



FOUND YOU

Bestselling Author of *Fixed on You*

LAURELIN PAIGE

"Every page of Hudson and Laynie's story is bite-your-lip sexy!" -Kristen Proby USA Today Bestselling Author



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Book 2 in the Fixed Trilogy

by Laurelin Paige

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ISBN-13: 978-1-62704-020-4

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First edition October, 2013.

The following story contains mature themes, strong language, and sexual situations. It is intended for adult readers.

Chapter One

I paused at the doorway to the Park Avenue high-rise and stared at the building's name engraved on the stone. The Bowery. Jordan had already pulled away from the curb behind me. He probably felt it was safe enough to be left with the doorman who held the door for me while I stood frozen in thought.

This was real, a big step—a giant step—moving deeper into Hudson's life than anyone had ever been before. I was excited, of course. I loved the man. But did I really even know him? Could I truly love him based on the little I knew about him? His address had been a mystery to me until two minutes ago when his driver had dropped me off. And what would I find inside the building? What was inside Hudson Pierce, behind the mask he wore so well?

I felt like I'd seen the true Hudson, like I was probably the only person in the world who truly had, but I'd barely scratched the surface. There was still so much left to uncover and learn about the young business mogul who had captured my heart.

I also knew that Hudson held secrets. He'd abandoned his mind games and predilection for manipulating women before meeting me, but the possibility of his past habits returning was very real. As real as the possibility of mine returning.

And that was the fear that overwhelmed me most—that I might be driven to my old habits and obsession. Of all the relationships I'd destroyed with my stalking and unfounded jealousy, I knew that fucking this one up would destroy me. Thankfully, so far, I had felt fixed with Hudson. Only time would tell if that would last.

The doorman looked at me, an anxious expression on his face—should he continue holding the door open for the crazy indecisive woman, or should he let it go?

I eased him with a smile. "I'll be just a minute."

He returned the smile with a nod and closed the door.

Taking a deep breath, I looked toward the top floor where Hudson's apartment was surely located—I didn't even know his unit number. Was he awake up there? Was he looking for me from his window? Could he see me down here, hesitating?

He said he'd be sleeping, but it was that last idea that gave me the courage to move. I wouldn't put it past him to wait up for me and I didn't want him to suspect I felt any doubt at all. Because I didn't have doubts. Not about him. My doubts were about me, about whether I could handle us. And truly, I let my hopes take root—hopes that I could finally have a real relationship with another person without losing myself to the fears and unhealthy habits of my obsessive past—then even those doubts were superficial.

The doorman smiled again as I stepped toward him, opening the door for me. Inside, another man sat at the security desk in front of the elevators.

"Ms. Withers?" he asked before I had a chance to give him my name.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Hudson said he'd leave a key for me at the desk and it was there thirty in the morning. Who else would I be?

I nodded.

"Mr. Pierce left you this key. Both elevators on the left will take you to the penthouse. Simply insert the key into the panel when you get inside."

"Thank you."

The doors opened the minute I pushed the call button. Inside the elevator car, my hand shook as

inserted the key in the panel, and I was grateful to no longer be in sight of the security guard. The ride to the penthouse was fast, but not fast enough. As soon as I'd squashed down my trepidation, the emotion had been replaced with eagerness. I wanted to be in Hudson's space, in his arms. I wanted to be with him and even the minute that it took to arrive at the top floor was too long to be away from him.

The doors of the elevator opened into a small vestibule. I stepped out and turned the only direction I could, finding myself in a foyer. The space was quiet, but I could hear the sound of a clock ticking somewhere nearby, and there were very few lights on. I suspected the bedrooms were to my left because my right opened up to a large living room with floor-to-ceiling windows.

As anxious as I was to find Hudson, I turned instead into the living room, attracted by the gorgeous view. Before I made it to the windows, though, a lamp flipped on and I saw him sitting in an armchair.

Startled, my mouth fell open and then stayed open as I ogled the gorgeous man dressed only in boxer shorts. The definition of his sculpted chest quickened my heart before my gaze caught his gray eyes through the flop of his brown hair in the dim light. I'd never seen him in boxer shorts, and damn, had I been missing out. It struck me again how little I knew him, but this time the thought didn't scare me—it excited me. How much more there was to discover about this man, and I was ready to dive in and explore.

Yet, the excitement didn't ease the awkwardness, the anxiety. This was new territory, and I didn't know how to proceed. Certainly, Hudson felt the same.

My hand held tight to my purse while the other absentmindedly clutched at the blue fabric of my dress, a short A-line that hedged the border of professional and sexy. It was the type of outfit I always wore at The Sky Launch, the nightclub where I worked as an assistant manager. The nightclub Hudson owned. The place I'd met him.

A memory flashed through my mind of the first time I'd seen him sitting at the end of the club's bar, of how he took my breath away. I'd known then I should've run. But I didn't. And now, I couldn't be more grateful.

He took my breath away now like he did then. With a meek smile, I braved breaking the silence. "You're awake."

"I thought it would be best to be waiting for you when you got here so that you wouldn't be disoriented."

"But you should be sleeping." As president of Pierce Industries, a multi-billion dollar company, his hours conflicted with mine at the club. Coming over in the middle of the night, when his daily wake-up time was six in the morning—what was I doing? How could our two very separate lives ever be compatible?

No, I wouldn't think that way. That was an excuse to deny myself happiness. And Hudson and I both deserved some happiness, for once in our lives.

The object of my desire stood and crossed to me, lifting the hand that held my purse. "I slept. Now I'm awake." That simple touch quieted my trepidation to a dull buzz, easy to ignore under the thud of my heart. That's what Hudson did to me, overwhelmed and astounded me in such a beautiful, delicious way.

He took my purse from me and moved to set it on the end table.

Without his contact, my nerves returned and mindless small talk slipped from my lips. "I've never been in a penthouse before. Unless you count the loft." The loft above his office, the place where he'd fucked me to oblivion. Thank god the dark room hid my blush. "This is beautiful, H."

"You've barely seen any of it." He didn't cringe at my absurd nickname for him. Perhaps he was

getting used to it.

“But what I can see...” My eyes scanned the expansive living room, noting the ornate detail of the architecture and the simplicity of the styling. “It’s incredible.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s much different than I expected. Not like the loft. That’s what I thought it would be like.” The loft was black and leather, masculine and strong. This place was white and light—I could tell that even in the low glow of the lamp and the moon.

“Alayna.”

My name on his tongue sent goose bumps to the surface of my skin. How could he still do that to me? Turn me on with only a word? Turn me into knots so easily?

“The furniture is so different, too.” Nervousness drove me to talk, avoiding the connection we made the minute I gave in. I stepped toward the white sofa and ran my hand across the expensive upholstery. “But Celia decorated this place too, right?”

His voice tightened. “She did.”

Celia Werner, his childhood friend and ex-fiancée. Well, not really, but practically. Why had she brought her up? Was I trying to destroy us? Celia had been a constant source of tension in our relationship since Hudson had hired me to convince his mother that we were together. Sophia Pierce, believing her son was incapable of love, thought a pairing with the daughter of her good friends the Werners was a perfect match for Hudson. Even if he couldn’t feel anything for her, Celia could at least keep him in line—keep him from getting in trouble with his addictions.

