



BRIDE FOR THE BILLIONAIRE

NEXT
DOOR

KATE TILNEY

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ONE

INES

There is only one thing I want—one thing I need at this moment. He is standing in front of me with a glass of water.

I take the glass from his hand and set it aside. He eyes me curiously, but I don't give him a chance to speak. I throw my arms around his neck and pull his mouth to mine. He jolts in surprise. For a moment I worry he will push me away. But his arms come up and wrap around me. Moving up and down my back, over every curve of my body.

My lips part and our tongues meet. I moan as one of his hands lowers, grabbing my *derrière*, pulling me close enough to feel his hard length against my belly. My fingers dive into his cropped hair, and I know this will not be enough.

I want—need—him all.

I lower my hands to the waist of his pants. I palm him through the fabric as I reach for the button—

Applause thunders through the walls of my godmother's condo, pulling me out of the story I'm writing.

Or, rather, trying to write. Every time I start to get something going between my characters—a crowned princess on the run, and the bodyguard sworn to protect her—the noise coming through the shared wall distracts me.

And that's really a shame considering where my characters are at in the story right now. The parties next door are giving my characters—not to mention me—blue balls.

I glare at the wall as the music starts again. You'd think with how much my godmother, Rachel, paid for this condo, the builders of the Shipman would have at least sprung for better materials to soundproof the walls. This is supposed to be one of the premier high-rise condominiums in greater Los Angeles. The list of residents has graced the pages of celebrity magazines.

True story: I bumped into a former child star on the elevator when I was taking my Rachel's dog, Elsie, out for a walk. And I'm about ninety-nine percent positive I saw the

member of a former boy band doing laps in the rooftop pool.

You'd think someone who appeared on People's Sexiest Man Alive would have higher standards than a broke romance novelist with a major case of writer's block.

That writer's block is the main reason I'm here right now. After meeting my godmother for lunch last week, I told her about my struggle to get my next book written. I told her about how hard it is to write at home. I love my roommates, but they aren't the best at keeping it down while I write. I told her about how I'm spending a fortune on overpriced coffees working from coffee shops.

The wonderful woman that she is, Rachel listened patiently, and then offered me a solution.

"How about you house-sit for me while I'm on my cruise next week?"

In exchange for writing in paradise, all I had to do was make sure her sweet pooch gets fed twice a day and goes for a walk every morning and evening. It's the deal of a lifetime.

Or, so it seemed, until tonight when her next-door neighbor turned out to be a party animal.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I debate between giving up writing for the night in lieu of watching a movie. Rachel does have all the movie channels. It'd be a waste not to check them out while I'm here.

Thud. The print on the wall above me goes crooked. I narrow my eyes at it. I won't be able to do much of anything tonight if these party monsters keep it up.

Elsie whimpers at my feet, and my heart twists.

"That's it." I jump to my feet and pull the belt of the terry cloth robe tighter around my waist. "I'm going to speak to someone about this."

Remembering to grab the keys so I won't get locked out, I stride out the door and march to the next one over. Pulling my shoulders back and raising my chin, I knock on the door—hard. No one answers. So, I do it again, pounding with my fist.

When no one still seems inclined to open up, I pull my fist back, ready to really let the door have it. I'm about to launch it forward when the door swings open.

My fist freezes mid-air and my jaw falls open. There, on the other side of the door, is the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. Fitting the description of tall, dark, and dreamy to a T, he's dressed in a tuxedo. His dark hair is immaculately cut and styled and there's a glimmer of interest in his green eyes.

There's an instant tug of lust low in my belly as he arches an eyebrow.

The man could be James Bond. Or the bodyguard in the story I'm writing.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

I stare at him dumbly. I open my mouth, but words don't come out. I really am at a

loss for words tonight. And right now, this delectable man is entirely to blame.

MILES

The first thing I notice about the woman standing outside my door is that she's stunning. Her thick, dark curls are swept up on top of her head, with a few loose tendrils falling down around her heart-shaped face. Her eyes are brown and wide as she stares at me like I have a horn growing out of my head. Her lips are full. The perfect kind for kissing and fucking.

The next thing I notice is that she's wrapped in a bathrobe and wearing fuzzy bunny slippers.

I didn't realize people still wore bunny slippers.

And, they definitely don't wear them to swanky fundraisers, like the one my CFO and I are hosting for our company's foundation. Which means she probably isn't a guest. Pity. I can only imagine how much I'd like to get to know the woman behind the serious, bright eyes.

Just like I can only imagine how much I'd like to explore the supple curves underneath that thick, lush robe she's wearing.

The robe would look good on the floor of my bathroom. She'd look even better naked and willing in my bed.

I arch an eyebrow. Jesus. What's my problem? A woman I've never laid eyes on before is standing at my front door. I'm too busy eye-fucking her to mind my manners.

My mom would be royally pissed at me if she could see me right now.

Clearing my throat, I curve my lips up in what I hope is a friendly grin.

"Can I help you?"

She parts her lips, and I momentarily lose all ability to think. She really does have the sweetest-looking mouth. I wonder what it tastes like. My cock twitches and I shift my stance to avoid pitching a tent here in the foyer.

I wonder if she's as rattled as I am right now. Neither of us seems to be doing a particularly good job of carrying on a conversation right now. And neither of us seems to be able to take our eyes off of the other.

