainty. Will she find her happily ever after amidst the opulent backdrop of Miami's billionaire elite?

Unveiling the second installment in the thrilling "Miami Billionaire Playboys" trilogy, this captivating story will leave you yearning for more. What awaits Emily in the next chapter of her tumultuous journey?

#2 in the heart-pounding trilogy of the Miami Billionaire Playboys.

COMING SOON!!!

MAKE AN AUTHOR'S DAY

Hello, dear readers.

Did you enjoy reading "The Playboy's Crush"?

Are you as eager as I am to delve into the next book in the series?

It will be a pleasure to hear from you.

Kindly rate and leave reviews on [Obooko](#), Selar, Goodreads and/or any of your favorite stores online.

You can also check out my other books online.

Your support means a lot to me.

Thanks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah A. Olaleye is a new author who is just starting out. She enjoys writing during her leisure time and is excited to share her stories with the world. She is passionate about writing and wishes her readers experienced as much excitement reading her books as she does when writing.

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