Except it turned out Hudson could love. And during our ruse, he’d fallen in love with me.

Still, Hudson had something with Celia, a bond that fueled my jealousy. Deflecting, I moved to the windows. “The view here...”

“Alayna.”

I pressed my face against the glass and looked down to the world far below. “It’s gorgeous.”

Hudson came up behind me, his warmth emanating against my back even though he hadn’t yet touched me. “Alayna, look at me.”

Slowly, I turned to him.

He lifted my chin up, forcing me to meet his eyes. “You’re nervous. Don’t be. I want you here.”

His words were the consolation I needed, sending calm over every part of my worry like a blanket smothering a fire. “Are you sure?” I’d been eased, but I wanted more where that came from. “You’ve never brought a woman here before, have you? It’s weird, isn’t it?”

His thumb stroked my cheek, my skin awakening under his caress. “It’s different, because I haven’t brought a woman here, but it’s not weird. And I am completely sure that I want you to be here.”

I thrilled at the confirmation that I was the first woman he’d allowed in, the first woman he’d made love to in this house. “Me, too. I mean, I’m sure that I want to be here.” His gaze burned into me. I could get lost there forever and that scared me just enough.

Looking for a way to keep myself, for only a moment longer, I glanced over at the room connected to the living room. “What’s over there? Is that the dining room?”

“I’ll give you a tour in the morning.” He brought his other hand up to cradle my face, capturing my eyes again with his.

“A tour in the morning,” I repeated. And there I went—lost to him. “But not now.”

“No, not now. Now I want to welcome you to my home.” His mouth crashed into mine, taking me to dizzying heights that put the view behind me to shame. His lips sucked my own before his tongue slid inside my mouth with delicious strokes that threw me off balance, provoking me to throw my arms

around his neck and hold on for dear life.

~~He moved a hand from my face to wrap around my waist and pulled me into him where I could feel his erection against my thigh through the thin material of his boxers. His other hand reached behind my head to tangle in my hair. I pressed my breasts into him, needing to feel him with every part of my body.~~

A moan caught in the back of Hudson's throat, vibrating underneath our kiss and kindling the desire in my belly. I shifted, trying to get closer, my leg antsy to hook around him.

His lips still wrapped around mine, he said, "I do have one room I want to show you tonight."

"I hope it's the bedroom."

"It is." In a blur of motion, he lifted me in his arms and headed back to the foyer I'd come from. Just like that he carried me away, the movement imitating the effect he had on me in general—with him, I was a branch in a roaring river, rushing toward the sea. And Hudson, he was the current, pulling me in whichever way he wanted to take me. I was at his mercy.

He'd promised me that he wouldn't play his manipulative games with me, that he'd never try to control me. But it was a promise he couldn't keep. He swept me away with him whether he intended or not. And that was perfectly fine with me.

He carried me through the foyer, kissing me as he did until we reached the end of the hallway where he turned into what had to be the master bedroom. My attention still entirely on him, I only registered that he was laying me on a king-size bed, the light gray sheets disheveled on one side, the left side his side. The intimacy of being in the place that Hudson slept, had slept in earlier that evening, shot a pang of need to my already aching core. I wanted him on me and in me, not standing above me gazing down with hooded eyes.

He'd take his time with me though, and there was no use disputing his tempo. There was no reason to dispute. Though a dominant lover, he always focused his attention on my needs, always attended to me in the ways he knew best. And god, did he know me best, knew how to turn my body boneless and sated, knew how to arouse and love me, even when I didn't.

His hand lagged down the length of my leg to my ankle where he removed my strappy sandal with gentleness that had me writhing. He repeated the action with my other shoe, then knelt over me to deliver a brief kiss. I reached up to pull him in for more, but he resisted.

"Last time we went quickly. This time I need to savor you." Last time had been fast and fraught, a reprieve mid-argument, on the new couch in the manager's office at The Sky Launch, and he hadn't left me with any complaints. But being savored sounded pretty damn awesome, too.

With a trail of wet kisses, he made his way down my body to the hem of my dress. With a wicked gleam in his eyes, he shoved the material up around my waist, placing a kiss on the center of my waist.

A moan escaped my lips and he chuckled softly. His fingers slipped under the band of my panties, pulling them off and tossing them aside. He hooked my leg over his shoulder and then his mouth went back on me, licking and sucking greedily at the bundle of nerves between my thighs.

I was already delirious from pleasure when he slipped two fingers inside me, probing and twisting until he pulled my orgasm from me with ease. I shuddered and quaked while he climbed up to reclaim my mouth where he kissed me with deep hunger.

The soft sounds he made as he devoured me, the taste of me on his tongue, the jab of his cock in my thigh—it was only half a minute before the tightness built again in my belly, ready for another ride up the hill to ecstasy. Drawn to touch him, my hand found his cock and rubbed it through his underwear.

His mouth broke from mine with a groan. I nudged at him to roll to his side while I continued to stroke him. "Boxers? Do you wear these often?"

“To bed.”

“I like them. I’ve never seen you in them.” My hand slipped inside the opening of his shorts, marveling as I always did at the softness of his thick shaft in my hand, at the heat rolling off his skin.

“Because when I go to bed with you—” His voice broke as I ran my hand across his crown. “I wear nothing.”

“Oh, yeah. I like that even better.” It was my turn to slip my hand into the band of his underwear and pull them down his strong legs, my eyes pinned on the gorgeous sight of his erection as I did.

As soon as his boxers hit the floor, he drew me to him again. “I like it when you’re wearing nothing.” His fingers were already tugging my dress up over my belly. “You need to be wearing nothing right now.”

“I won’t argue.” I sat up to help him pull the outfit over my head. He tossed the dress aside and his hands circled around me to unhook my bra, freeing my breasts. Then he was stretched out over me, his penis hot at my entrance for only a second before he plunged inside of me, penetrating me, stretching me, filling me the way only he could.

He turned to his side, taking me with him, and I wrapped a leg around him, urging him deeper. He wanted to savor me, but either he changed his mind or he couldn’t contain himself, unleashing his passion with rapid thrusts. Each time he drove in, he hit a tender spot that made me crazy, drawing another climax to surface, starting in my core, tightening my thighs, traveling down to curl my toes as it rolled through my body.

Hudson continued his assault, increasing his speed until he grunted out his own release. He collapsed, still inside me, and gathered me in his arms to spread kisses down my face—an unusual tender gesture from the guarded man I’d grown to love. I delighted in the sweetness of it.

“Did I mention that I’m awfully glad you’re here?” he asked, breaking his sentence to continue his trail of kisses.

Hearing those words meant everything. I recognized it as Hudson’s version of I love you. He hadn’t brought himself to say it to me directly—he was too new to the emotion, and I didn’t expect it. Though he had accepted it earlier in the evening when I’d informed him that I knew he was in love with me, and he hadn’t freaked when I told him I was in love with him.

Still, I didn’t fool myself into thinking we’d have instant hearts and roses. Baby steps. Saying how he felt at all was a step in itself. That it included how he felt about me equaled two steps in my book.