I shake my head and repeat the question.

She blinks and seems to come back to her senses too.

"Hi, I'm Ines. I'm trying to write next door," she says.

"Next door?" I lean against the door jam. "Did Rachel Ramirez move out?"

And if so, how did I not notice such a knockout new neighbor move in?

"No, she's my godmother. I'm staying at her place for the week." She chews on her

bottom lip. It sends a jolt of lust through me like a bolt of lightning.

I push that aside, though it isn't easy. If she's here, there has to be a reason.

"Is there a problem?" I ask, searching my mind for possible reasons she could be here.

Not that I'm complaining. "Did you get locked out? Did you have a small fire?"

"No, nothing like that." Her eyes go wide. "As I said, I'm trying to write—"

"You're a writer?" I can't believe I missed that part. "What do you write?"

She hesitates a moment. "Romance novels."

My lips curve up instinctively. I'd like to write a romance novel with her. One where we're the hero and heroine who can't keep their hands off of each other.

"I like a good romance. I'll have to check them out."

Her cheeks flush, and her gaze flickers to my chest. "Good luck finding them. I write under a pen name."

"Interesting." I'll have to have one of my people look into what her nom de plume might be. "So you're trying to write. Did your pencil break? Did your pen run out of ink?"

She rolls her eyes. "I'm using a computer."

"Then did your power cord stop working? Because we could probably rustle up something for you." I only have a dozen power cords of varying kinds around this place for my own work emergencies.

I rather like the notion of being her knight in shining armor at this moment.

She sighs. "What I'm really doing a bad job of saying is I'm trying to write, but I can't because your party is too loud."

Oh.

That sucks some of the wind out of my sails—some of the pomp out of my circumstance.

"I'm sorry about that," I say, and I genuinely do feel bad. "My foundation is having a fundraiser. I'll ask everyone to keep it down. Believe it or not, some of these Hollywood movers and shakers can be pretty loud."

"Hollywood movers and shakers?" Her eyes light up with interest as she glances over my shoulder. "I guess if it's for a good cause, I can wait till tomorrow to write."

"You're welcome to join us if you like. We have plenty of food. Lots of champagne."

I blurt out the invitation without thinking. But once I say the words I mean them.

"Are you kidding?" Her jaw falls open. "I mean, thank you for asking, but I can't go looking like this."

She gestures to her robe and slippers.

"I think you look quite fetching." I grin. "But I can understand if you want to take a raincheck. Maybe I could stop by with some leftovers tomorrow."

She just shakes her head, laughing under her breath. "Good luck with your fundraiser."

I wait to close the door until she's back safely in her apartment. Even then, I linger for a moment after. Ines next door is a beautiful woman. Interesting too.

And something about her has grabbed hold of me.

It's been a long time since I've found someone who's hooked onto me quite that hard, let alone so fast.

I wonder what she would think about champagne and leftover eclairs for breakfast.

I'm interrupted from my silent contemplation by Declan, the CFO of my company.

"We have a couple of investors who are interested in having your pitch over the weekend on Catalina Island." Declan shakes his head. "Of course, two of them have mentioned how much nicer it would be if you had a wife to bring along to keep their wives company."

I've always thought that was kind of a sexist remark. A woman isn't an ornament for someone's arm.

"Tell them I'm working on it," I say.

"It'd be easier to say if you actually were."

"Maybe I am."

Declan arches an eyebrow. "Oh yeah?"

Shaking my head, I cuff his shoulder as we turn to rejoin the party. "Believe it or not, I think I just found the woman I'm going to marry."

TWO

INES

The next morning, I'm once again struggling to find the right words to get the princess and her bodyguard together. Unfortunately, this time I can't blame my lack of word count on any distractions beyond my own dang imagination.

As promised, the next-door neighbor must have asked his guests to quiet down. I didn't have an interruption the rest of the night. Of course, after my run-in with him, I couldn't think about anything but him. Ever since we met, I've had a million questions running through my head.

What was his foundation raising money for?

Does he work for a non-profit? Or is he one of those rich guys who throw lavish fundraisers for appearances?

When he said Hollywood big-shots, what did he mean? Movie stars? Producers?

What's his name?

How did he look so damn good in that tuxedo of his?

Most importantly: Is there a Mrs. Handsome Neighbor?

I'd text my godmother to dig for some more information about him, but Rachel is in international waters. Knowing her, she probably didn't spring for WiFi or an international phone plan so she could fully immerse herself in a week of sunshine and cocktails.

Honestly, it's a way of life that sounds great if you can get it.

But since she's unavailable, and I don't know who else I can pester for details, I'm sitting here wanting to know everything about the handsome neighbor I met last night.

Maybe I'll write a story about a handsome neighbor someday so I can pretend all of this angst was research. In that case, I should make a note of how much I spent on the Pop-Tart I'm eating now. I can maybe write that off as a business expense.

I'm still staring at the screen, willing any words to come, when there's a knock at my front door.

I frown and glance at Elsie. "Who could that be?"

She wags her tail and smiles up at me in her usual, "I'm game for whatever" way.

I glance down at myself. I'm still in my pajamas because it's only a little after eight. Oh, who am I kidding? I'd still be in my pajamas if it was mid-afternoon.

There's another knock and with a sigh, I pull on my bathrobe and go to answer. I glance through the peephole and my heart does a somersault. It's Mr. Handsome Neighbor. Today, he's dressed in a simple suit instead of a tux. If possible, he looks even sexier than he did last night with a hint of stubble on his hard jaw.

Pressing a calming hand to my belly, I open the door.

"Hey." He flashes a disarming smile that leaves a dimple on his chin. "As promised, I brought party leftovers."

He holds up a bottle of champagne and a wrapped plate with pastries. A hint of his cologne wafts toward me. It's musky and male. Just like everything else, it perfectly suits the man standing before me.

My belly flips again even as my panties become instantly damp.

I hold the door open wider. "Please, come in."

"Sorry if I'm intruding a little early." He follows me inside.

"I'll be honest, if you'd stopped by later today, I'd still be in my pajamas."

"Did you forget to pack regular clothes?"

I chuckle. "It's more of my writing uniform this week. I brought only comfy clothes and a swimming suit."

"Are you planning on hitting the pool while you're here?"

"Why not? I don't get much of a chance to go swimming." I guide him toward the kitchen. My heart pitter-patters when he leans down to give Elsie a good scratch under her chin. "Plus, I thought maybe some poolside writing would get the creative juices flowing."

He sets down the refreshments and rests a hip against the counter, looking perfectly at home. "Are you still not going to tell me your pen name?"

"Why should I?" I fold my arms across my chest and lift my chin to stare him straight in the eye. "You haven't even told me your name."

He opens his mouth and promptly closes it. His eyebrows knit together. "You don't know who I am?"

"Should I?"

He lifts a shoulder. "I thought maybe Rachel told you."

"She didn't." I shake my head. "So until I know your name, I couldn't possibly consider telling you how to find my smutty books."

"Smutty books, eh?" His lips curve up and the dimple is back. "I like the sounds of that. I'm Miles."

I take his offered hand and try to ignore the way my heart hitches at how well my hand fits with his.

"Miles, it's nice to meet you."

He arches an eyebrow. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

I purse my lips together as I try to think of what I could have possibly forgotten.

"Thank you?"

"Thank you for what?"

"Thank you for the refreshments."

"Oh." He gives a light laugh. "You're welcome. I meant, aren't you forgetting to tell me your pen name?"

"Nope."

He frowns. "No?"

"I only told you I couldn't consider telling you until I knew your name." I shrug. "Now I can consider it."

He shakes his head at me, but he's grinning as he does it. "So, are you planning on doing any pool writing today?"

"Maybe. There are other things you can do at a pool."

"Oh yeah?"

I nod, enjoying this banter. "If I had a partner, I could always play Marco Polo."

His eyes widen. "You want to play Marco Polo?"

"Why not? It's fun. Don't you play?"

"Not since I was a kid."

"Well . . ." I tap my fingers on the countertop and decide how brave I'm feeling. "We could always change that."

MILES

Fifteen minutes later, I'm treading water in the deep end of the pool.

It's funny, I've owned this building for five years. I've lived here almost as long. But I've never been in this pool.

That's probably because I have my own private pool on the third level of my penthouse.

But Ines doesn't know about that. In fact, she doesn't know I own the building. Or that my unit in the building spans seven floors.

It's better this way. It feels like we're on a slightly more equal footing. That's a welcome change after all of the groveling and ass-kissing I'm used to.

I'm also not usually someone who ducks out of work to go play a kids game. I'd only

meant to drop off the leftovers for Ines, and maybe ask if she had dinner plans. But when she'd thrown out the challenge of a game, I couldn't resist.

I doubt there's much I can resist where she's concerned.

"Marco," Ines calls out from halfway across the pool, her eyes closed.

"Polo."

She cranes her neck in my direction and narrows the distance between us. With her hair slicked back and water droplets glistening on her shoulder, she's never looked sexier.

"Marco!"

I bite back a grin. "Polo."

She moves even closer. "Marco."

"Polo." I lower my voice, hoping to throw her off.

It doesn't work. She moves within an arm's reach.

"Marco."

"Polo."

She grabs my shoulders and opens her eyes. "I've got you!"

"Yeah, you do." My arms instinctively come around her, pulling her closer.

Her full breasts press against my chest. The soft curves of her hips rest against mine. If we moved just a few more inches, I could pull her legs around me. My dick grows painfully hard at the prospect of being nestled against her sweet curves.

"That was clever of you." She grins at me, and my heart thuds a little harder in my chest.

I swallow past a lump in my throat. "What was?"

"Trying to lower and throw your voice."

"Apparently not clever enough. You found me."

"Yeah, well, I'm very good." She gives me a smug smirk.

I'd like to wipe it from her face. Preferably with a good, hard kiss.

"Okay." She pushes away from me. "Now it's my turn to hide and your turn to find me."

It takes me a full second to register her words, I'm so caught up imagining all the things I'd like to do to that mouth of hers.

"Got it."

Closing my eyes and covering them with one hand, I begin the count to ten. My inner nine-year-old is tempted to do that thing where you count super fast so your opponent doesn't have enough time to hide. But I figure Ines would take exception.