I ran my hand through his hair as his mouth lowered to my neck. “You did say it. And if you hadn’t, I think I figured it out.” I wagged my eyebrows to make sure he knew I was referring to what had just occurred physically. “But you can tell me as many times as you’d like.” In as many different ways as you’d like, I added silently.

He shifted over me and sucked further down my body, heading toward my breasts. Obviously, we were already headed for round two. “I’m glad you’re here, precious.” He tugged my nipple between his teeth then eased the sting with a swirl of his tongue.

I drew in a deep breath, delighting in the mix of pleasure and pain as he showered my other breast with the same attention. His nickname for me, precious, floated through my mind as his mouth licked at my skin. He’d called me that since our first sexual encounter, nearly two weeks before. Had it only been that long? And had it only been another week before that when I’d first met him at the club, when I didn’t yet know he was the Hudson Pierce? It already seemed like a lifetime. The term of endearment he used for me had held weight from the first moment he’d said it. But we’d only just met then. Maybe it didn’t have as much meaning as I attributed to it.

Curiosity overtook me even though my body was already vibrating under his ardor. “Why do you

call me that, anyway?"

He answered without looking up from my bosom. "Because you are."

"You started calling me precious before you could ever possibly know."

"Not true." He propped his elbow up on the bed and leaned his head on his hand. "I knew the minute I first saw you."

For a brief second I thought he meant at the bar—the first night I had seen him. Then I remembered he'd seen me nearly two weeks before that when I was still working on my MBA and he'd been in the audience during my graduate symposium. I hadn't found out about that until later, and he'd barely told me anything about it.

I propped my torso up on my elbows and eagerly waited for him to continue.

"You were on that stage at Stern," he said, his hand stroking along the dip and curve of my waist to my hip. "When you started your presentation, you were nervous. It took you a few minutes to fall into the rhythm of your speech. But when you hit your stride, you were magnificent. Yet you had no idea. It was completely obvious that it never crossed your mind that the room was full of people who would have hired you had you spoken to any of them. Thank god, you didn't. Because I watched them watch you and I knew. I knew that they saw you were smart. They saw you had business savvy. But none of them recognized the rare jewel that stood before them. Precious."

Tears stung at the corners of my eyes. No one had ever seen me like that, no had ever even looked at me. Not my parents before they died or my brother, Brian, or any of the men I'd ever dated or obsessed over. No one.

"I love you, Hudson." It was out before I could think not to say it, before I could worry about his freaking like he had the first time I'd voiced my feelings for him. I wouldn't have been able to keep the words inside if I'd wanted to—they were always at the surface now, at risk of tumbling off my tongue at any given moment. If we were going to make a relationship work, we'd both have to get comfortable with it.

My eyes never left his while he processed my declaration.

Then, in a flash, he covered his body with mine. Bracing one hand under my neck, he circled my nose with his. "You can tell me that as many times as you like," he said, repeating my earlier words.

"I plan on it." But it came out mumbled, lost inside his mouth as his lips overtook mine, and we expressed our emotions with our tongues and hands and bodies and a slew of other ways that didn't require talking.

Chapter Two

Awareness of movement in the room woke me the next morning. I opened my eyes and saw Hudson adjusting his tie in front of the dresser mirror, his back to me. He had yet to put on his jacket so I had a full view of his tight behind. God, that man could wear a suit. He could wear nothing as easily. I wasn't choosy.

He met my eyes in the mirror and a slight smile graced his lips. "Good morning."

"Morning. I'm enjoying the view."

"So am I."

I blushed and pulled the sheet up over my naked body. The room seemed awfully light for as early as it had to be. "What time is it?" I glanced around for a clock and found none.

"Almost eleven." He finished with his tie—a silver patterned one that brought out his eyes—and opened a drawer, retrieving a pair of dress socks.

Eleven? Hudson was usually at work before eight. "Why are you still here? Shouldn't you have made half a million dollars by now?"

"Half a billion," he said, straight-faced, as he sat on the bed next to me. "But they don't need me for that. I canceled my morning."

"When did you do that?" I was mesmerized with watching him put on his socks. It shouldn't be so sexy to watch a man get dressed, yet my belly tightened and my girl parts started humming.

"Last night. Before you got here."

"Smart thinking." His invitation to spend the night in his penthouse had come at the beginning of my shift at The Sky Launch. I'd obsessed about it the entire evening, but being at work, there was nothing I could do to prepare for it. I didn't even have a change of clothing or a toothbrush. It hadn't occurred to me that Hudson would have used the time to get ready for my arrival. But of course he did. He was a very organized man, a planner with a fine attention to detail.

And since two rounds of lovemaking had transpired, we hadn't gone to sleep until nearly six in the morning. Canceling his morning was good planning indeed.

I yawned and stretched my arms over my head, the sheet falling below my breasts as I did.

Socks on, Hudson stood and peered down at me, his eyes clouding as he perused my naked body. "Fuck, Alayna, you're making me want to cancel my afternoon, too. And I can't cancel my afternoon."

I grinned. "Sorry." But I wasn't. Hudson could make me wet from across a crowded room. It was nice to think I had some of the same power over him. "Um, I need to get up. Is that going to be too distracting?"

He narrowed his eyes at me then turned and disappeared into a closet returning with a cream robe. "Here."

I took the robe from him, not bothering to put it on until I was standing.

"You're a wicked, wicked woman," he said as he watched me pull the garment around myself.

"And you love it."

Without acknowledging my statement, he nodded toward a closed door. "The bathroom's there. There should be brand new toothbrushes in one of the drawers. Look around until you find what you need."

"Thank you." I crossed to him and gave him a peck on the cheek before making my way to the bathroom to pee.

It hadn't been a cuddly afterglow morning like we'd spent together at Mabel Shores, his family summerhouse in the Hamptons. But this was Hudson—aloof and compartmentalized. He was focused on getting to work, and, to his credit, he'd been pretty hospitable considering.

I found the toothbrush easily; as he'd said, there was a drawer full of them. While I brushed, I wondered about that. What was with the surplus? Did he simply want to always be prepared, in case I needed a new one? Maybe he believed toothbrushes should be disposable. He certainly could afford that attitude.

Or *did* he have them for overnight guests? Female overnight guests, to be precise.

I might have decided I was being paranoid, except it wasn't only the toothbrushes. Now that I looked around, there was floral scented deodorant by one of the sinks with a bottle of women's face cream and another bottle of moisturizer next to it.

And the robe—the woman's robe that I was wearing at that very moment—where had that come from?

A chill ran down my spine. I tightened the sash around myself, despite my growing concern that I was wearing clothing that belonged to someone else. To another woman. Another woman in Hudson's life.

Okay, okay. No need to panic. Maybe there had been other women before me at the penthouse. That was fine. Not wonderful, but fine. I just wished he hadn't lied about it. And why had he lied about it?

I opened the moisturizer and brought the bottle to my nose. It smelled fresh and familiar—was that the scent Celia wore?

Now I was being ridiculous. Paranoid, even. Knowing that didn't change the sick, angry emotion rooting through my gut. It was a feeling I'd once been very intimate with. The driving force of most of the unhealthy behaviors I'd acted upon in the past. Behaviors I did not want to relive.