Though, it could be kind of fun to find out what kind of punishment she'd have in store for me.

"Nine." It comes out almost as a squawk. I clear my throat. "Ten. Marco."

Some distance to my right, I hear, "Polo."

I move toward her sweet, velvety voice. "Marco."

"Polo."

I grin. I'm already close, but I move closer.

"Marco."

She whispers, "Polo."

With just a few more feet, I could catch her. But I'm not ready to end this game yet. I move only a few inches closer.

"Marco."

I can hear her take a breath before mumbling, "Polo."

I reach forward, sliding my arm around her waist, pulling her back against my chest.

"Marco," I whisper into her ear.

Opening my eyes, I spin her around so we're facing each other. Our chests are both rising up and down as we take quick breaths.

My gaze flickers to her lips as she says, "Polo."

Neither of us moves, wrapped in each other's arms as the water flow around us. She runs her tongue over her bottom lip. My control snaps like a twig.

I tighten my hold on her, pulling her up as my lips lower towards hers. Our mouths meet in an urgent crash. Fire shoots through me, warming my body. The kiss consumes every one of my senses as I bring her even closer. Her breasts are pressed firmly against my chest. The peaks of her nipples poke through the thin material, rubbing against my chest.

Ines clings to my shoulders as I angle my head, urging her lips open. As they part, I sweep my tongue into her mouth, savoring her sweet, sweet taste.

She moans into my mouth. The sound is like throwing lighter fluid on the fire already burning hot within me.

I grip her hips, pulling her legs around me. My cock is pressed against her core. I instinctively thrust against her as our teeth scrape against each other.

The more I taste of her, the more I want. I want to make her mine, body and soul. I want to give myself to her.

It will never be enough. I don't see how I could ever get my fill of her.

I start to move a hand between us, so I can stroke her when, through the haze of pleasure, I hear someone calling my name.

We pull apart, both gasping for breath as we cling to each other. I keep a close hold on her when I turn toward the voice.

It's Carl, one of the doormen.

"Mr. Shipman, your colleague wanted me to remind you that you have a conference

call with the office in Singapore in ten minutes.”

I groan. Duty calls.

“I have to go,” I say to Ines with great regret. “To be continued?”

She nods. Then, suddenly she freezes. “Wait, did he say Mr. Shipman?”

My gut clenches. I can already imagine where this conversation is going. She’s way too smart for her own good.

“He did,” I concede.

“As in the Shipman Building?”

My jaw clenches. “This is my building.”

“As in you built and own it.”

“That’s right.”

She releases a breath. “I had no idea.”

Unfortunately, I don’t get a chance to follow this line of conversation any further. My assistant appears with towels and a robe.

I sigh.

“To be continued?” I repeat again. This time it’s more a question than a statement.

She nods slowly, staring at me with great interest. I can only imagine what’s going on inside that beautiful head of hers.

THREE

INES

I don't believe it. My next-door neighbor for the week is Miles Shipman. The man who built and owns this extravagant building. The man who has dated a string of models and movie stars. The man who is a bonafide billionaire.

And he kissed me. And he has seen me in my pajamas. Twice.

Part of me is embarrassed. How could I not have recognized the man? His face is all over the Internet and on any number of magazines. And how could I have thrown myself at a man without knowing his full identity?

Though, I don't regret that. The kiss had been hot as hell. I could write pages and pages about how good it felt. I could write a book on all the things I'd like to do with him later.

If there is a later.

Granted, Miles had said our kiss and conversation would be continued later. But I can't expect him to follow up on that. He's an important man. He has his hands in just about every industry and business you can find in L.A., including the industry.

There's no way a man like that would have any interest in me.

I glance at the unopened bottle of champagne and the plate of treats. Then again, if he wasn't interested, why would he have stopped by to see me this morning? Why would he have come bearing gifts?

Why would he have kissed me as if his life depended on it in a swimming pool?

"Great. Now I have even more questions than before."

I gaze down at the sweet little pooch resting at my feet.

"Elsie, I'm a mess."

But, at least I have more inspiration for how I can get my characters together. I wonder how I can get them into a swimming pool in a natural way.

Plucking up one of the eclairs from the plate, I take a bite while I try to come up with something.

There's a knock at the door.

"What now?" I ask, my mouth full of cream and pastry.

Setting down the dessert, I wipe my hands and head toward the door. My heart racing, my stomach in knots, I look through the peephole. This time, it's a man I don't recognize.

I pull the door open a crack. "Hello?"

The man flashes a bright smile. "Mr. Shipman asked me to bring you this."

He hands me a bouquet of orchids. My heart skips a beat.

"Oh, they're gorgeous." I take hold of them. "Thank you."

"He also asked me to make sure you read the note."

Handing the flowers back, I glance at them again with pure joy as I open the card. The note is short.

Will you go to the movies with me tonight?

Then, there are the words "yes" and "no," just waiting to be circled.

I bite back a grin. "Do you have a pen by any chance?"

The man quickly produces one and I circle "yes."

I shake my head as I take back the flowers. I can't believe this is happening.

"Mr. Shipman will be pleased." The man disappears down the hall and back into the next door over.

Starstruck and a little dizzy, I carry the flowers back into the condo. I set them on the counter next to the champagne and pastries.

This has to be the most unbelievable day in my life.