I had to get calm, handle the situation constructively. I forced myself to count to ten. In between each number I repeated the mantra I'd learned in counseling: when in doubt, talk it out. *One, when in doubt, talk it out. Two, when in doubt, talk it out.*

Yeah, easier said than done.

By the time I reached four, the mantra had turned into *when in fucking doubt* and still I was very much doubting.

But that was my tendency, my go-to in all of my relationships. I jumped to conclusions—conclusions that very often were way off-base and unfounded. Late nights at work meant another girlfriend. Mysterious phone calls meant cheating. With my previous boyfriends, I never asked. I assumed. I accused.

Not this time. This time I would be different. Even though the evidence suggested that Hudson had lied to me, I couldn't accept that as fact. I would have to ask him about it.

I scrubbed my face clean with the facial cream, hoping that stalling before I talked to Hudson would relieve the simmer of fury. After patting my face dry with a hand towel, I convinced myself that I was together enough to address him and started out of the bathroom, grabbing the cream and moisturizer to take with me as evidence.

So, maybe collecting evidence was more of an attack than a discussion tactic. As long as I didn't end up throwing them, I considered it an improvement on my past.

Hudson wasn't in the bedroom when I came out, so I made my way out through the apartment until I found him in the kitchen. He'd donned his suit jacket now, and he stood at the kitchen table, reading the paper as he drank from a mug.

He looked up when I appeared. "I made you some—"

“Why do you have all this stuff?” Though I’d cut him off, I was pretty sure my question sounded more curious than accusatory. Hopefully.

“What stuff?”

“This stuff.” I set the bottles on the table in front of him. All right, maybe it was closer to a slant. “And you have a plethora of toothbrushes and this woman’s robe. Why do you have a woman’s robe?”

His eyes narrowed and he took a sip from his beverage before answering. “I have more than the robe. I have several pieces of women’s clothing in the extra closet in my bedroom.”

“That’s not helping.” The panic I thought I had smothered deep inside worked its way up my throat, tightening my voice. “You told me you never had a woman here before.”

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy?”

The gleam in his eye unleashed me. “You detect more than a fucking hint. Also, a whole lot of suspicion. Come on, H, this isn’t any way to start a relationship. If you’ve had a woman here—if there is someone else’s clothing I’m wearing—I need to know.” My eyes burned, but I managed to keep them pinned on him.

Hudson set his mug down and turned his whole body toward me.

I kept my hand on the table, bracing myself for whatever excuse he’d give. What he said—if I chose to speak the truth, if I chose to believe him—it could make or break us.

“They’re yours, Alayna.”

“What?” That, I wasn’t expecting.

“I purchased them for you. Except the toothbrushes. My housekeeper buys me those so I have plenty for when I travel. The clothing and cosmetics are yours.”

Mine?

No, it wasn’t possible.

I swallowed. “When did you get them?” Had he been planning for me to be there before he invited me? Or was this part of the scam we’d tried to pull on his mother, a piece of proof that we were a couple should anyone look in his closet?

“Last night after I left the club.”

Last night. “But that was almost eight.” He’d left me at the start of my shift. That couldn’t have possibly been enough time to arrange anything. “How did—”

“I understand what it looks like,” he cut me off. “There’s likely still a tag on the robe if you...” He reached his hand inside my collar and tugged. “Yes, see?” He held up a tag, the price—an extravagant price for a robe—listed boldly under the size.

I glanced over at the cosmetic bottles again. They were completely full, seemingly unused. I hadn’t realized that in my heated emotion. But, still, I had questions. “Why? How...?”

“Why? Because I knew you’d have nothing to wear today and I didn’t want you to have to do the so-called walk of shame through my lobby. Plus I figured you’d want to wash that club makeup off your face and freshen up a bit. As for how...I have people.”

I ran my hands through my hair. “You have people.” The tension in my shoulders relaxed slightly as I processed what he’d said. He’d left me at work and then he’d prepared. As he always prepared. He’d canceled his morning. He’d arranged to have clothing for me. Even at that late hour, Hudson managed to make arrangements. Because he had people.

“Mirabelle?” I asked. Hudson’s sister, Mira, owned her own boutique. She knew my size, knew what I’d look good in.

“Yes.” He cocked his head. “And others.”

Others like the same people he had launder and deliver my undies within a couple of hours when I

left them at his office one time. Like Jordan who was always available to drive me to and fro at the drop of a hat. I'd known he had *others*.

"Oh." A medley of emotions washed over me as I let the pieces settle into place. I was relieved to find my jealousy was unfounded and delighted to realize how much thought Hudson had put into my arrival at his apartment. I was also touched to know he was serious about wanting our relationship to work, because didn't this type of preparation show sincerity?

But then I also felt embarrassed. And ashamed. I'd overreacted, and even though I hadn't gone crazy like I would have in the past, I felt the seed of it inside. It scared me. Scared me to know Hudson saw it too.

I lowered my eyes to my hands where I wrung the sash of the robe anxiously. "It must be nice to have people," I mumbled. "I want people." Silly, senseless words, but they were all I had.

Hudson lifted my chin to meet his stare. "I want you."

The look on his face—he wasn't upset by my outburst at all. Other men had been scared away by similar unfounded accusations. But Hudson—not only did his expression show an absence of fear, he showed hunger, desire. Almost as though my paranoia was a turn-on.

"You have me," I whispered.

He took the sash from my hands and pulled the knot free. "I want you right now." His hand wrapped around my breast, squeezing as his thumb flicked across my nipple.

"Oh, you *want me*, want me."

"Uh-huh." He shifted me so my backside was against the table. Flattening his palm between my breasts, he pushed me down; the surface of the table met hard with my backside and a brief flash of worry about spilling his coffee and breaking the cosmetic bottles entered my mind.

"And I want you now."

Fuck the coffee. Let it spill.

Hudson nudged me back so that my bottom met up with the edge of the table, scooting the bottles out of the way with his arm as he did. I was laid out before him now, my robe open to expose the most intimate parts of me.

His eyes darkened as he rubbed his hands in long strokes from my belly up to my breasts and back again. Then they went lower, to the center of my desire.

"I could stare at your pussy all day long." His fingers slid through my folds and circled my hole.

"Don't you have to be somewhere?" My voice didn't sound like mine, breathy and needy and desperate.

And what the hell was I doing? I didn't want him to leave. I didn't want him to stop. *Please, god, don't let him stop.*

"I do have someplace to be. We'll have to be quick." His hands left me to work on opening his pants. "But I'm not leaving here without fucking you good morning."

I may have sighed out loud in anticipation.

Leaning up on my elbows, I watched as Hudson adjusted his pants and briefs enough to free his stiff cock. A sight I'd never tire of. And it was all mine, only mine.

Another random worry crossed my mind. "Your housekeeper isn't going to walk in on us, is she?"

"She comes on Tuesday and Friday. If I'm not mistaken, it's Wednesday." He grabbed my ankle and bent my legs up. "And if she did walk in, would you care?"

He thrust in.