I reach for the eclair when there's another knock. I can't even imagine what's awaiting me now.

This time, when I open the door there's a small group of people.

"Ines?" One of the women asks.

I clutch my robe closed, eyeing them in confusion. "Yes, I'm Ines."

Her face bursts into a bright smile. "We're your glam squad."

My eyes go wide. "Glam squad?"

"For the movie premiere."

"Movie premier . . ." My jaw falls open. "Miles is taking me to a movie premiere?"

"Yep. And Mr. Shipman wanted you to have your choice of gowns." The woman snaps and three people stride in carrying garment bags and boxes of shoes. "We're also here to do your hair and makeup."

I gape at them. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything." Her eyes crease around the edges. Her genuine kindness soothes my pounding. "Just tell us what you do and don't like. We're here for

you.”

I watch as they make quick work of transforming the living room into a salon. “I feel like Cinderella.”

“Then, we’d better get you ready for the ball.”

FOUR

MILES

I tap my fingers on my knee as the limo draws closer to The Shipman. Today was a challenge. After spending a delightful hour with Ines this morning, the rest of the day was jam-packed with meetings.

Not that I accomplished much during any of them. My mind kept wandering back to Ines and how good she felt in my arms.

Now, I'm practically bursting with excitement to see her.

I tug at my bowtie and arch my neck to see if the traffic ahead of us is going to move any faster. The afternoon was so full of meetings, I'd gotten dressed at the office so we'd make it to the premiere on time. I hope Ines enjoyed her day with the glam squad.

I can't wait to see what she chose to wear for the evening. Whatever it is, I'm sure she'll be gorgeous. The woman had been nothing short of stunning in a bathrobe and pajamas. She could wear a burlap sack and I'd still want her more than anyone else I've ever been with.

"You need to relax," Declan says from his seat across the limo.

"I am relaxed."

"You're going to choke yourself if you don't stop messing with your tie." He smirks. "Or I'm going to choke you with it if you don't stop tapping your fingers."

I release the tie and still my fingers. "There. Are you happy?"

"Much better." Declan leans back against his seat. "So, tell me about this girl."

I squirm in my seat like a kid. "What do you want to know?"

"Who is she? How did you meet? Why has she turned you into a nervous teenager?"

"I'm not a nervous teenager." I scowl, which doesn't help my argument. With a sigh, I run my hands through my hair. "Her name is Ines. She's a writer."

"What does she write?"

"Romance novels."

Declan's eyebrows shoot up. "Anything we've heard of?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. She hasn't told me her pen name."

"Interesting." He strokes his chin. "You know, romance is hotter than ever. Thanks to streaming, we have studios knocking down people's doors to get more romances. Having someone in the business could go a long way toward impressing some of our investors."

I roll my eyes. "Since when have I given a fuck about impressing investors?"

"Never. But you should."

I frown. "I'd think our business portfolio should be able to speak for itself."

"You'd think, but you know how this business works. It's who you know. It's how things look. And people would like to see you settled down. It would be big news to see the big-shot billionaire picking an ordinary woman."

"There's nothing ordinary about her."

"Of course not." Declan rests his hands on his knees and leans forward. "If this girl is the one, it would be good to seal the deal fast and make it public."

I start to tell him exactly what I think about that, but the limo pulls up in front of the Shipman. There, wearing a form-fitting knee-length strapless dress, looking gorgeous as ever, is the woman who has completely captured my heart in just one day.

"Declan," I say. "I need you to do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"Find your own ride home from the premiere."

I'm going to need some alone time with Ines. The sooner the better. Stunning as she looks in that dress of hers, I'd like to see how she looks out of it even more.

FIVE

INES

My hormones are working in overdrive by the time we slide back into the limo after the movie.

Don't ask how the movie was. I can't remember anything after the first ten minutes. That was about the time Miles slid his arm around my shoulder and started stroking my skin. Then, a few minutes after that, he started toying with my hair and trailing his fingers along my neck.

That's nothing to mention what he did with his other hand. Sure, to the naked eye, it might have looked like it was just resting on my thigh. But what the man can do with a thumb on the thigh should be illegal.

By the time the credits rolled, I was as tightly wound as spring. I'm like a Jack in the Box just waiting to be released.

And there's only one way to get my release.

Either I need Miles to sweep me up in his arms and kiss me the way he did in the pool earlier, or I'm going to have to take a cold shower before spending the night with my battery-operated boyfriend.

Before I can beg Miles to put me out of his misery, he closes the door behind us and tugs me into his nap.

"Hey." He nuzzles the side of my neck. The hairs on the back of my arms stick up as a shiver of anticipation runs down my spine. "How did you like the movie?"

"I don't know."

He pulls back. "Why not?"

"I don't think I saw a minute of it." I trail my finger up his chest. "Someone was distracting me."

He grins. "I was hoping you might notice."

"How could I not?"

"Mmm." He strokes my back in long, gentle motions. "There's an after-party we could

go to if you like.”

“Oh?” My voice shakes a little as his hand lowers to the small of my back. Need pools between my thighs.

“We could go to that, or . . .”

He slides his other hand up my thigh, under the skirt of my dress.

“Or what?” I ask, barely able to breathe let alone get the words out.