"No," I gasped. Right then I didn't care about anything but the man in front of me. The man inside me. The man who wanted me, wanted me in his house, wanted me in his bed. Wanted me in his life.

despite my shortcomings.

~~Hudson pulled out and pressed back in, again and again, the sturdy table rocking with the force of his jabs. He adopted a rapid tempo, apparently serious about the have to be quick. At this rate, he'd be there soon.~~

He adjusted his grip on my ankles and folded my knees into my chest, the new position bringing him deeper inside me. "Touch yourself, precious." His voice was tight with effort to hold on. "Let's come together."

Without hesitation, I moved my hand to rub my clit, swirling the bud at a speed that matched his. I'd done this before—played with myself for his viewing pleasure. It was a turn-on for him, based on how quickly it always brought him to release.

It was a turn on for me, too. To see the pleasure in his face, to feel his drive increase as I writhed and moaned at my own touch—there was nothing hotter. Already, I was tightening, clenching around him.

"That's it, Alayna." His face contorted. "Fuck, that's... it..." His voice broke as he came, shoving deeper into me as his climax erupted.

My hand fell to the table, my body numb.

He smiled as he pulled out. "How was that?"

He knew the answer. The perv wanted to hear me say it.

I grinned. "You can fuck me good morning anytime you want."

"I wouldn't mind fucking you good morning every morning." He reached behind him to grab a paper towel off the kitchen counter while I pretended not to read a million things into his statement. I continued to pretend while he cleaned himself up and did up his pants.

He raised his brows and gestured toward me. For a moment I thought he might know what I was thinking—how being with him every morning implied living with him, how that was too soon, how I'd never thought anything was too soon because I was an obsessive freak who wanted to cling, how I was ultimately unable to handle such a proposition with my history.

Then I realized he was simply asking if I needed the paper towels, too. "I'm jumping in the shower. Shit, he hadn't said I could stay. "If that's okay, I mean." Was it totally inappropriate for me to ask if I could lounge around his place while he went to work? Because until that very second, that's exactly what I had planned.

Hudson reached his hand out to help me down from my perch. Reaching around me, he grabbed the ends of my sash and tied it at my waist. "It's more than okay. I want you to stay. I planned that you would stay." Which meant I would likely find women's shampoo and conditioner in the shower, too.

Hudson's phone buzzed and he pulled it out of his suit pocket to read his text message. "My driver's here. Seems I used up the time I meant to spend giving you the penthouse tour."

I shrugged. "Whoops."

"You'll have to explore on your own." He walked to the kitchen sink and washed his hands.

"Are you giving me permission to snoop? Because it sounds like you are and you don't understand. I'm a snooper."

He chuckled. "I don't doubt it. I have nothing to hide. Snoop away. Use the gym. Take a nap. There's food in the fridge. Do and take whatever you like. You work at eight tonight?"

"Yes." I'd stopped being surprised by Hudson's omniscient way of knowing my schedule. It was the sort of thing I'd usually do—memorize a guy's schedule, find out all the details of his life. It was kind of nice to be on the other side of that for once.

"Good. I'll make sure I'm home by six." Home. He said it like it was our place, not his. Another ping of anxiety stabbed at my chest. "We'll have dinner together before you leave."

“I hope you aren’t expecting me to cook.” *Or to not latch on.*

“Don’t be silly. I’ll arrange for the cook to come.”

I nodded, my insides turned into knots by Hudson’s easiness about our relationship.

“Oh, and the books for the library should be here today. There’s an intercom there.” He pointed to the wall by the light switch. “And one in the hallway by the elevators and a third one in the bedroom. When security buzzes up, you can approve the delivery and the guard will let them up.”

“Sure thing.” Trusting me with intercoms and security...this was getting bigger by the minute.

“Wait, books?”

“Yes, I ordered a few books. Since you said it was your favorite part of the library.”

“Right.” It had been part of our charade for his mother. She didn’t believe I had ever been to Hudson’s penthouse and, of course, I hadn’t. Meaning to trick me, she’d asked me what my favorite room was. I had said the library. An avid reader, the library was a natural room for me to choose, and I had mentioned my love of books to Sophia. Apparently, though, Hudson’s library didn’t have any books.

Not at the time, anyway. “I still feel somehow tricked about that whole thing, by the way. But when did you have a chance to order them?”

The conversation had only taken place on Sunday when we’d been at his parent’s place in the Hamptons. The day I voiced for the first time that I was falling in love. The day before he’d left me alone with his family while he went to try to save one of his companies, Plexis, from being sold.

“I ordered them Monday night from my hotel. After the deal with Plexis.” His voice held the slightest hint of disappointment when he said the name of his company. His disappointment mirrored how I was suddenly feeling. “What is it?”

I considered saying nothing, but the *talk it out* mantra replayed in my head. “It’s silly, but I convinced myself you hadn’t called me or anything because you didn’t have time. But it seems you did.” Hudson had left me without anything but a brief text. He didn’t call or contact me until more than a day later. I had believed we were over then. I’d been devastated and heartbroken. Now I found he was ordering books when he could have been calling me? “Like I said, it’s silly.”

Hudson tugged me into his arms. “I was trying to not be with you at the time, Alayna. But I couldn’t sleep that night. Because I couldn’t stop thinking about you.” He kissed me on the forehead as I furrowed my brow. “Tell me—what’s going on in there?”

“It’s just...” How could I express the myriad of emotions that I’d been through that morning? Especially this growing fear tugging at my gut—this fear that anything that seemed too good to be true usually was.

I took a shaky breath. “You’ve made a complete one-eighty, Hudson. About you and me. You were so intent to be only sex only half a day ago. And now...who are you?” It scared me. It made me doubt what he felt. It made me wonder if he was playing games with me.

Hudson cupped my face in his hands and pierced me with his deep gray eyes. “Don’t do that. I mean it.”

He widened his eyes, making sure I was with him.

I was.

“I’m the same man, Alayna. A man who commits to whichever plan he’s chosen. I had told myself I couldn’t have you. So I didn’t let myself even try.”

“And now you’ve let yourself.” I said it like a statement, but it was really a question. A question that I absolutely needed answered.

“Yes. And I will commit to this new plan as fiercely as the other. Even more fiercely. Because this plan was a compromise.” He pressed his forehead against mine. “This plan is the one I should have

pursued to begin with. It's the better plan."

My throat tightened. "The plan with the greater potential of profit."

"Unfathomable potential." He parted his lips and bent in for a kiss, sucking gently as he moved his mouth over mine. It was a sweet and tender kiss and it ended too quickly. "I have to go. Save more of that for later."

"Always."

I walked with him to the foyer. He retrieved his briefcase from the closet then kissed my forehead once more before stepping into the elevator. We stood, eyes latched until the doors closed.

As soon as he was gone, I fell against the foyer wall. Oh my god, was this really happening? Was I really making myself at home in the penthouse of my billionaire boyfriend? I felt like Cinderella. Or Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. Did Hudson really want me in his life like this or was I completely insane?

I was insane. Insanely happy.

With a squeal, I ran to the living room and threw myself on the sofa. I closed my eyes and replayed the morning in my mind—waking up in Hudson's bed, the hot sex on the kitchen table. But what I focused on the most were his words.

I'd like to fuck you good morning every morning.

I'll be home by six.

I couldn't stop thinking about you.

Unfathomable potential.

After several minutes of grinning so widely my cheeks hurt, the doubts started to creep in again, they always did. Was it truly possible for Hudson to change so completely, seemingly overnight? Or was I merely a game he was playing? Maybe he wasn't even conscious of what he was doing and I was manipulating me and my emotions out of habit.

Or maybe, like I, he didn't know how to do this relationship thing and he was simply acting the way he thought he should, even if that meant rushing.

Possibly it was all completely genuine. I felt those things for him after all. I wanted to be with him every day, all the time. I was ready for that commitment level, even though I wouldn't have said so two days before.

But I jumped into things, clung too quickly. That was my way.

Maybe it was Hudson's way too.

I sat up and glanced around the room. I had been serious when I'd said I was a snoop and usually I'd jump right on that. But I didn't feel the need to at the moment. I did feel the need to get in the shower and clean up. I was still sticky from the evening before, not to mention our morning activities.

I went back to the master bedroom, noting on the way a closed door that most likely led to the library as well as another bedroom. In the master, I stepped into the closet Hudson had retrieved my robe from. It was a walk-in and was mostly empty except for one rack of clothes. There were a few dresses most likely meant for the club, several pairs of shorts, jeans and sweat pants, and a rack of tops. One dresser drawer was partially opened so I pulled it out the rest of the way and found pants and bras. There was also a negligee. I guess I knew what Hudson wanted me to wear to bed that night.

I let out a happy sigh and headed to the bathroom, this time noticing a closed door on my way. I peeked in and discovered it was a second walk-in closet, this one full of Hudson's clothing. I walked through, running my hands along the rows of suits. Was it ridiculous how much I adored seeing his clothes like this? It felt so personal, so intimate. As if by being in the center of his closet, I was in the center of his life. I twirled around slowly, basking in the metaphor. It felt warm and completely right.

My shower was long and hot. If I'd been in my studio apartment, I'd have run out of hot water long before the time I finally stepped out from the luxuriating pulse of Hudson's deluxe showerhead. I wrapped a towel around my body and put my hair in a turban, then left the bathroom to pick out some clothes from my closet.

My closet.

But once I was in the bedroom, I heard voices coming from the main part of the apartment and the click of heels on the marble floor in the foyer.

It couldn't be the housekeeper—not only was she not due in that day, but she would have been alone. And surely she wouldn't be wearing heels. Maybe Hudson had forgotten to tell me something. Like that his mother was visiting. God, wouldn't that just be the way to ruin my day?

I bit my lip. My phone was in my purse, which was still in the living room, so I couldn't call or text Hudson to ask who could be in his house. I glanced at the intercom. Should I call down to security? But whoever was there had gotten past security without a problem. Whoever it was had a key.

And from the sound of her heels and soprano voice, it was a woman.

Pressing my body tight against the wall, I peered around the doorframe and down the hall. Her back toward me, I saw a woman dressed in a light blue sundress, directing men with boxes toward the library. Her hair, wrapped into a loose yellow bun at her nape, was what gave her away.

It was the woman Hudson grew up with. The woman Hudson had falsely claimed he'd gotten pregnant. The woman Hudson's mother had wanted him to marry.

It was Celia Werner.

Chapter Three

One of the deliverymen spotted me and nodded his head in my direction. Panic bubbled in my chest as Celia turned to see what he was gesturing at. I ducked back around the corner, but not before she saw me.

“Laynie?”

Shit, shit, shit. I didn’t want to see her, didn’t want her to see me.

Her heels clicked as she walked down the hall toward the bedroom. “Alayna, is that you?” She peeked into the room and found me pressed against the wall, still dressed only in a towel.

“Hi.”

“Wow.” Her smile brightened as her eyes moved up and down my body, taking in my lack of clothing. “I didn’t expect you to be here.”

This was ridiculous. I was acting like I’d been caught doing something wrong, but I hadn’t. I had every right to be there and, as far as I knew, Celia did not.

I straightened my back and stepped away from the wall. “I didn’t expect you either. Hudson didn’t say you were delivering the books.”

Celia shook her head. “He didn’t know. He ordered them through my office and my schedule was open today, so I thought I’d make sure they got here okay and help unpack them if need be.”

“You have a key.” It was honestly the only thing going through my mind at that point, and I hated how pathetic I sounded mentioning it. I had a key too, after all.

She leaned her shoulder against the door jam. “I do. Since I did the interior decorating. We’re always updating, and we thought it was easiest for me to keep a key.” Her eyes glanced over to the unmade bed, sheets in disarray from my night with Hudson. When she looked back at me, her smile seemed wider. “I did buzz though before I came up and there was no answer.”

“I was in the shower.”

“I see that.” She winked, and I knew she was saying that she was seeing more than me wrapped in a towel. She was getting the whole picture.

Well, good. I was glad. Then I wouldn’t have to feel like a jerk when I spelled it out for her. Hudson and I were together now. Whatever anyone else had ever planned for Celia and Hudson, it was moot. This was the one he’d chosen. End of discussion.

Except that discussion had only occurred in my head. Some things probably still had to be said out loud.

Celia seemed to be thinking the same thing. “Look, let me get finished with the delivery guys and you can get dressed. Then we can chat or whatever. It seems we have some catching up to do.”

She shut the door behind her, and I let out a deep breath. I wasn’t sure why Celia’s presence was giving me so much anxiety. She wasn’t a threat to me. She felt like one, though. I’d been jealous of her since I’d met her. As Hudson’s oldest friend, she knew him better than anyone. He told her things. He kept her secrets. She’d been the only one who knew about Hudson and me pretending to be a couple. It was an intimate friendship they had.

Hudson had insisted that friendship was the only thing between them. I had to trust that or the envy would tear me apart. The whole charade had started in the first place so that Celia and Hudson’s parents would stop trying to pair up the two. If there really had been something between them, then why would I have been brought into the middle?

I'd only discovered the day before that the reason the Werners and Sophia Pierce were so keen on playing matchmaker was because they thought Hudson and Celia had been together in the past. They thought Hudson was the father of the baby Celia had miscarried. But he wasn't, and they had never been together. The truth was worse—Hudson had played Celia, had tricked her into falling for him and had sent her spiraling into depression and wild partying. So when she'd ended up pregnant, he felt responsible and claimed parentage.

In a way, Hudson *had* been responsible. But he wasn't the man of his youth anymore. He wasn't responsible that his games had to follow him for the rest of his life. I couldn't believe that. Otherwise I would have to believe the same about the things I'd done to others. Certainly even people like us—people who had been so broken that we destroyed others around us—deserved happiness of our own. We didn't have to spend our entire existence making up for our mistakes. Did we?

I brushed the guilty thoughts out of my mind and quickly changed into a dress I could wear to the club later. I threw my wet hair into a bun and took a deep breath before opening the door.

The delivery men had already left, and I found Celia straightening a row of boxes into an orderly line. There were dozens of boxes, many more than I had anticipated. "Damn. He went all out, didn't he?"