“Or, we could have a party of our own.”

His hand slides between my thighs, stroking me through the silk panties.

I take a gulp of air. “I vote private party.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

He removes his hand for a second to slide up the partition between the driver and us.

“Don’t worry,” he says, finding me again, sliding his fingers over my panties, over my seam. “It’s tinted and soundproof.”

“Thank God.”

His lips capture mine in a searing kiss. My toes curl in the sky-high shoes as our tongues tangle and his fingers work their magic.

“You’re like a fucking fantasy,” he says when he pulls his mouth away from mine. He trails wet, hot kisses down my neck. “Only better than that. You’re real. And you’re about to be mine.”

Then, he gently shoves me back onto the leather seat. I gaze up at him. My breaths come in quick gasps. He stares down at me, heat lighting his green eyes so they’re almost electric.

“I can’t wait to taste you.” He bunches up the hem of my skirt, sliding it slowly up my thighs.

I can barely breathe as he kneels on the floor next to the seat as he pulls the skirt up to my waist.

“You’re gorgeous.” He presses a kiss to my inner thigh. My belly flutters. “Every. Inch. Of. You.”

Then, he hooks his fingers on my panties and glides them down. I raise my hips to help him. Otherwise, I’m useless. I’m all anticipation as I wait to find out if he’s all talk.

Somehow, I don’t think he is. And I have zero doubts I’ll be thoroughly satisfied.

Peppering kisses up my thighs, Miles nuzzles my pussy before trailing a tongue along the seam.

I gasp, grabbing the seat with both hands to keep from sliding off.

He chuckles, and the low, deep sound vibrates against my core, sending little jolts of desire through me. He parts my folds and his tongue finds me. I buckle up and he makes swirling motions around my click. His fingers dig into my ass as he lifts my hips to give

him better access.

The need churning inside of me grows and whirls. My thoughts turn hazy. My vision goes dizzy. I clench my eyes shut so nothing will distract me from the glorious pleasure working its way through me.

"Come on, baby," he whispers before going back for more. "Come for me."

He applies more pressure with his fingers and tongue. It's enough to send me over the edge into a pool of oblivion.

I don't know how long I lie there catching my breath. But when I open my eyes again, Miles is back on the seat next to me. His lips glisten with remnants of me and my pleasure. His eyelids are low as he gazes at me like I'm the Hope Diamond.

"Come here," I whisper, pulling him toward me.

I cup his face in my hands as I bring his mouth to mine. I can still taste myself on him, and it's oddly erotic. Better than anything I could have written into one of my own stories.

While our tongues mate, I remove his bow tie and flip open the top buttons of his shirt until I can splay my hands over his muscles.

Miles shifts suddenly, bringing me on top of him so I'm straddling him. I can feel his hard length settled against my core, still damp from him. Reaching between us, I undo his fly and slide a hand under the waist to find him.

He hisses against my mouth as I grip onto his cock. I pump it twice, rubbing the tip against my wetness.

"Fuck." He groans into my mouth. "That feels so good."

"It's about to feel better." I tear my lips away from his to give an open-mouthed kiss to the side of his neck. "I'm on the pill. And I'm clean."

His fingers tighten their hold on my hips. "Are you sure?"

I nod.

He releases a shaky breath. "I'm clean too."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

He grips tighter onto me, lifting me up. I position him at my opening, savoring the way his full girth feels against me.

Slowly, he lowers me, easing me onto his cock. I have to bite my lip to keep from screaming with pleasure as he fills me completely.

"Jesus, you're so tight." He presses his lips to my cleavage, burying his face there. "You feel so good."

Planting my hands on his shoulders, I lift myself up and bring myself down again. He groans.

With a grin, I do it again, and again.

While I set the pace, he tugs down the top of my dress, along with the strapless bra.

He latches on to one of my nipples, sucking it deeply into his mouth. Fresh jolts of desire and need shoot through me. I increase the pace, needing to come again. I need to take him with me this time.

We're wild as we gasp words of love and praise to each other. Each of us races toward the finish line together.

At last, it's too much. The pleasure erupts through me again. The strength of my orgasm latches on to him, and he holds me tight as he buries himself in me once more finding his release.

I collapse against his chest, and he holds me close. We both gasp for breath as he strokes my back, hugging me tightly.

"You're incredible," he says. "Please say you'll stay with me tonight."

As if I could say no to an offer of more of what we've just shared.

SIX

MILES

The next morning I wake with a smile on my face.

While I didn't get much sleep last night, it was a good night thanks to the gorgeous woman curled up next to me.

For most of my adult life, it's been just me and my work. Sure, there have been other women. But they weren't interested in me. At least not the real me. Any woman I've dated has always been more interested in what was in my bank account or what I could do for their career.

Not Ines.

She'd opened herself up to me and charmed me completely before she had an inkling of who I am. Then, after she found out, she hadn't run screaming for the hills.

I was so proud of the way she handled the red carpet the night before. She'd been nervous. I could tell by the way she clung to my hand as we walked and paused and posed for the cameras. But she'd never let on to anyone else. She'd politely answered questions about who she was wearing and who had done her hair and makeup. She'd only frozen up a little when people asked for information about her.

I'd quickly put an end to that.

I still haven't found out her pen name. I wasn't about to let some paparazzi bully it out of her. Besides, she'll tell me when she's ready. I won't force it out of her a second sooner.

In one day, this woman has brought me more joy than anything in the past decade. I'm not about to let anything screw that up.

Ines stirs in my arms and opens her eyes. Her lips curve up into a sleepy grin.

"Good morning," she murmurs.

"Good morning, yourself." I brush my lips against hers. "Did you have a good night?"

"It was magical."

"There is something about the glitz and glamor of a movie premiere." I stroke her

cheek. "Even if it's one for an action thriller that's short on plot."

"Who said anything about the movie?" She bites her lip, holding back a chuckle. "I was talking about what we did here and in the limo."

"Oh, baby."

I nuzzle the side of her neck. And then we spend the next half hour making sweet love to each other.

We lie there together in each other's arms staring at the ceiling. I idly play with her hair.

"Ines, could you do something for me?"

"Mmm?" She snuggles closer, making lazy circles with her palm on my chest. "Name it."

"You'll agree even without knowing what it is?" I tease.

"Whatever it is, it can't be that bad, can it?"

"I don't know." I pull her close. "Not every woman would agree to marry a man she's just met."

Her hand freezes and she pulls back to gape at me. "You want me to marry you?"

I nod. "There's nothing that would make me happier than having you for my wife."

"But . . . why?"

"You're good for me."

"I'm good for you."

I nod. "In more ways than you can ever know."

She stares at me a moment longer and then pushes herself up. "Wait, you're serious."

"As serious as it gets."

Her lips part. "And you seriously want to marry me?"

"I seriously want to marry you." I brush a curl away from her cheek. "So. What do you say?"

"This is crazy." She shakes her head, and a giggle bubbles out of her. "But who am I kidding? Yes. Yes, I'll marry you."

With a whoop, I pull her into my arms to kiss her again. It's a lazy, sweet kiss of two people who have just decided to be happy together for the rest of their lives.

I'm about to make love to her again when my phone rings. With a groan, I pull back.

"I'm sorry, baby. I think this will have to be continued."

She cups my cheek and I lean into it. "I've waited my whole life to have a happily ever after of my own. I can wait a few more hours."

Giving her one more kiss, I grab my phone and answer.

"Have you checked the news?" Declan asks.

I frown. "Not yet. What's going on?"

"You and the future missus made quite a splash last night."

Sparing a glance at Ines, who is reaching for her own phone, I slide out of bed and move toward the bathroom.

"What do you mean future missus?" I ask when I'm out of earshot.

"The other night you said you'd met the woman you were going to marry. I assumed that was Ines."

I sigh. "It was an expression."

"Well, that expression just got you some really positive feedback from our investors."

I frown at my reflection in the mirror. "What do you mean?"

"Take a look at this article."

Putting him on speaker, I click on the link he sent and start reading.

The headline is enough to have me groaning.

Billionaire Set to Tie the Knot with Girl Next Door

I scan the article, which talks about my making a public debut with Ines, which is true. From there, it moves into borderline fiction. It talks about our whirlwind romance and how we couldn't keep our hands off of each other. It quotes a source close to the couple saying wedding bells would be ringing soon. It also says dollars will be adding up now that a confirmed bachelor is finally looking more serious.

"Shit," I mutter.

"Hey, it's not all bad news." Declan chuckles. "Since the news broke about your impending engagement, my phone has been ringing off the hook from some of our investors. They're happy to see you settled down. With the girl next door, no less. After all those pin-ups you've been dating, they're happy to see you with an ordinary woman. They're ready to work with you. I told you, getting married was going to be good for you and your business. Hell, it'll probably help her business, too, once people find out her pen name, which is only a matter of time."

There's a gasp, and I turn to find Ines gaping at me.

"That's what you meant about being good for you." She presses a hand to her heart. "You meant good for business."

"That's not it at all." I hang up the phone and drop it on the counter. I reach for her but she takes a step back.

She shakes her head. "I knew this had to be too good to be true. You just want a wife so you can seal some business deals. Because that's all that matters."

"Baby—"

"Don't call me baby." She grabs a robe and pulls it on. "I'll return this to you."

"But—"

"Please, no more lies." A tear slips down her cheek. "I make a living writing love

stories. I can't settle for anything less."

Then, she turns on her heel and storms out of the penthouse. I slouch to a stool and stare after her.

What the fuck just happened? And how am I ever going to make her understand that she wouldn't be settling for less than love with me?

I'm going to have to think like the hero in one of her romances. I'm going to have to make a grand gesture.

SEVEN

INES

Rachel strokes my back soothingly as I cry and tell her everything that happened with Miles.

After keeping myself hidden in her condo for a few days, I didn't have any other choice once she returned back from her cruise. The hallway leading to her front door had been lined with oversized floral arrangements, gift boxes, and even a couple of oversized stuffed animals.

Swiping tears from my face, I release a sob.

"He only wanted to be with me because I'd be good for business." I sniffle again. "Because I'm ordinary. The girl next door."

"Did he actually say that?"

"No, but his business partner did. And he didn't disagree." I wipe my face again. "And now he won't leave me alone."

"The flowers and the presents."

"That's only part of it." I push a lock of hair away that's sticking to the tears on my face. "First there was the singing telegram."