Celia looked up from her task. "He always does. But as I'm sure you've noticed, he has lots of shelves to fill."

I scanned the room for the first time. A large mahogany desk sat at the far end surrounded by a curved wall of windows. Two armchairs and a long sofa created a sitting area in the middle of the room. A beautiful marble fireplace graced the center of one wall with a large flat-screen television centered above it. The rest of the wall space was filled with shelves. Shelves and shelves—booklover's dream. Except that only one small section near the desk had any books on it.

"Uh, yeah. These boxes are barely going to put a dent in that shelf space."

"He ordered more, but this is what was already in stock. The rest should come in the next few days or so. And, yes, he'll still have a lot of empty space. Maybe you can help him fill the rest."

Was that supposed to be a leading statement? Was she trying to get me to open up about Hudson?

If she wanted to know, she'd have to come out and ask. I responded to her statement with a simple "Maybe." I joined her in pushing the boxes into a line against the wall, doing a count of them as I did. Twenty-seven in total. Guess I knew how I was spending my afternoon. Unpacking books—the thought had me more excited than it should.

I nudged the last box into line with the others and turned to find Celia staring at me, arms crossed over her chest, one light brow cocked. "So. You and Hudson."

"Yeah. Crazy, right?" Celia had only ever been nice to me. Why was this so awkward?

"It's real then? You're *really* together?"

"We are. No more pretending. It's the real deal now." It felt strange to say that. With other relationships my declarations were most likely exaggerations. Was I exaggerating now?

No. I wasn't. This was real.

"Since when?" The question didn't sound disbelieving, but curious. Excited, even. "I was with him on Monday and he didn't say anything had changed between you, though he did seem awfully lovesick. I thought he was being moody about his business-whatever that was going on. But now that I see you here, I'm thinking it was about you."

Celia had driven Hudson from his parents' house in the Hamptons to the airport for his business emergency with Plexis. "Just since yesterday. When he came back from Cincinnati, we sort of had a fight out and then—" I suddenly realized the source of the awkwardness. Though Celia and Hudson hadn't

ever been together for real, she had thought she loved him. I had no reason to be jealous of her, but she had plenty reason to be jealous of me. “Is this weird for me to talk about?”

“Weird? Why?” Her face relaxed with understanding. “Oh, he told you.”

“He did.” I wasn’t sure how she’d feel knowing I knew such intimate details of her life. “I’m sorry that makes you uncomfortable.”

“No, not at all. It surprises me. He’s never talked about it with anyone. I’m not even sure he told his therapist.” She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “What exactly did he say? Do you mind me asking?”

“Of course not, it’s only fair I tell you. But can we sit down first?” Maybe sitting would get rid of the confrontational feeling between us.

She nodded and we made our way to the sofa. I sat facing her, my legs curled up underneath me. “Well. He, um, explained about how he, uh, made you fall for him and then slept with your best friend. He said it was all a game. Which makes sense now, how you knew that he did that to women.” Celia had been the one who’d filled me in on Hudson’s mind games.

“Yep. I spoke from experience.” Her voice had lost some of its usual cheerfulness, but nothing seemed to indicate that talking to me was painful or unpleasant.

Her ease helped me go on. “And he told me about the baby.”

I watched her chest rise and fall before she responded. “What did he say about that?”

“That you didn’t know who the father was, so he said it was his. So you wouldn’t be disowned or disgraced or whatever. Since he felt responsible for the situation.” Even though none of the information was new to Celia—she’d lived it, after all—a part of me felt guilty for sharing things Hudson had told me in confidence.

Another part of me, a bigger part, wanted to know more about his rocky past and getting anything out of him was difficult, to say the least. Celia’s unexpected arrival brought an opportunity to learn, and I wasn’t throwing that away.

“Hmm. Well, that about covers all of it.” She tapped a long peach-painted nail on her knee as she processed. “Silly Hudson. He shouldn’t feel responsible for anything. I was a grown woman. I can own up to my actions. He doesn’t still feel that way, does he?”

“Yeah. I think he still does.” I didn’t think he did, I knew it. It was the reason he kept himself so closed off, the reason it had been so hard for him to let me in. Because of his mother or his therapist or whatever reason, he’d been conditioned to believe that he was incapable of caring for anyone, and the horrible things he’d done to people such as Celia was his proof. That he could take his friend and manipulate her life, cause her to act so recklessly that she got pregnant from a stranger and then lose her child—that was evidence to Hudson that he was a despicable person. Because no decent person would do that in his mind.

But to me, the fact that he was so traumatized by the things he’d put Celia through was evidence to the contrary—he could feel. He cared enough to regret his actions. That didn’t show heartlessness. That showed humanity.

Celia rolled her eyes. “That’s ridiculous. He really needs to get over himself. That was practically a decade ago now. It’s old news.”

I agreed on that count. Maybe by finally having love in his life, Hudson would learn to move on.

As for Celia, I wasn’t sure she had yet. “So you don’t still have feelings for Hudson?” It wasn’t hard for me to imagine harboring an unrequited love for ten years because I obsessed. The only reason I’d gotten over some of my past obsessions was because I’d had therapy. Not that Celia suffered from the obsessive disorder I did, but it wasn’t unheard of to be in love with your friend for years and nothing

ever coming of it. It was the material of great books.

What did that make me? In Celia's story, was I the villain?

Possibly I was over-dramatizing. As always.

Celia leaned forward and put her hand over mine, taking me off-guard. "I totally have feelings for him, Laynie. He's my best friend. I've loved him since I met him which was before I could even talk. But I'm not in love with him. I don't think I ever was. He played me and I thought...well, anyway, I'm not now. My mother will tell you differently, but she believes what she wants. If I was in love with him, I would have let that arranged marriage thing work out instead of supporting a sham to throw our parents off."

"Yeah, that makes sense." I took my hand away from hers before it felt creepy. It already felt creepy—I wasn't much of a touchy-feely person. "Then it doesn't bother you that we're together?"

"Bother me? I'm happy for him! For both of you, actually. Truthfully, I was beginning to think Sophia was right, that he couldn't possibly love anyone because he'd never shown any inclination toward anyone. Except to mess with them, of course. It was really very sad. This is definitely a change for the better."

I wanted to be happy with her. Except when she'd brought up Hudson's past, it reawakened one of my greatest fears.

"What did I say?" Celia asked.

She must have seen the worry in my expression. I never did have a good poker face. "Nothing." was probably best that I didn't say anything. Only, Celia might be the one person I could talk to about it. The one person who would understand and give me insight.

I shifted, bringing my knees up to my chest. "It's just, I've been worrying it was too good to be true and I keep wondering if maybe I'm...if he's..."

"If he's playing you, too?"

My brown eyes met her blues. "Yes."

She nodded once and frowned. "That is something I'd worry about."

Well, that wasn't the consolation I was hoping for.

"I'm not saying you should be worried," she added. "It would just cross my mind as a possibility. Especially knowing his past, and since this arrangement or relationship he has with you is so entirely different than anything he's ever had before."

"You know him, what do you think?" Jesus, my lip quivered when I spoke. How pathetic was I?

She tapped her finger on her knee again. "I don't think he's playing that game anymore. Really, don't. He's had counseling, and it's been a good two years since he's had any...incidents."

I made a mental note to ask what she meant about incidents at another time. Right now, though, wasn't enough of a priority to interrupt.

"I guess he could be having a relapse, but..." Her words trailed off. "What has he said to you?"

"That he wants to be with me. That's he's committed to making a relationship work." Or similar things that I didn't want to share. They were my words and not meant to be given away to just anyone.

Celia scooted an inch closer to me as if we were in a room full of people and she was about to divulge a secret. "Let me tell you something about Hudson and the way he plays women. He doesn't lie. Ever. That's the brilliant part of his manipulative skills. He never says anything that you can throw back at him later. It's all truth spun to make you read more into what he's saying. He makes you think he's offering more than what he's really offering without ever saying the words. You know what I mean?"

"I think so." Now that I thought about it, I knew exactly what she meant. Hudson chose his words.

precisely and handled himself with such care that I could see how he'd be able to spin any situation so that he'd have the upper hand. It was what made him a good businessman, I imagined.

"So if he's said those things to you, I'd believe them," Celia reassured. "And he's never, ever brought a woman to his penthouse before. That's common knowledge. Even Sophia knows that. He never wanted anyone to be able to find him after he, you know, broke their heart."

That made total sense. If you were a guy playing people, you wouldn't want them to have access to your private life. I'd felt almost the same when I'd feared my ability to remain aloof from him—I hadn't wanted to know where he lived so that I wouldn't latch on.

Funny how we both were now in exactly the positions we hadn't ever thought we'd be in.

Celia was watching me, gauging my reactions. I could sense she wanted to say more, but perhaps she didn't know how. "Has he said...how he feels about you?"

"Yes." *Well...* "No." But he had implied it. Now I couldn't even quite remember what he *had* said and the ball of worry in my stomach began to tighten. "I mean, he's said some things, but he hasn't actually said he loved me."

But I knew he meant it. Right?

Celia smiled. "I don't think he's ever told anyone he loved them. Not even his mother. So that might be a while, if ever. Don't take that omission as a sign of anything." She straightened. "No, I think you're good. I think this is good. I think it's real." She clapped her hands together. "Yay! Hudson Pierce has a girlfriend! How exciting!"

"Yeah, it is exciting." The warmth of it spread through my body. "Totally exciting." Because none of this had happened to me before. I'd never had a relationship with someone who returned my feelings. Every guy I'd found to be the one never had a chance to see if they felt the same before I ruined it by clinging and suffocating. And the times I'd thought I'd been in love I'd really been more in love with the idea of someone being in love with me. I'd learned that through group therapy. That was why I held on to any slim nugget of interest a guy threw my way—because I so desperately yearned to be loved.

But this time, I wasn't being desperate and I wasn't clinging and I wasn't obsessing. Not more than reasonably, anyway. It was definite cause for celebrating.

I beamed at Celia. "I can't tell you how good it feels to talk to someone about him. Thank you so much."

"I bet. And no problem. Any time." She paused. "How are things going with Sophia?"

"I don't know." More like I didn't care. Hudson's mother and I were never going to be friends. Not when she'd belittled me and called me a slut. Not when she was so against Hudson finding anything good in life. "I told her off the last time I saw her. I'm hoping I don't have to deal with her anytime soon."

"Oh. You don't have plans to see her then? Like, to show her your coupledness and everything?" She seemed surprised by that, and perhaps it was surprising after the lengths Hudson had gone to show me off to his mother when we weren't actually a couple.

"No, thank god. I think Hudson's given up on convincing her of anything. Which is fine by me."

"Totally. Who needs Sophia?"

I didn't, that was for sure. But Celia, on the other hand... "You're chummy with her." We'd addressed everything else, might as well address Sophia too.

"Well, I live by that friends close, enemies closer philosophy. It works for me."

"Yeah it does. She adores you." I may have sounded a little bit jealous. Which was ridiculous since I hated Sophia Pierce.

“She adores me because she adores my mother. Besides, she thinks that if I’m with Hudson, she’ll have complete access to his life. Like I’d share anything personal with her. I have her snowed, that’s all.”

“Then all I have to do to get her on my side is to snow her too?”

“Maybe.” Celia’s eyes narrowed as she considered. Then she shook her head. “Seriously, forget her. She’s not worth it. Have you heard about the time that Hudson told her—” The grandfather clock in the foyer chimed once. “Oh, my, is it really one o’clock already?” Celia checked her watch. “It really is. I have a full afternoon. I’ve got to get going.” She stood and smoothed down her dress. “I’m sorry to rush off like this. It was great talking to you.”

“Yeah, this was nice.” I hated to admit it, but I was disappointed to see her go. Especially when she was about to tell me a story about Hudson. She had so much to offer in terms of understanding him. She’d already made me feel better and there was so much more to be gained from speaking with her.

“We should totally get together again,” Celia exclaimed, almost at the exact moment I was thinking about it. “Here.” She pulled a card out of her purse and handed it to me. “My cell is on here. Call me and we can do coffee. Tomorrow, maybe?”

“I’d like that.” I took the card from her, glancing at the print. *Celia Werner, Corporate and Private Interior Design.*

“Awesome. Give me a call in the morning then.” She paused. “Oh, and if I don’t answer, keep calling. I have a nasty habit of leaving my phone in random places and if you call over and over then I’ll find my phone. And I’ll find my phone! It’s a total win-win.”

I laughed at her method of phone control. “Perfect.”

“Great! Tomorrow then. Give Hudson my love.” She started toward the library door and then stopped and turned back to me, her hand clutched against her chest. “You know, it really is about time Hudson had someone in his life, and I’m so glad it’s someone who loves and understands him as well as seems you do.” Her words and actions would seem overly dramatic for most people, yet she was just classy enough to get away with it.

“Thanks. I do. I get him.” Probably more than either he or I knew yet.

“I know you do.” Her face grew serious. “He’s told me things about you, too. I hope that doesn’t bother you.”

She could only be referring to my crazy stalker past. Some of it was quite embarrassing. I’d violated a restraining order once. For that, I had a police record. It was buried now, by Hudson and my lawyer brother, but that didn’t change that it had happened. That I had done that. It was only one of a long list of many shitty things I’d done.

Normally I would have been humiliated to find that someone knew about my history. But right then, with all the good that was going on with Hudson, I didn’t. “No, it doesn’t bother me. Surprisingly.”

“Good.” She smiled. “I won’t tell anyone, of course. I’m glad that I know though. I can see how perfect you are for him because of what you’ve been through yourself. I’m on your side.”

“Thank you. I’m very grateful.”

She winked. “Okay, well, I’m off. Good luck!”

I stood in the library thinking over Celia’s visit long after she had gone and I had programmed her number into my phone. I was looking forward to having coffee with her, and, the truth was, that made me feel twitchy. As sure as I was that she could be a vital source of Hudson insider knowledge, I was also sure he’d be none too happy about it. And rightly so. If I wanted to learn about his past, I should go through him.

Still, could it really hurt to have coffee?

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