Her eyes widen. "People still do that?"

"Apparently. Then, he had the skywriter."

Her jaw falls open. "A skywriter?"

"Plane after plane went by. 'Ines, I'm sorry.' 'Ines, I love you.' 'Ines, forgive me.' 'Ines, you're the one.'"

Rachel lets out a whistle. "That's an awfully big gesture."

"Right? It's too much." I shake my head. "Why would he go to all of that trouble?"

"Well, you'd know more than I would, because it's your life." She strokes Elsie, who's curled up in her lap. "But, have you considered the possibility that maybe he is sorry, that he does love you, and that he really does think you are the one."

I stare at her. "Come on."

"It seems to me that if Miles Shipman wanted to marry a woman to help his business, he could probably have his pick. But, hey, I'm just playing devil's advocate." She lifts a shoulder. "He's always been a good neighbor to me. He always says hello to Elsie, and he helped me put the wreath up on my door last Christmas."

I chew my lip. "He can be kind of nice. But it still doesn't explain things."

"Have you let him explain things?"

"No."

"Don't you think maybe you should hear the boy out?" Her lips twitch. "Otherwise, there will be so many flowers in the hall, we won't be able to get to the elevator."

Sighing, I accept the tissue she offers. I wipe my face clean. "I guess I should. But I need a little time to think."

"Then take the time. Maybe go sit in the hot tub or get some sun. You'll feel better."

I pull Rachel close for a tight hug. "You're really the best."

"You make it easy to be." She gives me a squeeze then releases me. "Now, go find yourself some sunshine."

Once I'm in my bathing suit and robe, I glance both ways in the hallway before going to the elevator. I know I just said I'd hear Miles out, but I really don't want to do it here in the hall.

As I ride the elevator to the pool level, I consider my conversation with Rachel. I suppose it wasn't good of me to run out on Miles the other day without hearing him out. After all, it wasn't like he was the one who said I'd be good for his career.

Though, in my defense, he had said I was good for him in ways I didn't even know.

Rachel also made a good point. If Miles just wanted a wife—not love—he could marry anyone. But he'd asked me in a moment of pure bliss.

By the time I get to the pool, I'm looking at the whole situation in a new way. He wasn't using me. I see that now. I'm going to have to find some way to make it up to him. I turn on my heel to go back to our floor but freeze.

There, standing just a few feet behind me is Miles. He's standing there, looking handsome as ever, dressed in his swimsuit, with a towel around his neck.

Once I see him, and the mixture of hope and pain on his face, I know the truth. He loves me. And I love him. Dropping my towel I run toward him. He meets me halfway, pulling me into a hug. Then, his lips are on mine. We don't say anything. We don't have to.

When at last, we pull back, I stare up into his beautiful face, my heart overflowing with love.

I have to say something. But what?

Swallowing hard, I whisper, "Marco."

His lips curve into a grin. "Polo."

I release a laugh that's part sob. "I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions."

"I'm sorry, I made you jump to conclusions." He rests his head against mine. "I'm in love with you."

"And I love you."

Then, our lips meet again. We don't have to say anymore. We don't need flowery speeches. We don't need anyone falling to their knees. Not right now.

In love and life, it seems, the words that matter most are "I'm sorry" and "I love you." The rest of it comes down to trust.

Speaking of trust. When we part next, I stare up at him, love in my eyes. Then I lean up and whisper my pen name in his ear.

He gasps.

I grin.

Then, we go about writing our own happily ever after together.

EPILOGUE

MILES

Giggling, my three-year-old daughter takes a running jump into the pool.

Of course, I'm there to catch Charlie, though the floaties she's wearing are enough to do the trick.

"Again, Daddy." She flails her arms. "Again."

From her perch on the edge of the pool, Ines grins as she rubs a hand over her rounded belly. "Careful. Or you'll create a monster."

"Too late." I bury my face in the crook of Charlie's neck and blow a raspberry, which only makes her laugh harder as she splashes in the water.

The warm sun shines down on us with a gentle breeze sweeping in from the ocean. It's about as perfect of a day as you could find. Then again, every day of my life has been close to perfect since I met Ines.

We bought the sprawling mansion in Montecito shortly after we got married. It's where we come to spend our weekends. It's where we want to raise our children, including my little splashing monster and our son, who is due in a few weeks. For now, we're commuting back to our penthouse in L.A. during the week.

Ines says she doesn't mind. That she can write anywhere.

But now that Charlie is getting older and the little man is on his way, I'm looking to scale back on how much time we spend in L.A. I want to be more present for my family. And I'm most present when we're in this home we've made together.

"I have an idea," I say to Charlie.

"What, Daddy?"

"Let's play Marco Polo." I turn to Ines. "What do you say?"

She beams at me. "I say it's good to see you letting loose and having fun."

Letting loose and having fun has become our family mantra.

It's what being in love with Ines has shown me. Life is more than dollars and cents and bottom lines. What matters is who you're with and how you show each other love

every single day.

That's what makes our life together perfect. Because, sure, we fight from time to time like any other couple. And, sometimes, life can get a little messy. Like the day Charlie decided to pour a bottle of chocolate sauce all over our white carpets.

But when you show up, love each other, and are on the same team, life is pretty perfect.

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